

# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN THE LOWER PRIMARY CLASSES OF NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*This paper makes a case for the full implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in lower primary classes across Nigeria, emphasising its role in value-based education and cultural preservation. It explores how teachers and caregivers introduce cultural norms-both universal, such as honesty and kindness, and localised practices like greetings, gender roles, and etiquette- into early childhood learning. Drawing from Bloom's taxonomy, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the study underscores the formative nature of early childhood in shaping moral and cultural identity. Despite its relevance, CRT faces numerous obstacles, including inadequate teacher preparation, rigid curricula, and increasing societal preference for academic outcomes over cultural learning. The study advocates for repositioning caregivers as cultural agents and proposes actionable strategies such as curriculum reform, teacher training in CRT pedagogy, inclusion of indigenous learning materials, and stronger school-community collaboration. Through a reflective and intentional approach to teaching, the integration of culturally grounded content can help maintain Nigeria's rich cultural heritage while nurturing socially responsible and culturally aware citizens. The paper concludes by offering policy and practice-based recommendations to enhance the application of CRT in foundational education settings.*

**Keywords:** Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Culture, cultural concepts, lower primary, caregivers

## **Introduction**

In contemporary Nigerian society, the gradual decline of fundamental cultural practices among the younger generation, particularly those in lower primary grades, has become a significant concern. Customs that once defined community life, such as respect for elders, communal responsibility, traditional greeting patterns, eating manners, folklore and language preservation, among others, are increasingly becoming obsolete. This decline can be traced to the quality and nature of care and education children receive during their early years of development. The early years are indeed crucial and universally acknowledged as formative for character and moral value development.

The above declaration attest to what Bloom derived from analyses and syntheses of existing developmental and educational research (Bloom, 1964) about human growth and development. To him, the early childhood period (from birth to age eight) is crucial, as it accounts for the majority of a child's intellectual and moral foundation. Bloom emphasised that about 50% of a child's cognitive development occurs by the age of four, and up to 80% by the age of eight (Bloom, 1964). This underscores the argument that the values, practices and beliefs instilled during the formative years profoundly shape lifelong patterns of thought, identity and character of the child. In this connection, failure or success to instil cultural concepts into the child tells on the child's overall development, most especially when conducting his/her activities in the most culturally accepted manner. In spite of the acknowledged importance of early cultural orientation, studies have revealed that Nigerian schools, especially in urban centres, are increasingly dominated by Westernised curricula and pedagogies that often

marginalise local cultural values (Adegbija, 2020; Okonkwo & Ogu, 2020). Adegbija (2020) further noted that cultural dissonance in primary classrooms leads to identity confusion and weak moral grounding among learners. Similarly, Okonkwo and Ogu (2020) observed that many lower primary educators lack adequate training in integrating culturally relevant content into their teaching, contributing to a growing disconnect between home-based and school-based value systems.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), therefore, emerges as a necessary pedagogical response to these challenges. CRT involves recognising, respecting, and exposing the child to cultural backgrounds and experiences as meaningful sources for learning. This approach positions caregivers, teachers, parents, older siblings, peers, and community elders as critical stakeholders in shaping children's values and behaviour. These figures constitute the child's immediate learning environment and act as informal educators whose actions, attitudes, and dispositions deeply affect the child's cultural development. Considering that this paper cannot deal with the roles of all critical stakeholders in educating the child on the basic cultural practices of the society, it therefore discusses the extent to which teachers and caregivers in lower primary can culturally respond to socialising the child in the lower primary classes, that being the crucial stage in character formation, orientation and reorientation.

The focus here is on how caregivers respond to and integrate culturally-related concepts into the learning experiences of pupils at the lower primary school level in Nigerian schools. These cultural concepts may be broadly categorised into universal cultural concepts, such as honesty, non-violence, and justice, and localised cultural concepts, which differ across regions and include practices such as greetings, etiquette, gender roles, and notions of respect. The central thrust is that unless teachers and caregivers become intentional and reflective in their teaching of both universal and localised cultural values, Nigerian children risk becoming culturally rootless in an increasingly globalised world. In light of this background, the discussion shall take the following sequence:

- i. Conceptual Definitions
- ii. Cultural practices
- iii. Theoretical review
- iv. Justification of the roles of the teacher and caregiver in culturally-responsive teaching of the child
- v. Challenges confronting the teacher/caregiver in maintaining culturally responsive teaching in typical Nigerian classrooms
- vi. Solutions to the challenges confronting the teacher/caregiver in maintaining culturally responsive teaching in typical Nigerian classrooms
- vii. Suggestions
- viii. Conclusion

### **Conceptual Definitions**

To lay a proper foundation for this discussion, it is essential to clarify the core concepts underpinning culturally responsive teaching in Nigerian lower primary school classes as: caregivers, culture, cultural responses, lower primary, and culturally related concepts.

**Caregivers:** The term caregivers, in the context of education and child development, refers to individuals who provide care, guidance, and support for the child's overall development. On a general note, it includes parents, teachers, early childhood educators, older siblings, and sometimes extended family members or community elders (Ejeh, 2006). In the classroom, caregivers (mainly teachers) not only serve as transmitters of academic content but also shape the values and cultural identity through modelling and reinforcement.

**Culture:** The concept of culture is generally used to refer to the totality of learned behaviours, beliefs, values, norms, language, customs, and artefacts shared by a group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next. It encompasses both tangible and intangible elements of a people's way of life. Akinwale (2019) sees culture as the soul of a people, and when it is not consciously transferred to children, societal identity and continuity are threatened. An interpretation of Akinwale's position is that no society can be sustained without retaining its culture.

**Cultural responses:** It is the way individuals or institutions react, adopt or integrate cultural values and practices into behaviour, instruction, or decision-making. In education, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is

a pedagogical approach that acknowledges the cultural backgrounds of learners and uses those backgrounds as a foundation for effective teaching and learning (Gay, 2018). In Nigeria's multi-ethnic context, a culturally responsive educator is one who embraces, reflects and integrates learners' diverse cultural realities into instructional content, classroom interactions and assessment.

**Lower primary:** Lower primary in the Nigerian education system includes Primary 1 to Primary 3, and in most cases, the age of the children ranges from 6 to 8 years. This phase forms the first segment of basic education under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme and is considered critical for literacy, numeracy, socialisation, and value formation. Research by Uzoechina and Umeano (2020) affirms that cultural awareness and moral orientation take shape during this stage, reinforcing the argument for deliberate cultural education during the early primary classes.

**Culturally related concepts:** The concepts that are culturally related are values, norms, and behaviors. Children are expected to learn these virtues as part of the culture of the society, and it is considered part of their cultural socialisation. These concepts can be categorised into two types, namely universal and non-universal cultures.

*Universal cultural concepts:* This refers to practices that are universally recognised as good behaviour or practice. Some such cultural practices are politeness, honesty, respect for life, non-violence, patriotism, and kindness. These virtues are considered morally binding, regardless of the child's location or background.

**Non-universal cultural concepts:** The non-universal cultural concepts vary from one community or ethnic group to another. In Nigeria, such concepts include greeting protocols, modes of dressing, gender roles, food practices, respect for elders, taboos around topics such as dating, romance and sex education, communal living, and age-grade responsibilities. What may be viewed as respectful in one culture might be perceived differently in another. For instance, in Yoruba culture, kneeling or prostrating is a sign of respect, while among the Igbo, verbal greetings and symbolic gestures suffice (Olaosebikan, 2020).

### **Diverse Cultural Practices**

Cultural practices refer to habitual behaviours and traditions that reflect the values and worldview of a society. These practices are embedded in daily life and shape how individuals interact, communicate, and express identity. In the Nigerian context, cultural practices are highly diverse, reflecting over 250 ethnic groups, each with unique customs and traditions. The major types of cultural practices relevant to children in early childhood include:

**Language Use and Communication Styles:** Language is central to cultural identity and thought. The use of indigenous languages in teaching and interaction helps children internalise cultural values (Bamgbose, 2018). Communication styles such as tone, formality, non-verbal cues, and storytelling vary across cultures and influence how knowledge is transmitted.

**Social Etiquette and Manners:** Practices such as greeting elders, sharing food, waiting for one's turn, and showing deference, etc., reflect deep cultural values. For example, in many Nigerian cultures, interrupting an elder is considered rude, and communal eating is a sign of unity and respect.

**Dress and Appearance:** Dress codes convey cultural identity. Teaching children to wear traditional attire on Cultural-Days in schools fosters association with one's origin and identity awareness. This practice is common in many Nigerian primary schools during cultural festivals or Independence Day celebrations.

**Religious and Spiritual Beliefs:** Though Nigeria is a secular state, spirituality is central to many cultural beliefs. Respecting diverse religious backgrounds, observing local holidays, and introducing moral instruction based on shared values enhance cultural responsiveness.

**Family and Kinship Roles:** The way children are expected to interact with family members, take responsibility, and contribute to household chores is rooted in culture. Some schools reinforce this by assigning classroom responsibilities or encouraging group projects that reflect collective responsibility.

**Rites of Passage and Celebrations:** Cultural practices also include naming ceremonies, festivals, initiation rites, and marriage customs. Though not all are taught directly in the classroom, teachers can integrate discussions, songs, stories, and arts that mirror these practices.

**Food and Eating Customs:** Cultural expectations around food, such as sharing, eating in silence, or washing hands before meals, are often taught informally at home but can be reinforced in the school setting to promote hygiene and cultural continuity.

It is important to note that a growing body of Nigerian research suggests that when these practices are integrated into school curricula and classroom activities, pupils perform better socially and morally, demonstrating greater respect for community values (Iroegbu, 2020; Uzoechina & Umeano, 2020). The position as buttressed by the scholars, further stresses the need for this paper. To proceed, there is a need to examine certain theories deemed relevant to this paper.

### **Theoretical Review**

Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of culturally responsive teaching is essential in clarifying the roles of caregivers and teachers in shaping the child's learning experiences and cultural orientation. Among the most influential frameworks that justify the importance of adult involvement in the child's development are Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Both theories highlight the importance of social and cultural contexts in a child's learning, but also emphasise the pivotal role that adults play as mediators, guides, and cultural transmitters.

#### **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory.**

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, developed the Sociocultural Theory in the late 1920s and 1930s, with its most comprehensive publication appearing in *Mind in Society* (1978). The theory rests on the principle that learning is not an isolated individual activity but a socially mediated process. Central to Vygotsky's thought is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)-the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other, such as a parent, teacher, or peer. In this respect, adult-child interaction is seen as critical to the child's acquisition of knowledge, skills, and cultural understanding. For culturally responsive teaching, the theory underscores the role of caregivers and teachers in introducing children to cultural norms, indigenous languages, values, and social practices that are vital to their identity formation. The scaffolding provided by adults ensures that children learn not only academic skills but also ways of thinking and behaving that align with their cultural contexts. Thus, caregivers become active agents of cultural continuity, helping children connect classroom learning with their lived experiences.

#### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.**

Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American developmental psychologist, introduced his Ecological Systems Theory in 1979 through the book *The Ecology of Human Development*. His model emphasises that a child's growth and learning cannot be understood in isolation from the broader environmental contexts in which they are embedded. Bronfenbrenner proposed a layered system of influences: the microsystem (immediate settings like family, school, and peers), the mesosystem (interactions between home, school, and community), the exosystem (indirect influences such as parents' workplace policies), and the macrosystem (the overarching cultural values, beliefs, and societal expectations). In the Nigerian context, caregivers and teachers operate within the microsystem but act as bridges to the macrosystem when they integrate children into national cultural practices, indigenous knowledge, and civic values. Their role extends beyond academic instruction to serving as custodians of cultural heritage and mediators between the home culture and the school culture.

#### **Relevance to Culturally Responsive Teaching.**

Together, these theories affirm that caregivers and teachers are not mere transmitters of abstract knowledge but shapers of children's cultural consciousness. Their ability to design and implement instruction that resonates with learners' cultural backgrounds directly supports engagement, identity development, and academic success. For stakeholders, the benefits are far-reaching:

For children, it nurtures confidence, belonging, and the ability to navigate multiple cultural spaces.

For parents, it reinforces the value of their cultural contributions and builds trust between the home and school.

For teachers, it provides a framework for inclusive pedagogy that respects diversity while promoting unity.

For the nation, it strengthens cultural preservation and contributes to national identity formation.

In summary, Vygotsky's and Bronfenbrenner's theories collectively validate the call for culturally responsive teaching in Nigerian lower primary schools. They are a reminder of the fact that education is not culturally neutral but deeply rooted in the social, linguistic, and value systems of the community. Caregivers and teachers, by applying these insights, can position children to succeed academically while remaining grounded in their cultural identity.

Justification of the Roles of the Teacher and Caregiver in Culturally Responsive Teaching of Children. The role



of caregivers, especially teachers in the formal school setting, is crucial in instituting cultural practices among Nigerian children. Given that the early years of schooling are critical for shaping children's moral compass, identity, and sense of origin, teachers must move beyond academic instruction to include intentional cultural nurturing. One major justification is based on the influence of significant adults during the early years of development. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory contends that children construct knowledge through interactions with more knowledgeable others, most especially adults in their environment. In the Nigerian classroom, the teacher serves as one of the most consistent adult figures during the school day and is therefore strategically placed to model and reinforce culturally grounded behaviour (Ekwueme & Olayemi, 2021).

In this connection, Bloom's assertion that 50–80% of a child's mental development is complete by age eight supports the idea that cultural education must occur early. Teachers, therefore, carry the responsibility of shaping not just cognitive abilities but also moral and social development, which are rooted in cultural values. Some empirical studies affirm that children taught using culturally responsive strategies perform better socially and exhibit a stronger sense of identity. For instance, research by Uzoechina and Umeano (2020) revealed that learners in classrooms where teachers integrate local folktales, proverbs, indigenous languages, and examples from traditional life showed improved social behaviour, respect for elders, and communal responsibility. Caregivers can be culturally responsive in many ways. Some such ways include:

Caregivers can infuse culture in teaching materials (such as using Nigerian names, settings, and stories).

Caregivers can encourage participation in cultural days or traditional celebrations in schools.

Caregivers can use local languages as a medium of instruction, especially in the lower grades, as mandated by the National Policy on Education (2013).

Caregivers can serve as models by demonstrating respectful behaviour, thereby modelling cultural expectations. Caregivers can be culturally responsive by integrating moral instruction through storytelling, role-playing, and classroom routines. Ultimately, culturally responsive teaching by caregivers helps to bridge the gap between home and school, ensuring continuity in value formation and affirming the child's cultural identity within the learning process. Challenges Confronting the Teacher in Delivering Culturally Responsive Teaching in Nigeria's Classrooms. No one may say that culturally responsive teaching (CRT) cannot improve or enrich the nurturing of culturally grounded learners, caregivers and teachers at the lower primary classes in Nigeria; however, they face numerous challenges in maintaining this approach in practice. Foremost is the lack of professional training and awareness suitable to care and teach the lower primary school child, such that the children are culturally proactive. Many early childhood educators at the lower primary have not received adequate training on how to integrate cultural content into the curriculum. This lack of preparedness results in huge reliance on textbook-driven instruction that may not reflect the sociocultural realities of the learners (Nwachukwu & Abiola, 2020).

Outside the issue of readiness, some teachers are unaware of the value of CRT or see it as outdated in the face of modern or westernised curricula (Eze & Okafor, 2020). As a result, they do not have the skills required to handle children in the multicultural complexity and linguistic diversity in Nigerian classrooms. This phenomenon poses significant hurdles to the orientation and re-orientation of the Nigerian child about the acquisition of basic cultural practices. Nigeria's multi-ethnic nature presupposes that learners often come from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A classroom in Lagos, for example, might include Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and children from minority groups. This diversity can make it difficult for a single teacher to fairly cater to all the children from different cultural backgrounds. This invariably leads to marginalisation of minority perspectives or sets of children (Adeyemi & Odukumaiya, 2021).

One other issue that impedes the caregivers' culturally responsive disposition in a typical Nigerian classroom is curriculum rigidity. The Nigerian primary curriculum is centrally designed and often lacks flexibility for teachers to introduce indigenous content or localised experiences. Even where civic and moral education is included, the content may not align with the unique cultural expectations of people from some regions (Eze & Okafor, 2020). The pressure from parents and society to prioritise academic performance over cultural development is another problem. Parents often equate education with success in literacy and numeracy, thereby putting pressure on teachers/caregivers to focus on examinations and standardised assessments, to the detriment of cultural learning (Onyema & Okoli, 2022).

Resource constraints also limit the ability of caregivers to maintain culturally responsive teaching. Many public schools lack culturally relevant learning materials such as folktales, traditional art supplies, or indigenous language books and operate in overcrowded classrooms, leaving little room for differentiated or culturally grounded activities (Iroegbu, 2020).

Conclusively, while caregivers are positioned to promote cultural values, the aforementioned challenges, ranging from policy and training limitations to environmental and societal pressures, continue to hinder the consistent application of culturally responsive teaching practices in Nigerian schools that would promote the acquisition of cultural virtues by children.

### **Ways to Overcome the Challenges in the Delivery of CRT in Nigerian Classrooms**

To overcome the challenges hindering culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in Nigerian lower primary schools, several strategic solutions are necessary. First, teacher education programmes must be restructured to include compulsory CRT modules, ensuring educators are trained to integrate cultural content effectively. In-service training and continuous professional development workshops should be provided to build teachers' competence in handling multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Secondly, curriculum reform is vital; flexibility must be built into the national curriculum to allow for the inclusion of local cultural experiences, languages, and values. Third, educational resource development must prioritise culturally relevant materials such as indigenous storybooks, visual aids, and folktales, among others, distributed across schools. Additionally, government and community collaboration should be encouraged to organise cultural days, storytelling sessions, and language immersion activities. Finally, sensitisation of parents and stakeholders is needed to balance academic goals with cultural development, promoting a holistic view of education. With these interventions, caregivers can more effectively nurture culturally grounded learners, preserve Nigeria's diverse heritage, and support identity formation from the early years.

### **Conclusion**

The role of culturally responsive teaching in the preservation and promotion of societal values among children in Nigerian lower primary schools cannot be overstated. This paper has established that the early childhood period represents a foundation stage for cultural identity, moral values, and social behaviours. The increasing erosion of traditional practices, fueled by globalisation, curriculum limitations, and the undervaluing of indigenous knowledge systems, which threatens the continuity of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, is unabating. Hence, safeguarding Nigeria's cultural legacy begins with her children. Intentional efforts must be made to engage caregivers who can orientate and reorient the children through intentional and culturally responsive teaching. To achieve this, caregivers, teachers, parents, and significant adults are strategically positioned to orient and re-orient cultural values through deliberate, reflective, and culturally grounded teachings. The classroom serves as a fertile ground for reinforcing both universal and non-universal norms and values of the society. Unfortunately, those in a position to transmit the needed culture onto the children do not seem to have the chances to do so because they are limited by inadequate training and multicultural complexities to systemic rigidity, among other factors. However, all hopes are not lost if the schools can integrate indigenous languages, stories, folktales, and cultural scenarios into instructional materials at the lower primary level.

### **Suggested Steps**

To address these issues and strengthen the role of culturally responsive teaching in Nigerian schools, the following suggestions are proposed:

Revise and localise the curriculum to incorporate both universal and non-universal cultural contents. This includes integrating indigenous languages, stories, folktales, and cultural scenarios into instructional materials at the lower primary level. Train teachers on culturally responsive pedagogy through pre-service and in-service programmes. Such training should emphasise practical strategies for embedding culture in classroom instruction and managing multicultural classrooms effectively. Promote community-school partnerships that involve elders, parents, and cultural custodians in the teaching-learning process. Schools can organise cultural days, storytelling sessions, and language immersion activities to enhance cultural awareness. Provide culturally

relevant teaching resources such as bilingual storybooks, local art materials, proverbs, and traditional songs to support classroom instruction. Encourage policy frameworks from the Federal Ministry of Education and State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) that mandate cultural competence as a key aspect of teacher performance and curriculum development.

Balance academic and cultural goals by emphasising holistic education that values identity formation, ethical development, and academic achievement in equal measure.

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