

The Influence of Cultural integration in Social Studies Education for early childhood students with Special needs in Delta State.

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of integrating culture into Social Studies for early childhood students with special needs in Delta State, Nigeria. A survey research design was adopted, involving 1,094 students in Upper Basic Education level, with a sample of 200 selected through a simple random sampling technique. The study was guided by three research questions and three hypotheses. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.76. Analyses employed Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation and Chi-square statistics. Findings revealed a moderate positive relationship between cultural integration and academic performance, underscoring its significance in enhancing educational outcomes, there was a significant impact of cultural integration in Social Studies on students' social and emotional development. Teachers' perceptions also correlated significantly with the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration. The study recommends embedding culturally inclusive practices in Social Studies curricula and enhancing teacher training to foster adaptive learning environments. Such initiatives can promote equitable education for students with special needs, ensuring comprehensive academic and emotional development.

Keyword: Culture, integration, Social Studies, early childhood and special need students.

Introduction

The integration of culture into early childhood education plays a critical role in shaping the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. In particular, social studies education offers a unique avenue to incorporate cultural understanding in young learners, including those with special needs (Rosenberg, 2020). Cultural education in early childhood seems to promote the development of an appreciation for diversity, fosters an inclusive environment, and enhances social skills. Moreover, early childhood is a formative period when children are most receptive to new ideas and concepts. As such, providing them with culturally relevant education can significantly impact their growth and academic success (Adewusi et.al, 2023). One of the central reasons for the importance of culture in early childhood education is that it supports the development of a child's identity and self-awareness. According Eden Et.al (2024), cultural awareness in early education can lead to improved academic outcomes and social interactions, especially for students from marginalized or minority groups. This focus on culture helps children recognize the value of their own heritage while also fostering an appreciation for the differences of others. When students are introduced to diverse cultural perspectives in a supportive and structured environment, they are better equipped to navigate an increasingly multicultural society (Kafadar, 2021).

Social studies education, when infused with cultural relevance, serves as a powerful tool to develop cultural awareness (Ohanyere & Ohanyere, 2022). Social studies is not merely the study of history, geography, and civics but also a vehicle through which children can learn about themselves and others in the world around them. Social Studies lessons that include cultural narratives allow children to explore the significance of their own culture as well as the customs, traditions, and beliefs of different communities (Qin, 2017). Authors such as Pagaddut and Tamana (2024) have emphasized that a culturally relevant curriculum in social studies can improve

students' engagement, motivation, and academic performance, particularly for those from diverse backgrounds. The inclusion of cultural perspectives in Social Studies helps children develop empathy, understand societal structures, and recognize the importance of social justice.

For children with special needs, cultural integration in education is equally essential as Apebende et.al (2008) noted that students with special needs often face barriers to academic success due to factors like exclusion, stereotyping, and a lack of tailored educational strategies. The authors posited that incorporating cultural diversity into the curriculum, educators can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that respects and values the uniqueness of every student. For students with special needs, culture may not only serves as a medium for learning but also as a bridge that connects them to their peers and communities. Culturally responsive teaching practices are critical in meeting the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities.

A culturally responsive curriculum helps teachers understand the cultural backgrounds of their students, allowing them to tailor instruction in ways that are meaningful and relevant to the learners' lived experiences (Biswas, 2022). Teachers who understand the cultural contexts of their students could adopt teaching strategies that recognize and value differences, which may enhance students' academic and social success. Abacioglu et.al (2020) argued that teachers who are equipped with culturally relevant pedagogical strategies are better prepared to support students with special needs, particularly in classrooms where diversity is high. Incorporating culture into the Social Studies curriculum may benefit students with special needs by promoting their emotional and social development. Early childhood education is a time when children learn to interact with their peers, understand emotions, and develop social skills. Culturally inclusive practices, such as sharing diverse stories, traditions, and practices, offer students with special needs the opportunity to connect with others, develop empathy, and feel a sense of belonging (Balik et.al, 2024). Studies show that children with special needs who are exposed to culturally diverse content are more likely to feel included and valued in their learning environment, which can lead to improved social interactions and self-esteem (Molina et.al, 2021).

Furthermore, integrating culture into social studies education for students with special needs aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an educational framework that emphasizes flexibility in teaching and learning to accommodate the diverse needs of all students (Akintayo et.al, 2024). According to Almumen (2020) culturally responsive teaching is a key component of UDL because it recognizes the varied cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities of students. By using culturally relevant materials and approaches in social studies, educators may create more inclusive and accessible learning experiences for students with special needs.

The benefits of cultural integration extend beyond the classroom as well. In the broader context of society, early childhood education that is rooted in cultural understanding prepares children to become active, informed, and empathetic citizens. Children who are taught to appreciate cultural diversity are more likely to grow into adults who are open-minded, socially responsible, and capable of contributing to a harmonious society (Sakti et.al, 2024). Social Studies, when taught with a cultural lens could equip children with the skills they need to navigate and thrive in a complex, globalized world. Additionally, research has shown that culturally relevant teaching improves not only the social and emotional development of children but also their academic outcomes (Lau & Shea, 2024). Cultural integration in education also plays a role in addressing achievement gaps among students with special needs. Research has indicated that students with disabilities often perform at lower levels academically compared to their peers without disabilities. However, when these students are provided with

culturally responsive teaching, they are more likely to experience academic success and feel a stronger sense of connection to their education (Dyliaeva et.al, 2024). Culturally relevant teaching strategies allow students with special needs to make meaningful connections between the content they are learning and their personal experiences, which can lead to improved comprehension, engagement, and performance. The importance of cultural integration in early childhood education cannot be overstated, especially in Social Studies. For children with special needs, it is crucial that educators recognize and address the cultural dimensions of their learning experiences. By doing so, teachers could help ensure that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, have access to a rich, inclusive education that promotes academic success, social growth, and personal development. Cultural relevance in Social Studies appears to be critical in understanding how children engage with the subject matter. Social Studies, which encompasses topics related to history, geography, economics, and civics, plays a crucial role in shaping young children's understanding of the world. According to Karadag et.al (2021) integrating cultural relevance into Social Studies education ensures that all students, regardless of background, can see themselves reflected in the curriculum. The authors advocates for a multicultural education approach, which helps students to appreciate diverse perspectives and fosters global citizenship. This view aligns with the concept that education should not only focus on content delivery but also on creating a space for students to learn about their own and others' cultures.

Previous research on the role of culture in Social Studies has demonstrated that culturally relevant teaching practices positively affect student engagement and learning outcomes. For example, a study by Gulya and Fehervari (2024) on culturally relevant pedagogy highlighted the importance of teaching methods that recognize the cultural backgrounds of students. The findings suggest that when teachers incorporate students' cultural references into their teaching practices, it enhances student learning and fosters a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. This concept is particularly relevant in diverse classrooms where students come from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. In the context of children with special needs, cultural considerations also play a significant role in supporting effective learning. Many children with special needs come from backgrounds that may not align with traditional educational practices. Therefore, culturally responsive strategies may be essential to ensure that the educational experiences of these children are meaningful and engaging. Efthymiou (2023) has explored how cultural factors can influence the learning experiences of children with disabilities, emphasizing the importance of personalized approaches that consider the child's cultural context. Apebende et.al (2008) examined how early childhood education can foster cultural integration through the social studies curriculum, emphasizing the importance of exposing children to diverse cultural values and practices in Nigeria. It concludes that such education not only instills virtues like tolerance and understanding but also equips children to become productive citizens in a multicultural society. Suri and Chandra (2021) explored strategies employed by early childhood education teachers in Lampung, Indonesia, to implement multicultural education grounded in local cultural values and character building. The study found that the use cultural exchanges and problem-based learning strategies fosters multiethnic and multicultural understanding in school environments. Kafadar (2021) examined the inclusion of cultural heritage elements in Turkey's Social Studies curriculum and middle school students' awareness of such heritage, finding a stronger emphasis in grades 4 and 5 compared to higher grades. Students associated cultural heritage with historical buildings and intangible traditions, highlighting its importance in preserving cultural identity and history while recommending strategies for its protection. Pagaddut and Tamana (2024) examined the integration of Indigenous People's Education (IPEd) in teaching Social

Studies among senior high school students in the Philippines, highlighting its benefits and challenges. Findings revealed that while students and teachers perceived IPed positively, teachers often undervalue cultural integration, emphasizing the need for training and feedback mechanisms to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness.

Cultural competence among teachers is another key factor that influences the effectiveness of early childhood education for children with special needs (Biswas, 2022). Teachers who are culturally competent may be better equipped to create inclusive learning environments. These teachers could recognize and address the diverse cultural needs of their students, which is especially important when working with children with special needs who may face additional barriers to learning. Additionally, the integration of technology in early childhood education has introduced new opportunities to enhance culturally relevant learning experiences. As digital tools become more widespread, teachers can use technology to create personalized learning experiences that are both culturally relevant and accessible to children with special needs. Okoye (2024).demonstrated that technology can support language development and other learning needs in early childhood classrooms, particularly for children with disabilities. The ability of technology to offer tailored, interactive learning experiences seems to present a unique opportunity to make education more inclusive and culturally responsive.

The global shift towards inclusive education has led to increased emphasis on the need for culturally responsive teaching in diverse classrooms, particularly in Social Studies. As global migration and multiculturalism continue to shape educational settings, educators are tasked with fostering inclusive environments that meet the diverse needs of all students.

Statement of the Problem:

The role of culture in social studies education for early childhood students with special needs in Delta State remains underexplored, despite its significance in shaping an inclusive, responsive, and effective educational environment. There is limited understanding of how cultural factors influence the curriculum, teaching strategies, and overall educational outcomes for young learners with special needs. Early childhood education plays a crucial role in the development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills, yet the integration of culturally responsive teaching methods tailored to children with special needs is not well established. In Delta State, the diverse cultural backgrounds of students may present both opportunities and challenges in delivering social studies content that is both accessible and engaging for all children. This study aims to investigate the role of culture in shaping the educational experiences of early childhood students with special needs, focusing on how cultural sensitivity can improve social studies instruction and support better learning outcomes.

Purpose of the Study:

1. To examine the impact of culturally relevant Social Studies on the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs in Delta State.
2. To explore the role of cultural integration in enhancing the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs in Delta State.
3. To assess the relationship between the perceptions of early childhood students with special needs and the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration in Social Studies in Delta State.

Research Questions:

1. How does the integration of culture in Social Studies education influence the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs in Delta State?

2. In what ways does cultural integration in Social Studies education affect the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs in Delta State?
3. What is the relationship between the perceptions of early childhood students with special needs and the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration in Social Studies in Delta State?

Hypotheses:

1. There is no significant relationship between the integration of culture in Social Studies and the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs in Delta State.
2. There is no significant impact of cultural integration on the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs in Social Studies in Delta State.
3. There is no significant relationship between teachers' perceptions and the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration in Social Studies for early childhood students with special needs in Delta State.

Methods

This study explores the influence of integrating culture into Social Studies for early childhood students with special needs in Delta State, Nigeria. A survey research design was employed, targeting 1,094 students at the Upper Basic Education level. From this population, a sample of 200 students was selected using a simple random sampling technique to ensure representativeness. The study was guided by three research questions and three corresponding hypotheses. Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire titled 'Integrating Culture into Social Studies for Early Childhood Students with Special Needs Questionnaire' (ICSSECSNQ). The questionnaire comprised 30 items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The instrument was divided into two sections. Section A captured the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while Section B consisted of items related to the research questions designed to elicit relevant responses. The questionnaire's validity was ensured through expert judgment by two lecturers from the Department of Social Science Education, Delta State University, Abraka. To establish reliability, the instrument was administered to a sample of 30 students from schools in Anambra State, who were not part of the main sample. After two weeks, the reliability coefficient of 0.76 was obtained using the test-retest method and the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was applied to analyze the consistency and stability of the instrument over time. This value of 0.76 indicates an acceptable level of reliability for the instrument. To measure students' academic performance, the study relied on academic records provided by the schools, assessing students' grades in Social Studies. Data analysis involved using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation and Chi-square to test the hypotheses.

Results

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant relationship between the integration of culture in Social Studies and the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs in Delta State.

Table 1: Correlation analysis of relationship between the integration of culture in Social Studies and the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs

Variable	N	Mean	STD.D	df	R	P-Value	Remarks
Culture in Social Studies Academic performance	200	16.21	4.053	604	0.405	0.000*	Sig

Source: Author's Survey, 2024

** denotes significant relationship at 0.05 level of significant*

The table shows a positive and significant relationship between the integration of culture in Social Studies and the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs. The correlation coefficient is $r=0.405$, which indicates a moderate positive relationship between the variables. The mean score for the integration of culture in Social Studies is 16.21 (STD.D = 4.053), while the mean score for academic performance is 17.31 (STD.D = 2.093). With a P-value of 0.000, which is less than the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis stating that "there is no significant relationship between the integration of culture in Social Studies and the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs" is rejected. This result implies that the integration of cultural elements in Social Studies positively and significantly contributes to the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs.

Hypothesis 2:

There is no significant impact of cultural integration on the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs in social studies in Delta State.

Table 2: Chi-square Analysis of the Impact of Cultural Integration on the Social and Emotional Development of Early Childhood Students with Special Needs

Variables	N	df	Crit X^2 value	Calc X^2 value	Decision
Cultural Integration Social and Emotional Development	200	3	7.815	19.547	Rejected

Source: Author's Survey, 2024

The results in Table 2 shows that the calculated Chi-square value of 19.547 is significantly greater than the critical Chi-square value of 7.815 at a 0.05 level of significance with 3 degrees of freedom. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which posits that cultural integration does not significantly impact the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs in Social Studies, is rejected. This implies that cultural integration has a significant impact on the social and emotional development of these students.

Hypothesis 3:

There is a significant relationship between the perceptions of early childhood students with special needs and the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration in Social Studies in Delta State.

Table 3: Correlation analysis of the relationship between the perceptions of early childhood students with special needs and the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration in Social Studies in Delta State.

Variable	N	Mean	STD.D	df	R	P-Value	Remarks
Perception of students cultural integration in Social Studies	200	16.39	2.224	604	0.606	0.000*	Sig
	200	17.31	2.093				

Source: Author's Survey, 2024

** denotes significant relationship at 0.05 level of significance*

The results in Table 3 show a positive and statistically significant relationship between students' perceptions of cultural integration in Social Studies and its perceived effectiveness for early childhood students with special needs. The correlation coefficient of 0.606 indicates a moderate to strong relationship, meaning as students' perceptions of cultural integration improve, their views on its effectiveness also become more favorable. The mean score for students' perceptions of cultural integration is 16.39 (STD.D = 2.224), while the mean score for the perceived effectiveness of cultural integration is 17.31 (STD.D = 2.093). With a P-value of 0.000, which is less than the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates a significant relationship between students' perceptions of cultural integration and its perceived effectiveness in Social Studies for students with special needs, highlighting the role of positive perceptions in enhancing its effectiveness.

Discussion of Findings

The results in table 1 revealed a positive and significant relationship between the integration of cultural elements in Social Studies and the academic performance of early childhood students with special needs ($r = 0.405$, $p = 0.000$). This moderate positive relationship suggests that culturally integrated teaching practices enhance the academic engagement and outcomes of these students. The rejection of the null hypothesis underscores the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in creating a supportive learning environment. This finding is in agreement with Ohanyere and Ohanyere (2022) who stressed the importance of culturally responsive teaching in improving students' academic outcomes, emphasizing that aligning educational content with students' cultural backgrounds fosters better understanding and performance. In the same vein, Eliyahu & Ganz (2023) argues that cultural integration in teaching practices motivates and boost academic performance of students; and also bridges gaps between their home and school environments. It is required that educators should prioritize culturally responsive pedagogy to improve academic outcomes.

The findings from Table 2 indicate that the calculated Chi-square value of 19.547 is significantly greater than the critical Chi-square value of 7.815 at a 0.05 level of significance with 3 degrees of freedom. As a result, the null hypothesis, which suggests that cultural integration does not significantly impact the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs in Social Studies, is rejected. This significant result suggests that the integration of culture into Social Studies positively influences the social and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs. The Chi-square analysis confirms that cultural integration in the curriculum is not just a trivial or incidental factor, but a key contributor to enhancing students' social skills and emotional well-being. The results suggest that incorporating cultural elements fosters inclusivity, empathy, and emotional stability among students. This finding is in line with the of Sakti et.al (2024) who emphasized the role of sociocultural factors in shaping emotional and social development, stating that cultural

practices in education strengthen interpersonal and intrapersonal growth. Corroborating this finding Eden et.al (2024) supports the idea that cultural integration in educational settings promotes collaborative learning and social competence that cognitive development is more strongly influenced by collaborative exploration and external cultural elements embedded in school activities. This study demonstrates that Social and emotional growth can be enhanced through culturally inclusive practices.

The correlation analysis in Table 3 shows a significant positive relationship between early childhood students' perceptions of cultural integration in Social Studies and their views on its effectiveness for students with special needs. With a correlation coefficient of 0.606, the relationship is moderate to strong, indicating that as students' perceptions of cultural integration improve, they are more likely to view its effectiveness in enhancing their learning outcomes. The mean score for students' perceptions of cultural integration is 16.39, while the perceived effectiveness score is slightly higher at 17.31, suggesting general belief in its effectiveness with some variability in responses. The P-value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 significance level, indicates that the relationship is statistically significant, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This finding highlights the importance of fostering positive perceptions of cultural integration among early childhood students with special needs, as these perceptions significantly contribute to its perceived effectiveness in Social Studies instruction. This finding aligns with Bise (2022) argument that motivated students are more likely to adapt and engage with inclusive strategies, emphasizing the pivotal role of students' attitudes toward cultural education in its success. Additionally, Tuncel (2017) supports this view, asserting that students' cultural competence directly influences their ability to contribute to an inclusive classroom environment. Therefore, fostering positive perceptions and supporting students' cultural competence are essential for the effective implementation of cultural integration in Social Studies.

Conclusion

From the discourse, this study underscores the significant role that cultural integration in Social Studies plays in enhancing the academic, social, and emotional development of early childhood students with special needs. The findings reveal a positive and moderate to strong relationship between cultural integration and academic performance, as well as its impact on students' social and emotional development. Additionally, the study demonstrates that students' positive perceptions of cultural integration contribute significantly to its perceived effectiveness in Social Studies, further reinforcing the necessity of integrating cultural elements into the curriculum. The implications of these findings are far-reaching for both educational practice and policy. It is clear that culturally integrated teaching practices not only enhance academic performance but also support students' social and emotional growth, making it a vital tool for inclusive education. Students' cultural competence and positive perceptions are essential for ensuring the effective engagement with cultural integration in Social Studies. By fostering positive perceptions and supporting students in recognizing the value of cultural integration, an inclusive learning environment can be created that addresses the diverse needs of students with special needs. This study advocates for a continued focus on culturally responsive teaching methods to improve both the academic and holistic development of early childhood students with special needs in Social Studies education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Educators should prioritize integrating cultural elements into Social Studies curricula to enhance academic engagement and outcomes for early childhood students with special needs.

2. Schools should organize workshops and training programs to improve teachers' cultural competence, enabling them to implement inclusive teaching strategies effectively.
3. Administrators should create environments that motivate teachers and promote positive attitudes toward the integration of cultural elements in education.
4. Schools should include activities that reflect students' cultural backgrounds to strengthen their emotional and social development.
5. Teachers should work with families to bridge cultural gaps between home and school environments, creating a more cohesive support system for students.

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