

Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approach: Teaching Multicultural Classrooms in South African Schools

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Abstract

Teaching diverse student populations with varying cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds is fraught with opportunities and challenges. In this paper, we examined the prospects and complexities in teaching multicultural classes and how teachers' competencies could be improved. This conceptual paper uses the case of South Africa to respond to two questions: What are the opportunities and challenges in teaching multicultural classes and how can teachers' proficiencies be enhanced? Using document analysis, the study deploys Gay's (2000) cultural responsiveness theory which argues that teachers must understand and value the diverse cultural backgrounds of learners and adapt teaching practices to meet their needs. Understanding the possibilities and complexities that teachers face in their teaching could unlock new avenues in teacher-education programmes. Findings replicate that while teaching multicultural classes is crucial for nationwide integration, teachers lack the necessary training and preparation to teach multicultural classes, hence have limited pedagogical approaches and face communication and classroom management challenges. Considering these findings, the paper suggests a re-look to redefine teacher training and recommends employing professional learning communities to augment existing teacher competencies. The study contributes to discourses on how teachers' practices can be recalibrated to suit the educational needs of diverse learners.

Keywords: challenges and opportunities; multicultural classrooms; professional learning communities; teachers' competencies; South Africa

Teaching diverse student populations with varying cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds is fraught with opportunities and challenges. Previous research shows that adapting to the diversity of students is a major component of modern education for both teachers and schools (Smythe, 2023). As such, a growing body of literature is available that unpacks the intricacies of this educational phenomenon in many countries and adds to our understanding on how teachers reimagine and rework their professional practices to accommodate students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Aziz, 2024; Crystal et al., 2024; Lawson, 2024).

For instance, Karadağ and colleagues (2021) conducted a Turkish study that examined the degree of proficiency needed in social studies teachers to teach in multicultural classrooms to determine their multicultural competencies. The study's conclusions demonstrated how inadequate teachers were in addressing the requirements of the culture of the learners at the classroom level. That affirms the criticality of teachers' acquaintance with culturally responsive pedagogies that can address diversity issues. In the United States of America, Kumi-Yeboah and Amponsah (2023) report on a comprehensive study that explored three issues: the challenges of facilitating cross-cultural collaborative learning for students from diverse cultural backgrounds; the teachers' perspectives of culturally responsive pedagogy in online education; and how they incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy strategies in the online learning environment. The study concluded that teachers who taught physical science had difficulties in including culturally diverse materials in their online courses. The report advocated additional discussion on the best ways to support teachers in effectively engaging with students online. The study conducted by Crystal and colleagues (2024) is noteworthy as it investigated whether Bedouin Arab preservice teachers who taught in Jewish schools in Israel could benefit from an integrative learning pedagogy in terms of improving communication and understanding across cultural boundaries and fostering tolerance toward the other. The research demonstrated how the teachers' perspectives were affected by the integrated learning methodology, leading them to reassess their biases, reduce their anxiety, and develop greater tolerance for others. This highlights the criticality of examining strategies in addition to those provided in teacher education programmes which can assist teachers to navigate the opportunities and challenges of teaching diverse students. In a related but earlier study, Rodriguez and colleagues (2023), examined pre-service teachers' opinions and views about instructing culturally and linguistically diverse students in a multicultural school setting using the contexts of the United States and South Africa. The study provided more insights into a few strategies that can be used to support in-service and pre-service teachers in teaching students from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds.

Although these studies have helped to clarify the need for interculturally competent teachers, many of them still believe they are unprepared to work with students from other backgrounds, both linguistically and culturally (Crystal et al., 2024; Gedik-Bal, 2023; Keles et al., 2024; Lawson, 2024; Romijn et al., 2021). Despite extensive research that reports on the criticality of the need for teachers to accommodate children whose cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours deviate from those of the dominant culture, it is notable that not much is known empirically about studies that reflect and discuss teachers' cultural understanding and the

growth of their intercultural competencies. This dearth of studies in this regard obscures our understanding of teachers' opportunities and obstacles in teaching multicultural classes and how their competencies can be re-aligned and enhanced. This conceptual study plugs this gap. Two questions underpin the study:

1. What are the opportunities and challenges faced by teachers teaching multicultural classes?
2. How can teachers' cultural competencies be enhanced?

By exploring the opportunities and challenges found in multicultural classes and how the teachers' competencies can be bettered, the study hopes to provide novel insights into how teachers' practices can be recalibrated to suit the educational needs of diverse learners and concurrently may provide teacher educators with important insights into how to train teachers to work in classrooms with a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The study is structured as follows: after this introduction is the literature review which contextualises the study, followed by the unpacking of Gay's (2000) theory which informed the study and then describe how the data was generated and analysed before presenting the findings and their discussions and implications. Then conclude the paper with some insights on the way forward.

Literature Review

Context to the Study

In the globalised world of today, classrooms serve as miniature versions of the entire globe. Diverse student populations with varying cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds characterise South African schools. Historically, during the apartheid era, there were “19 racially based education departments in South Africa, each serving different racially defined groups of learners” (DoE, 2001, p. 7). Even after the downfall of colonisation and apartheid, South Africans continue to “see themselves in the racial categories of the apartheid era, in part because these categories have become the basis for post-apartheid redress, in part because they retain cultural meaning in everyday life” (Seekings, 2008, p. 1). Basically, the population of South Africa is made up of Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites (Posel & Casale, 2011), resulting in 12 official languages that includes sign language (Chimbunde et al., 2024) though English and Afrikaans dominate the other African languages, spoken at home by most of the African population. Using a democratic approach, the Constitution of South Africa states that “everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Section 29(2)). That proclamation extends the challenges that teachers face given the tapestry of languages found in South Africa.

Considering that language is a carrier of culture, the several languages in use in the country characterise the South Africa's multicultural classroom environments. In addition, the Constitution recognises the right to equality regardless of any distinction or difference and gives no room to any form of discrimination, which, by implication, promotes a full recognition

of diversity (Cross, 2004). Furthermore, South Africa is a rainbow nation (Chimbunde et al., 2024) composed of a complex and diversified cultural landscape, formed by colonialism, apartheid, and immigration, which challenges teachers and teacher education (Rodriguez et al., 2023). This diversity is represented in the country's classrooms, where children of all racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural origins learn together. It is estimated that in South Africa, 2.5 million citizens, or around 5% of the overall population, are foreign-born (Hanna, 2023). This highlights that with increased mobility, societies have seen a shift in the population and a rise in cultural variety; as a result, many children nowadays come from immigrant or ethnic minority families (Keles et al., 2024). Consequently, multicultural classrooms in South Africa are tainted with linguistic diversity as students speak various Indigenous languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and Sepedi in addition to English and Portuguese. Students also come from different cultural backgrounds, including African, European, Asian, and mixed-race cultures. These races reflect the country's diversity.

The legacy of colonialism and apartheid, which continues to affect students' lives and cause some to suffer from intergenerational trauma and others to enjoy historical privileges, adds to the variety of the classroom. However, no teacher enters the classroom to spread hatred or teach in a racist manner (Gedik-Bal, 2023). As such, teachers in this complicated situation must be culturally sensitive, adaptive, and devoted to inclusive and equitable education. Interestingly, these approaches are not innate abilities of teachers, rather they need to be cultivated during their training and or nurtured as they engage in their teaching practices in schools. Since South African classrooms are diverse, this offers academics and professionals a chance to consider the benefits, challenges, and potential of developing inclusive, pluralistic learning settings where students from all backgrounds can succeed (Kurian, 2023). Understanding and valuing students' diverse backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge systems is essential for effective teaching in multicultural South African schools. While this understanding is noted in several studies conducted across nations (Karadağ et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2024; Lawson, 2024; Williams et al., 2019), there is a general agreement that teachers are confronted with educational challenges each time they face a multicultural class because teacher preparation in this regard is far from comprehensive (Aziz, 2024). Given this inadequacy in teacher preparation, it is easy for practicing teachers to accidentally offend or, at worst, prejudice students from cultural backgrounds other than their own (Goh, 2012). This underscores the need to undertake professional development that effectively equips in-service teachers with the competencies required to interact with these learners in multicultural classrooms while simultaneously preparing pre-service teachers for the opportunities and pitfalls of diverse classrooms (Gedik-Bal, 2023; Romijn et al., 2021).

What is under-researched in these studies is the nature of the opportunities and problems South African teachers face and how they can be dealt with. This study fills this scholarship lacuna by exploring the opportunities and challenges that teachers face in teaching multicultural classes and how their competencies can be enhanced, with the view to go beyond the one-size-fits-all approach that teacher education programmes offer.

Multicultural Classrooms in Other Contexts

The paintings of multicultural classrooms are not confined to South African schools but are evident across many nations. As argued by Coyle and colleagues (2023), the educational landscape in the world is undergoing extraordinary changes, including displacement, migration, and global people mobility, necessitating the need for teachers to reinvent classroom practices to satisfy the various learners' educational demands. For example, Spanish is typically sidelined in American classrooms, which fuels conflict and reflects the complicated issue of learner diversity, which includes discrepancies in ethnicity, class, gender, religion, linguistics, physicality, and other areas (Gay, 2002). In their study, Crystal and colleagues (2024) report that Israel is a heterogeneous country with diverse religions, languages, races, and cultures, which can contribute to tensions, inequity, alienation, lack of conversation, and mutual rejection. Similarly, in Dutch educational institutions, the histories and cultures of marginalised groups are typically introduced as a brief footnote to the standard curriculum, and social biases are rarely discussed (Abacioglu et al., 2023). This helps to maintain the status quo of inequality and prevents minoritised groups from having equal growth opportunities. Another study by Degaga and Mekuria (2023) acknowledges that "it is well known by the Ethiopians that Ethiopia is culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and religiously a country of diversity and pluralism" (p. 5). According to Jonsdottir and Einarsdóttir (2024) in the last two decades, there are now many more Icelanders from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds in Ireland because "in 1995 approximately 1.8% of the population had a culturally diverse background, but by 2020 the number had grown to 15.2%" (p. 127). Taken together, these studies provide foundational insights into the prevalence of diversity found in the education systems in the world. As such, students with narrow or distorted worldviews should not be commended given this diversity. Considering this, teachers need to meet their diverse needs, failure of which the culturally diverse demographics of today's classrooms is likely to produce regular value conflicts. However, this comes against the backdrop of the inadequacy of teacher education programmes as reported by many authors (Crystal et al., 2024; Gedik-Bal, 2023; Lawson, 2024; Romijn et al., 2021) who affirm that many teachers continue to feel unprepared to work with students from different origins in terms of language and culture, although the need for their intercultural competency has been acknowledged. This justifies the need for a few internal initiatives to improve the teachers' intercultural competency, which is the contribution of this study.

Theoretical Framing

We frame our understanding from Gay's (2000) cultural responsiveness (CR) theory which emphasises how critical it is for teachers to recognize and value the varied cultural origins of their pupils and modify their methods to suit the requirements of all kids. Three fundamental assumptions underpin the theory: 1. upholding rigorous expectations and learning standards while offering suitable scaffolds and learner supports; 2. leveraging students' pre-existing knowledge, experiences, and assets through the implementation of a curriculum that integrates their cultural knowledge and connections; and 3. fostering students' capacity to identify and question societal injustices (Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2023; Comstock et al., 2023). Several

fundamental principles are embedded in CR teaching, for example, the value of holding all students to high academic standards, the growth of their cultural competency (assisting them in appreciating and understanding both their own and the perceived dominant culture), and the critical understanding of the power relationships based on ethnicity and cultural background in society at large (Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2023; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Seen this way, CR teaching is a research-based teaching strategy that emphasises valuing and recognising the values and life experiences which students bring to the classroom. This suggests that when teaching multicultural classes, teachers must engage students in the subject matter, empower them with significant cultural references to support their sense of self, and encourage social justice, critical thinking, and reflective reasoning. This theory is a good fit for this study premised on its ability to unpack the cradle of the teachers' challenges and how teachers can navigate the teaching trajectory in multicultural classrooms characterised by racial, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic diversity. The theory will provide foundational insights into the way forward given that teacher training programmes are far from addressing the challenges the teachers encounter in their teaching practices.

Methodology

To glean insights into the opportunities and challenges of teaching multicultural classes, the study used documents such as books and journal articles, which were useful because the findings were unaffected by our influence (Morgan, 2022). The documents were helpful in exploring the opportunities and challenges of teaching multilingual classes. We combed and examined the literature in various electronic databases, including ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Science Direct, using the phrase "*opportunities and challenges of teaching multicultural courses*" as search words. More than 30 journal articles appeared. We selected only 10 articles for thematic analysis based on their relevance to the paper's focus. We screened by reading abstracts. The documents were useful since they offered us a method of tracking the opportunities and challenges encountered in teaching multicultural classes. To analyse the data, we employed thematic analysis as explained by Braun and Clark (2013). Codes and patterns were identified after articles were meticulously selected and carefully reviewed. The coding method comprised locating elements within the data that led to different themes and provided the details required to address the research questions. We employed colour coding, whereby concepts or terms that recur often were categorised according to their colour. Every article was printed out, with descriptive labels attached and various reoccurring themes were colour coded. This improved the general overview of the data, which made it simpler to concentrate on themes and ideas that related to the two study questions. The University of Free State's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee waived ethical requirements for the study.

Findings and Discussions

The study investigated the opportunities and challenges faced by the teachers teaching multicultural classes and established how teachers' competencies could be enhanced. We employed documents from various electronic databases and thematically analysed the findings. The study revealed that while multicultural classes have strength in diversity, teacher education

programmes could not adequately prepare the teachers to teach diverse students. These results confirm the need to use professional learning communities to complement initial teacher education programmes. Hereunder, are the findings presented as themes.

Opportunities in Teaching Multicultural Classes

A striking finding from the analysis of articles was that there is strength in diversity. Teaching and learning in a multicultural class offer an opportunity for this strength to blossom as learners from different cultures share their experiences and best practices which other learners and teachers can also emulate and solidify their competencies in accepting and tolerating often taken-for-granted minority perspectives and cultures. As Gedik-Bal (2023) contends “it is not admirable when students form limited or myopic perspectives of the world” (p. 37). Consequently, building an equitable, peaceful, and democratic society requires that the learners and their teachers become willing participants to understand and learn about different cultures. Acknowledging the possibility of diverse cultural backgrounds inside the classroom can help achieve this. In the context of South African classes, whites, coloureds, blacks, and Indians learn in one class in some schools, allowing them to fit anywhere in the global context. This corroborates the works of Güven and colleagues (2022), who argue that multicultural teaching and learning helps people accept and acknowledge the various cultures and ethnic distinctions in their community as well as their own; cultivating cultural and ethnic literacy; fostering self-awareness and healthy identity development in the person; and producing peaceful people. In concurrence, the CR theory affirms that teaching in such classes fosters in pupils a critical understanding of the power relations based on race and culture in the greater community, as well as a value and comprehension of both their own and the perceived dominant culture (Buzetto-Hollywood, 2023). Not only learners benefit from learning in a multicultural class but also the teachers who teach these students. By valuing diverse cultures, teachers safeguard their own identities and coexist peacefully in the same classroom with students from various cultural backgrounds. This affirms the CR theory which argues that teachers must engage learners to empower them with significant cultural references to support their sense of self and encourage social justice, critical thinking, and reflective reasoning. We thus, argue along with Keles and colleagues (2024) that in contrast to victimisation, prejudice, discrimination, and loneliness, socially inclusive classes can foster a sense of safety, belonging, and positive cross-group connections. An inclusive classroom not only embodies equity but also the real South African community because it is essential for maintaining forward-thinking growth and promoting national integration through peacebuilding.

Challenges South African Teachers Face in Multicultural Classes

Limited Pedagogical Approaches

This study found that teacher education programmes do not adequately train teachers to teach multicultural classes. According to Aziz (2024), there are too few teacher preparation programs that effectively prepare candidates to teach a diverse range of learners from different backgrounds, integrate a multicultural teaching praxis, interact with multicultural families, and

flourish in multicultural communities. Furthermore, a lot of research has shown how difficult it is for current teacher preparation programmes to adequately prepare teachers for classrooms that are becoming more and more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and language (Williams et al., 2019). Instead, fieldwork is often required for pre-service teacher education programs, and at least one multicultural education course is usually offered. This one-size-fits-all approach to teaching persists, neglecting the unique needs and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. This issue is not confined elsewhere but is also problematic in South African schools. As reported by Aziz (2024), teachers in South Africa are finding it difficult to handle the difficulties presented by students from different origins and cultures when put together in the classroom. According to Aziz (2024), teachers in many South African schools are not fully trained to work with students from diverse backgrounds. As such, South African teachers easily but unintentionally offend or, at worst, prejudice students from cultural backgrounds other than their own given the visibility of the lingering effects of social ills like racial discrimination, societal injustices and disparities, previous prejudices, oppressive practices, and gender inequality (Gedik-Bal, 2023; Goh, 2012). Taken together, the finding shows the deficit in teacher training programmes in South Africa, which needs to be re-worked.

Communication Barriers

An emerging source of unhappiness with teaching and learning that has affected students, teachers, and teacher candidates is the growing number of learners from varied language backgrounds (Williams et al., 2019). Because of this, many teachers continue to believe they are unprepared to work with students from different linguistic backgrounds (Gedik-Bal, 2023; Romijn et al., 2021). This is because of their training that has been focused on a one-size-fits-all approach, neglecting that these diverse needs of learners are personal requirements. The study reveals that while having different languages is inevitable in South African schools, teachers may face considerable linguistic challenges in these classes. Given that South Africa has 16 official languages (Chimbunde & Kgari-Masondo, 2022), cultural disparities in communication techniques, body language, and attitudes can lead to misunderstandings and disputes. Teachers teach learners who may speak different languages at home, which is not consistent with the language of teaching and learning. For example, Chimbunde and colleagues (2024b) report that learners from varied cultural and linguistic origins in South Africa are often required to break away from their languages and adopt the expectations of the dominant group to succeed in school. In most cases, the learners are supposed to adapt to class norms rather than the class to their diversity. As such, learners who speak, for instance, Venda, isiZulu, and Xhosa may struggle to understand concepts taught in English and participate less in class discussions. Gay (2002) confirms that placing learners in situations where they are expected to comply in this way while engaging in academic pursuits puts them in a difficult situation. Additionally, teachers may find it also difficult to convey complex concepts to learners who have limited English proficiency. No communication can therefore happen between the learners who speak the language other than the one prescribed by policy and those who speak the official language. Policies in the majority of South African schools require teachers to speak in the approved language, yet occasionally they must switch codes to be understood. So, using the prescribed language in a multilingual class is problematic and if not addressed, might result

in misconceptions and breakdowns in communication during lessons. Consequently, as argued by Rodriguez and colleagues (2023) students from historically marginalized communities who are linguistically diverse encounter an education system that is, at best, ineffective, disjointed, and irrelevant or, at worst, a concerted attempt to marginalize, mistreat, and disenfranchise.

Class Management

Given that learners in South African schools differ in terms of religion, politics, race, and creed (Makoelle, 2014), teachers might find it difficult to uphold discipline and control behaviour in such a diverse classroom. Student backgrounds and levels of self-discipline may differ, as well as their socioeconomic status. Behaviour expectations in the classroom can also be impacted by cultural variances. In South African schools, this diversity is evident as learners are either of white, black, coloured or Asian origin. The study argues that their culture varies and how they behave differs but expected to behave the same under the stewardship of a teacher. It will be the role of the teacher to ensure that a learning environment is maintained that is devoid of conflict. Teachers face challenges in maintaining discipline and managing the learners. There are many different hurdles when working with diverse learners. Meeting each student's unique learning needs in a method that suits them best may prove to be the most challenging task. Managing a larger class such that every student is getting the most out of it might be difficult. It is thus crucial to vary the teaching methods and set aside time regularly to address the issue of classroom management.

Enhancing Teacher Competencies for Teaching Multicultural Classes

Hereunder, we provide some strategies that teachers can employ to navigate the challenges posed by learning environments consisting of diverse learners. However, we hasten to say that addressing every learner as a member of a single, homogenous culture is neither feasible nor appropriate. It is an imaginary idea. Consequently, training teachers in abilities, attitudes, and frameworks necessary to teach all students from a variety of backgrounds is always necessary. Although it does not claim to be exhaustive, this study clarifies some foundational strategies and techniques that teachers can consider helpful in bettering their practices in handling multicultural classes.

Use of Professional Learning Communities

Studies reviewed showed that teacher training programmes alone have failed to equip teachers adequately on how to conduct lessons in multicultural classes (Gedik-Bal, 2023; Romijn et al., 2021). This raises a critical question: how then can these teachers be empowered, given they are neither at universities nor undergoing teacher training? The only best alternative is to arrange for these teachers to engage in workshops and seminars using professional learning communities found in their schools. Professional Learning communities are thought of as groups of teachers who work together to improve student's educational experiences by holding frequent interactive discussions, trying out different teaching methods, and critically analysing their own experiences to improve both their individual and group teaching abilities. For this

study, Professional Learning Communities are communities of teachers who come together to learn from one another as a group through discussions, reflections on practices, and the use of students' work to enhance instruction and learning to increase student achievement in multicultural classrooms (Chimbunde et al., 2024b). Having noted that all skills cannot be learned during the teacher education programmes though limited as evidenced by literature (Aziz, 2024), the onus rests with the teachers to organise themselves into professional learning communities to go beyond the one-size-fits-all approach that teacher programmes offer. These communities are intended to serve as spaces where teachers can regularly, continuously, and methodically examine their practices. This enables them to discuss their advantages and disadvantages with peers, work together to solve practice-related issues, and adopt fresh concepts for the good of students (Chimbunde et al., 2024b). This aligns with reflective teaching, where teachers evaluate their practices with the aim to improve their teaching.

Training on Intercultural Competence

One construct that professional learning communities may work on as a strategy is to train teachers on intercultural competence. This is defined as the capability of engaging with persons from various cultural or linguistic backgrounds appropriately and successfully. To have that, Gedik-Bal (2023) proposes the employ of cultural intelligence which he argues offers a feasible framework for fostering intercultural competence. Gedik-Bal (2023) defines cultural intelligence as an individual's ability to perform well in a range of cultural circumstances. It also stresses the significance of adapting one's behaviour to the needs of the cultures with which one interacts. Using the three key tenets of CR theory, we argue intercultural competence focuses on the types of support provided to students to affirm their cultural backgrounds and identities (Lawson, 2024). When teachers possess this kind of intercultural competence, they may leverage each student's cultural background, experiences, frames of reference, and learning preferences to tailor learning experiences that play to and build upon their strengths. Lawson (2024). advises that teachers need to recognize students' cultural heritage, create, and impart culturally based lessons that support learning for learners, connect the school and home experiences, use different techniques to engage learners of all backgrounds, recognize the cultural backgrounds of their students and support them in resisting oppressive systems, emancipating them, and challenging ideas that assume control over them (Gay, 2000). In doing so, teachers will be integrating diverse cultures in their teaching, where local contexts are taken into consideration. The intercultural approach is helpful because when students learn in a manner that is interconnected with other people's culture and their culture, learning becomes relevant, meaningful and highly appealing.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

When teachers are equipped with intercultural competence, the next step is to have them trained on how to adopt culturally responsive pedagogy. For clarity, Goodwin and Long (2023) following Gay (2002), describe culturally responsive pedagogy as teaching that includes the capacity to incorporate various pupils' experiences and cultural knowledge into instructional strategies. Teachers who are sensitive to cultural differences develop cross-cultural

communication skills, implement culturally relevant lesson plans and teaching strategies, demonstrate cultural sensitivity, and foster a safe and friendly learning environment (Gay, 2002). Here, the teachers emphasize the need to provide students with significant cultural references to support their sense of self, encouraging fairness and inclusiveness, piquing students' interest in the topic, and promoting social justice, critical thinking, and reflective reasoning. Introducing more ethnic practices into the classroom that could benefit all children is one possible strategy to address this issue (Abacioglu et al., 2023). We thus identify with Comstock et al., (2023), who claim that teachers must have a culturally responsive disposition that includes teachers' perceptions of themselves as effective teachers, their attitudes about pupils, cultural diversity, and their abilities as teachers. First, teachers must be endowed with cultural competence, which is "the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). This is important because culturally responsive teaching has many advantages, such as raising expectations, improving student needs, resolving inequalities and removing obstacles from the classroom, encouraging a more equal and level playing field, learner empowerment, strengthening student engagement, and offering new chances for students to shine (Buzetto-Hollywood, 2023). We agree with Lawson (2024) who contends that culturally relevant pedagogy is a student-centred approach that examines student achievement, supports children in adopting and affirming their cultural identities, and opposes the inequities that schools and other institutions maintain. For that reason, the teachers in South African schools must be trained in culturally responsive pedagogy and employ a range of methods while integrating multicultural contexts throughout their instruction. They might use a range of materials, multicultural resources, and instructional techniques that are related to various learning styles (Jonsdottir & Einarsdóttir, 2024). That will assist learners not only in developing cultural knowledge but also reflect on multicultural attitudes such as the willingness to respect others, the significance of tolerance, and the necessity to become open-minded to diverse points of view.

Implications for Broader Context

This study is significant not just for South African teachers but also for teachers worldwide, as it has illustrated how diversity poses challenges and opportunities. We note that although schools in South Africa have diverse learners in terms of their culture, language, and life experiences, they are not exceptional instances as many learning institutions globally share comparable circumstances. Using findings from South Africa, diversity must be viewed as a strength rather than a threat. As such, the study underscores the need for context-specific approaches that acknowledge the complexities of cultural dynamics within educational settings. Countries in similar contexts must therefore adopt culturally sensitive approaches in teaching, acknowledging the significance of appreciating and integrating a range of cultures into educational policies and practices (Gay, 2002). This is predicated on the idea that knowledge and skills that are rooted in the lived experiences and frame of reference of diverse learners are easier to acquire, more relevant, and highly appealing. For this to happen, teachers working with diverse populations must select and present content to students in ways that connect it with students' interests, their local languages, cultures and experiences. It is the duty

of the teachers therefore, to create inclusive learning environments that emphasize the valuing of culturally appropriate knowledge, ways of knowing and understanding, where students from all backgrounds feel valued and supported in their academic pursuits. By acknowledging and valuing students' diverse cultures, teachers can foster inclusive environments that promote equity, social justice, and academic success for all students, which is good for the whole world.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper, using the South African context, set out to explore the challenges and opportunities embedded in teaching multicultural classes and then reflect on how to improve teacher competencies in this regard. Since the 1994 general elections, significant changes have been made to South Africa's public education system. All children can now attend school, and students from a wide range of racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds are enrolling in multicultural classes. In stark contrast to most studies that concentrate on the challenges that teachers face in teaching multicultural classes, we interrogated the neglected side and explored the opportunities that these classes offer both to the teacher and the learners. We conclude that there is strength in this diversity as having learners from different cultures is a good foundation for establishing a just, tranquil, and democratic society in the future. An inclusive classroom not only embodies equity but also the real South African community. By extension, we argue that teachers are vital in promoting democracy in society. However, a remarkable finding was that teachers lacked the necessary training and preparation for teaching multicultural classes. Nonetheless, the study offered some nuggets on some strategies that can be employed to align teachers' competencies to enable them to navigate the complexities of teaching multicultural classes. This research fills a knowledge gap by demonstrating how teachers' cultural competencies can be enhanced through training that gives teachers the skills they need to be interculturally aware.

Considering the findings, the study recommends that teachers who are in service in South Africa and elsewhere in similar contexts need to be continuously trained on how to teach multicultural classes considering the diversity reflected in their learners. This training could be done in the form of workshops or seminars in their professional learning communities. This is to ensure that schools do not remain areas of ethnic conflict and that the academic success of pupils from marginalized ethnic groups will not lag that of their ethnic majority peers. In line with the above, universities in South Africa and others in comparable contexts, where teacher candidates are trained, must continue to redefine, and recalibrate teacher education programmes to better prepare future teachers. There is no extensive preparation involved in adding intercultural topics and objectives to the currently offered courses in teacher education programs. Teachers who teach multicultural classes must shake off the constraints of the one-size-fits-all approach training that they got from teacher education programmes, which neglects the variety of needs that students have given the nature of the South African schools and engage in self-development. The learners, diverse needs are distinct needs. It is not conceivable or appropriate to address each learner as a member of a single culture. While this current study has assisted in providing a foundational understanding of the nature of opportunities and challenges embedded in multicultural classes, it has its limitations. The study is based on

literature, hence other studies could be undertaken to explore the experiences of teachers and learners in teaching and learning in diverse classrooms.

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