

## Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Early Childhood Education Curricula in Nigeria: Implications for Learning and Cultural Sustainability

**Autor:**

Oluwasegun Samuel  
Kolade

**Afiliation**

Glorious Vision  
University, Ogwa Edo  
State

**Email:**

Sammykolade316@g  
mail.com

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**Abstract**

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria has historically been rooted in indigenous knowledge systems transmitted through oral traditions, storytelling, songs, proverbs, and communal play. Despite policy recognition of cultural relevance, classroom practice continues to prioritize standardized, Western-oriented curricula, creating a disconnect between children's cultural environments and their formal learning experiences. This study examines how indigenous knowledge and cultural practices are integrated into early childhood education curricula in Nigeria, with a focus on classroom practices, teacher perceptions, and pedagogical implications. Grounded in Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory and the culturally responsive pedagogy frameworks of Ladson-Billings and Gay, the study adopts a qualitative design. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators, and analysis of curriculum documents, and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that while teachers occasionally incorporate indigenous stories, songs, games, and proverbs into classroom activities, such integration remains inconsistent and largely dependent on individual teacher initiative rather than systematic curriculum design. Children demonstrated markedly higher engagement and participation during culturally grounded activities. Key constraints include inadequate professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy, limited availability of culturally relevant instructional materials, and rigid adherence to standardized curricula. The study concludes that sustainable integration of indigenous knowledge into ECE requires systematic curriculum reform, targeted teacher training, and stronger home-school collaboration to support both learning outcomes and cultural continuity.

**Keywords:** cultural sustainability; culturally responsive pedagogy; curriculum integration Nigeria; early childhood education; indigenous knowledge

**Abstrak**

*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) di Nigeria secara historis berakar pada sistem pengetahuan lokal yang diwariskan melalui tradisi lisan, bercerita, nyanyian, peribahasa, dan permainan komunal. Meskipun relevansi budaya telah diakui dalam kebijakan pendidikan, praktik di kelas masih cenderung mengutamakan kurikulum terstandarisasi yang berorientasi Barat, sehingga menciptakan kesenjangan antara lingkungan budaya anak dan pengalaman belajar formal mereka. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana pengetahuan lokal dan praktik budaya diintegrasikan ke dalam kurikulum PAUD di Nigeria, dengan fokus pada praktik pembelajaran di kelas, persepsi guru, dan implikasi pedagogis. Berlandaskan teori pembelajaran sosio-kultural Vygotsky serta kerangka pedagogi responsif budaya dari Ladson-Billings dan Gay, penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan pendidik PAUD, dan analisis dokumen kurikulum, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun guru sesekali memasukkan cerita, lagu, permainan, dan peribahasa lokal ke dalam kegiatan kelas, integrasi tersebut masih bersifat tidak konsisten dan sangat bergantung pada inisiatif individu guru, bukan pada rancangan kurikulum yang sistematis. Anak-anak menunjukkan keterlibatan dan partisipasi yang jauh lebih tinggi selama kegiatan yang berbasis budaya. Kendala utama meliputi kurangnya pengembangan profesional dalam pedagogi responsif budaya, terbatasnya ketersediaan bahan ajar yang relevan secara budaya, dan dominasi kurikulum terstandarisasi yang kaku. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi pengetahuan lokal yang berkelanjutan dalam PAUD memerlukan reformasi kurikulum yang sistematis, pelatihan guru yang terarah, serta kolaborasi yang lebih kuat antara sekolah dan keluarga guna mendukung hasil belajar sekaligus keberlangsungan budaya.*

**Kata Kunci:** integrasi kurikulum Nigeria; keberlanjutan budaya; pedagogi responsif budaya; pendidikan anak usia dini; pengetahuan lokal

## **INTRODUCTION**

In Nigeria, early childhood education has historically been embedded within indigenous knowledge systems, through which children acquired language, moral values, social responsibility, and cultural identity via storytelling, songs, proverbs, communal play, and oral traditions (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003; Fafunwa, 2018). These culturally grounded practices functioned as the primary mechanisms of early socialization long before the introduction of formal schooling. However, the colonial imposition of Western educational models significantly displaced indigenous epistemologies, privileging foreign languages and externally developed curricula over local knowledge systems (Taiwo, 1980). This historical rupture continues to shape contemporary early childhood education in Nigeria, where standardized, Western-oriented curricula remain dominant in formal classroom settings.

Contemporary educational scholarship increasingly recognizes the value of aligning formal instruction with children's socio-cultural environments. Socio-cultural learning theory argues that learning is not a neutral, individual process but is socially mediated through culturally meaningful language, symbols, and shared practice (Vygotsky, 1978b). Building on this foundation, culturally responsive pedagogy advocates for instructional approaches that draw on learners' cultural backgrounds as pedagogical assets, enhancing engagement, comprehension, and identity formation (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the African context, scholars have further argued that integrating indigenous knowledge into formal education is essential not only for pedagogical relevance but also for decolonizing curricula and affirming local epistemologies (Battiste, 2002)

Despite these theoretical and policy endorsements, the integration of indigenous knowledge into early childhood curricula in Nigeria remains limited and inconsistent. Many early childhood centres continue to rely on standardized instructional materials and pedagogical approaches that marginalize indigenous languages, folklore, traditional games, and culturally embedded moral instruction. Structural factors, including insufficient teacher preparation in culturally responsive pedagogy, inadequate instructional resources, and curriculum frameworks that prioritize externally developed content, further constrain meaningful integration (da Silva et al., 2024; Ebele, 2024; Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2023).

This disconnect between children's home cultural environments and their formal learning experiences carries significant consequences. Research indicates that when familiar cultural knowledge and practices are absent from classroom instruction, children's engagement and sense of belonging are weakened, and the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages, values, and traditions is disrupted (Gay, 2010). In the Nigerian context, where linguistic and cultural diversity is substantial, this misalignment poses a particular threat to the sustainability of local cultural heritage within early childhood learning environments.

Against this background, the present study examines the integration of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into early childhood education curricula in Nigeria. It investigates how indigenous cultural elements, including language, storytelling, music, folklore, and traditional play, are represented in curriculum materials and enacted in classroom teaching. The study further explores educators' perceptions of the educational value of such practices and the institutional constraints that shape their implementation. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach involving classroom observations, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators, with data analyzed thematically. Findings are expected to contribute to broader discussions on culturally grounded and decolonized curricula in African education, with implications for curriculum development, teacher education, and the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Concept of Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to the organized provision of care and learning for children from birth to the early years of formal schooling and is widely recognized as foundational to cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development (NAEYC, 2020; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Developmental theorists emphasize that young children learn through active engagement with their environment, with Piaget highlighting knowledge construction through exploration and Vygotsky stressing the mediating role of social interaction, language, and culture (Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1978a). International bodies further affirm the importance of

ECE, identifying it as a fundamental human right and a key driver of equity, school readiness, and lifelong learning (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). In Nigeria, ECE is formally recognized in the National Policy on Education as preparation for primary schooling and socialization, though scholars note a shift from traditional community-based learning toward structured curricula that often underrepresent indigenous child-rearing practices (FRN, 2013; Fafunwa, 1974; Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003) (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003; Fafunwa, 2018; Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2013). Contemporary scholarship underscores the need for developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive early childhood education that supports holistic development, identity formation, and cultural continuity (da Silva et al., 2024; NAEYC, 2020).

### **Indigenous Knowledge and Culture in Education**

Indigenous knowledge refers to locally developed understandings, skills, values, and practices transmitted across generations through lived experience and oral traditions, and embedded within cultural worldviews, languages, and belief systems (da Silva et al., 2024; Dei et al., 2025). Increasingly recognized within educational discourse, indigenous knowledge is viewed as a legitimate source of learning that enhances curriculum relevance, supports identity formation, and bridges school knowledge with learners' lived experiences (da Silva et al., 2024). Socio-cultural learning theory further explains its educational value by emphasizing learning as socially mediated through cultural tools such as language, symbols, and shared practices (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978b).

In African contexts, indigenous knowledge historically underpinned community-based education through storytelling, apprenticeship, rituals, and communal participation, emphasizing moral and social development (Fafunwa, 2018). Nigerian studies indicate that indigenous languages, folklore, and culturally relevant play enhance early literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development (Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2023).

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education**

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) refers to instructional approaches that

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recognize and leverage learners' cultural backgrounds as assets in teaching and learning (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In early childhood education, CRP is especially important because young children learn through culturally meaningful activities such as play, storytelling, music, and social routines (Adam et al., 2023). Grounded in socio-cultural learning theory, CRP frames classrooms as communities of practice where learning is socially mediated through language, cultural tools, and guided participation (Gay, 2010). Empirical studies indicate that culturally responsive practices, including mother-tongue instruction and culturally familiar materials, enhance early literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional development, and a sense of belonging (Anyichie et al., 2023). In African and Nigerian contexts, CRP supports the integration of indigenous knowledge, local languages, and traditional child-rearing practices, providing a framework for decolonizing curricula and validating local epistemologies (da Silva et al., 2024).

### **Indigenous Knowledge in the Nigerian Educational Context**

Indigenous knowledge in Nigeria encompasses the cumulative body of skills, values, beliefs, and practices developed by local communities through long-standing interaction with their social, cultural, and natural environments. This knowledge is transmitted primarily through oral traditions, communal participation, apprenticeship, and culturally embedded practices such as storytelling, music, proverbs, festivals, and traditional occupations. Scholars emphasize that indigenous knowledge in Nigeria is holistic in nature, integrating moral education, social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and practical skills (Dei et al., 2025; Fafunwa, 2018) (Dei et al., 2025).

Historically, education in pre-colonial Nigeria was largely informal and community-based, designed to prepare children for responsible participation in social, economic, and spiritual life. Learning occurred through observation, imitation, and guided participation in communal activities, reinforcing cultural norms and shared values (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2003). However, the introduction of Western-style formal education during the colonial period significantly displaced indigenous educational systems, privileging foreign languages, curricula, and epistemologies over local knowledge forms (Taiwo, 1980).

Contemporary Nigerian education policy acknowledges the relevance of indigenous knowledge, particularly through provisions for mother-tongue instruction, cultural studies, and civic education. The National Policy on Education recognizes the role of local languages and cultural values in early learning and identity formation (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2013). Despite these policy intentions, several studies indicate that indigenous knowledge remains marginal in classroom practice, often treated as supplementary rather than integral to curriculum content (Oladele Jegede & O. Arubuola, 2025)

### **Empirical Studies on Indigenous Knowledge and Early Childhood Education**

Empirical research on indigenous knowledge in early childhood education (ECE) has shown that culturally embedded practices positively influence young children's learning and engagement. In Cameroon, Wiysahnyuy and Valentine (2023) found that using folktales in school classrooms enhanced children's comprehension, moral reasoning, and identity formation. Studies in Zambia showed that integrating indigenous games and cultural songs into play-based pedagogy improved early literacy, numeracy, and home–school linkages (Matafwali & Mofu, 2023; Oladele Jegede & O. Arubuola, 2025). In Nigeria, empirical evidence indicates that mother-tongue instruction and the use of indigenous languages in primary classrooms improved learners' linguistic competence, cultural identity, and school adjustment (Oladele Jegede & O. Arubuola, 2025). However, studies also highlight persistent challenges such as inadequate teacher training and limited culturally relevant materials, with indigenous knowledge often incorporated only incidentally rather than systematically into curricula (da Silva et al., 2024). Overall, evidence suggests that integrating indigenous knowledge, through language, stories, songs, and community practices, enhances early literacy, engagement, and cultural identity in young learners.

The reviewed literature demonstrates broad scholarly agreement on the significance of early childhood education as a critical foundation for lifelong learning and development. Studies consistently emphasize the pedagogical value of indigenous knowledge and culturally responsive approaches in enhancing children's engagement, comprehension, identity formation, and socio-emotional development.

The literature further shows that indigenous languages, folktales, traditional games, moral instruction, and community-based practices have historically functioned as effective educational tools within Nigerian and wider African contexts. Theoretical perspectives such as socio-cultural learning theory and culturally responsive pedagogy provide strong conceptual support for integrating indigenous knowledge into early childhood curricula.

Empirical studies, both within and outside Nigeria, indicate that the inclusion of indigenous cultural content in early childhood classrooms can positively influence early literacy, numeracy, and learner participation. However, these studies also reveal persistent challenges, including inadequate teacher preparation, limited culturally relevant instructional materials, and the dominance of standardized, Western-oriented curricula. While education policies in Nigeria acknowledge the importance of cultural relevance and mother-tongue instruction, classroom practices often fall short of these intentions.

Despite the growing body of literature on indigenous knowledge in education, a critical gap remains. Much of the existing research focuses on basic education, informal learning systems, or language policy, with relatively limited empirical attention to the structured integration of indigenous knowledge into formal early childhood education curricula in Nigeria. Moreover, few studies provide in-depth, classroom-level analysis of how early childhood educators interpret, implement, and negotiate indigenous knowledge within institutional constraints. This study seeks to address this gap by examining indigenous knowledge integration in early childhood education curricula in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on classroom practices, teacher perceptions, and pedagogical implications.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded in socio-cultural learning theory and culturally responsive pedagogy, both of which emphasize the central role of culture in children's learning and knowledge construction. Socio-cultural theory argues that learning is socially mediated and shaped by interaction with language, cultural tools, and community practices (Vygotsky, 1978b). From this perspective, children's understanding develops through engagement with the cultural knowledge systems

that structure their everyday experiences. Culturally responsive pedagogy extends this view by advocating instructional practices that draw on learners' cultural backgrounds to enhance comprehension, participation, and identity development (Gay, 2010).

Within the Nigerian context, these frameworks highlight the educational significance of indigenous languages, storytelling traditions, folklore, music, and communal practices as meaningful resources for early learning. However, the dominance of Western-oriented curricular models in many formal early childhood settings often privileges external knowledge systems while marginalizing local epistemologies and cultural forms of learning (Odei-Tettey et al., 2023). Such curricular orientation may weaken the relevance of classroom instruction to children's lived cultural realities and limit opportunities for the transmission of indigenous knowledge. In this regard, the integration of indigenous cultural practices becomes essential not only for improving pedagogical relevance but also for advancing the broader goal of decolonizing early childhood education by affirming local knowledge systems within formal educational structures. These theoretical perspectives therefore provide a conceptual lens for examining how Nigerian educators negotiate the relationship between indigenous knowledge and formal curriculum practices in early childhood classrooms.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the integration of indigenous knowledge within early childhood education in Nigeria. The research focuses on selected early childhood centres within urban and semi-urban contexts, concentrating on the early years of formal schooling (ages 3–6). Participants are purposively selected to include early childhood educators with at least two years of teaching experience, ensuring they have practical engagement with curriculum implementation and classroom interaction. This approach allows for the collection of rich, contextually grounded data on how culturally responsive practices are enacted in real classroom settings.

Data collection involves classroom observations, document analysis of curriculum materials, and semi-structured interviews with participating educators.

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Classroom observations capture teaching practices, learning activities, and the use of indigenous cultural elements, while document analysis provides insight into curriculum content and instructional planning. Semi-structured interviews elicit educators' perspectives on the value, challenges, and strategies of integrating indigenous knowledge into teaching.

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following a systematic process: *first*, familiarization with the data through repeated reading and transcription. *Second*, generation of initial codes representing meaningful units of information. *Third*, identification and development of themes by grouping related codes. *Fourth*, reviewing and refining themes to ensure they accurately reflect patterns across the data. And *finally*, defining and naming themes to provide a coherent narrative that addresses the research objectives.

To ensure credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness, the study employs several strategies consistent with Guba and Lincoln's parallel criteria for qualitative rigor (Enworo, 2023). Triangulation of data sources (observations, curriculum documents, and educator interviews) enables cross-verification of findings, reducing potential biases and enhancing validity. Member checking allows participants to review and confirm interpretations of their responses, supporting the accuracy of the data. Thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and classroom practices facilitates the transferability of findings to similar educational settings. Additionally, the research process is documented rigorously to ensure dependability, and reflexive journaling is used to account for the researcher's influence on data interpretation, strengthening confirmability.

Overall, this scope and methodological rigor provide a credible, in-depth exploration of how indigenous knowledge is integrated into early childhood education curricula, highlighting both practical strategies and the systemic challenges educators encounter.

## **PRESENTATION OF DATA**

Classroom observations revealed that teachers occasionally incorporated indigenous knowledge through storytelling, songs, and traditional games, though such practices were sporadic and largely dependent on individual teacher initiative

rather than systematic instructional planning. During activities that drew on familiar cultural elements, such as local songs, folktales, and communal games, children demonstrated noticeably higher levels of engagement, enthusiasm, and participation compared to lessons that followed standardized instructional approaches. Conversely, the limited and inconsistent frequency of these culturally grounded activities indicated that indigenous knowledge has not been systematically embedded into classroom routines or curriculum delivery.

Analysis of lesson plans, teaching guides, and curricular materials revealed minimal explicit inclusion of indigenous knowledge. While some activities referenced local folktales or proverbs, the majority of curricular documents were structured around standardized, Western-oriented content, with little indication of deliberate planning for cultural integration. This disjunction between the documented curriculum and national policy aspirations for culturally grounded education points to structural constraints in the resources and frameworks provided to early childhood educators.

Interview data indicated that teachers broadly valued indigenous knowledge as a resource for promoting early literacy, numeracy, and cultural identity. Many participants reported using local stories, songs, and games to make learning more meaningful and connected to children's lived experiences. At the same time, teachers consistently identified barriers to consistent implementation, including insufficient professional training in culturally responsive pedagogy, a lack of culturally relevant instructional materials, and institutional pressure to adhere to standardized curricula. These reflections point to a gap between educators' awareness of the value of indigenous knowledge and their capacity to integrate it systematically within institutional constraints.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Thematic analysis of the data generated six interconnected themes that collectively illuminate how indigenous knowledge is understood, enacted, and constrained within early childhood education settings in Nigeria.

The first theme, integration of indigenous knowledge, reveals that teachers occasionally incorporate indigenous stories, songs, games, and proverbs into classroom activities. These moments of cultural integration consistently elicited

higher levels of engagement and enthusiasm from children. However, such inclusion remained largely incidental, dependent on individual teacher initiative, rather than systematically embedded in formal lesson plans or curriculum frameworks. This pattern reflects a broader gap between the aspirational role of indigenous knowledge in education and its actual curricular presence.

The second theme, teacher practices and perceptions, indicates that educators broadly recognized the educational value of culturally relevant instruction, particularly its benefits for early literacy, numeracy, and cultural identity development. Despite this awareness, limited access to professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy constrained their confidence and capacity to implement such practices consistently. This tension between awareness and capability aligns with socio-cultural learning theory's emphasis on the mediating role of institutional tools and support structures in shaping pedagogical practice (Vygotsky, 1978b).

The third theme, curriculum and instructional materials, highlights a persistent structural disconnect. While some teaching resources incorporated elements of local culture, such as folktales and proverbs, the majority of curricular documents remained organized around standardized, Western-oriented content. This misalignment between policy intent and available resources reflects what da Silva et al., (2024) identify as a systemic barrier to indigenous knowledge integration in formal schooling contexts.

The fourth theme, learner engagement and outcomes, provides some of the study's most compelling evidence. Children demonstrated markedly higher levels of attention, participation, and social interaction when classroom activities incorporated culturally familiar elements, affirming the developmental and motivational benefits of culturally grounded learning. This finding is consistent with culturally responsive pedagogy's core argument that aligning instruction with learners' cultural backgrounds enhances comprehension and engagement (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Conversely, the dominance of standardized teaching methods limited the frequency and impact of culturally responsive practice.

The fifth theme, institutional and policy constraints, reveals a gap between policy frameworks and implementation realities. Although Nigerian educational policy acknowledges the importance of cultural relevance and indigenous knowledge in

early childhood curricula, classroom practice is frequently shaped by insufficient resources, rigid curricular structures, and an institutional emphasis on uniform academic standards. These constraints often compel teachers to improvise rather than implement structured culturally responsive approaches, consistent with findings reported by Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin (2023) in the Nigerian educational context.

The sixth theme, home–school cultural alignment, underscores the developmental significance of congruence between children's home cultural environments and formal learning experiences. Activities that incorporated children's home languages, stories, and daily routines fostered a stronger sense of belonging and reinforced cultural identity. Where misalignment existed between home practices and formal curricula, children's engagement and cultural continuity were weakened, a pattern that resonates with Rogoff (2003) framework of learning as culturally embedded participation.

Taken together, these themes illuminate a complex and multi-layered picture of indigenous knowledge integration in Nigerian ECE settings. While teachers and learners demonstrated clear responsiveness to culturally grounded instruction, systemic constraints, including inadequate professional development, resource limitations, and curricular rigidity, continue to undermine the consistent and meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge. Effective culturally responsive pedagogy, as these findings suggest, requires not only individual teacher commitment but sustained institutional support, curriculum reform, and the provision of culturally relevant instructional materials.

### **Cultural Sustainability for Early Childhood Education**

The findings from classroom observations, document analysis, and interviews align closely with existing literature on indigenous knowledge and culturally responsive pedagogy in early childhood education. Consistent with previous empirical studies, the occasional use of indigenous stories, songs, games, and proverbs demonstrates the pedagogical value of culturally grounded instruction in promoting engagement, early literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development (Matafwali & Mofu, 2023; Oladele Jegede & O. Arubuola, 2025; Wiysahnyuy & Copyright © 2026: Real Kiddos (Online)

Valentine, 2023). Similarly, educators' recognition of the benefits of culturally relevant instruction supports the central claims of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2010) that aligning teaching with learners' cultural backgrounds enhances both learning outcomes and identity formation.

However, the tensions identified, including inconsistent integration, over-reliance on Western-oriented curricula, and inadequate teacher training, reflect gaps documented in the literature regarding systemic constraints to embedding indigenous knowledge in formal ECE (da Silva et al., 2024). These findings underscore the persistent challenge of translating policy aspirations into classroom practice, a concern also highlighted regarding the ongoing marginalization of non-Western epistemologies in African education systems.

From the perspective of socio-cultural learning theory, learning is most effective when it is socially mediated and situated within familiar cultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978b). The observed engagement of children during culturally relevant activities confirms that indigenous knowledge functions as a meaningful mediating tool for cognitive, moral, and socio-emotional development. Meanwhile, culturally responsive pedagogy provides a principled framework for systematically integrating local cultural practices into early childhood curricula (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995), supporting not only academic outcomes but also cultural sustainability by validating learners' identities and affirming local epistemologies.

Overall, these findings illuminate the potential of indigenous knowledge to sustain cultural continuity in early childhood education, while also revealing that effective implementation requires sustained structural support, teacher capacity building, and purposeful curriculum reform. Integrating culturally responsive practices systematically is therefore essential for promoting both educational effectiveness and the preservation of local cultural heritage in Nigerian ECE settings. Where classroom activities align with children's home cultures, belonging is strengthened and learning is deepened; where misalignment persists, cultural discontinuity limits educational effectiveness and undermines the broader goals of culturally grounded schooling.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the integration of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into early childhood education curricula in Nigeria, focusing on classroom practices, teacher perceptions, and pedagogical implications. The findings reveal that while teachers broadly recognize the educational value of indigenous knowledge, and children demonstrate markedly higher engagement when culturally grounded activities are incorporated, such integration remains inconsistent, incidental, and constrained by structural and professional barriers, including standardized Western-oriented curricula, limited culturally relevant instructional materials, and insufficient professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy. These findings affirm that meaningful early childhood learning is most effective when situated within children's cultural contexts and mediated through familiar language, practices, and community knowledge, yet a persistent gap between Nigeria's policy aspirations for culturally grounded education and actual classroom practice continues to undermine this potential. Integrating indigenous knowledge into Nigerian ECE is therefore not only pedagogically beneficial but also essential for cultural sustainability and identity formation among young learners; aligning early childhood classrooms with children's home cultures fosters belonging and enhances holistic development, while continued misalignment risks deepening cultural discontinuity and reducing the relevance of formal schooling to children's lived realities. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond rhetorical policy acknowledgment toward deliberate, systematic curriculum reform, sustained institutional support, and meaningful investment in the professional preparation of early childhood educators.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, curriculum developers, teacher educators, school administrators, and policymakers are encouraged to systematically reform early childhood education curricula in Nigeria to embed indigenous cultural content, including local stories, songs, proverbs, games, and mother-tongue instruction, as integral rather than supplementary components of instructional delivery, developed through deliberate collaboration with community knowledge holders and early childhood educators; pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes

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should incorporate focused professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy to equip educators with the knowledge and practical strategies needed for consistent and effective integration; schools and educational authorities should actively foster home–school collaboration by engaging families and local communities as pedagogical partners, drawing on children's home languages, practices, and cultural knowledge to reduce cultural misalignment and strengthen belonging; and policymakers should move beyond rhetorical acknowledgment of cultural relevance toward binding implementation frameworks that include the provision of culturally relevant instructional materials and assessment tools reflecting indigenous knowledge and local contexts. Future research should examine the long-term effects of indigenous knowledge integration on children's academic and socio-emotional outcomes, explore implementation strategies across diverse Nigerian linguistic and cultural contexts, and elevate community and parental perspectives to inform the development of more equitable and culturally sustaining early childhood education policy and practice.

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