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Empowering Young Minds: Strategies for Incorporating DEI in Early Childhood Centers

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Abstract: The birth-to-five-year period is a critical stage in a child's development. Most brain growth occurs during this time, laying the foundation for future learning. Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in shaping early development. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are essential components of early childhood education, influencing children's identities and socio-cultural development. Introducing DEI concepts at an early age equips children with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate a globalized world while fostering an appreciation for diverse perspectives. Children exposed to multiple languages and cultures tend to develop empathy and acceptance of others. This qualitative study explores how educators integrate DEI into early childhood settings through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Teachers and administrators from Belize, Canada, the United States of America, Egypt, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates share their approaches toward promoting DEI in early childhood programs and the challenges they face in implementation. Purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling were utilized to recruit participants. Findings demonstrate that while educators value DEI and aim to foster inclusive learning environments, the manner in which DEI is implemented varies. Recommendations will equip educators and policymakers with best practices for fostering inclusive, respectful learning environments that support all children and their families. Future research examining the intersectionality of educators' identities, including gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, and professional roles, may offer deeper insight into how lived experiences shape DEI understanding and practices in early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood education, diversity, equity, inclusion, teaching strategies

1. Introduction

The developing brain is shaped and strengthened by robust interactions and interplay between the environment and a child's genetic dispositions [1]. While the genetic blueprint lays the foundation of brain development, early life events impact the pattern of brain architecture. Early childhood educators play a crucial role in developing and strengthening these connections [2]. The child's brain is particularly malleable in the early years, a concept known as neuroplasticity. Although humans can acquire and learn new skills throughout their life span, brain plasticity is at its peak during the first few years. Young children learn language with ease, whereas language acquisition becomes more challenging (though not impossible) in adulthood [3]. An enriched environment during the early years increases neuronal complexity, promotes dendritic growth, and enhances synapse formation. It is therefore essential to provide children with opportunities to develop and reach their full potential.

Implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in early childhood classrooms requires an understanding of its foundations, principles, and approaches. A key component of supporting DEI is reflecting on how to promote best practices that welcome diverse identities within classrooms. Many educators struggle with integrating DEI in a way that supports holistic child development [4]. Although research emphasizes the importance of DEI in early childhood education, a significant gap remains in understanding how to translate these values into effective classroom practices [5]. This study highlights how some early childhood educators are successfully implementing DEI within their practices and the challenges they face. By sharing their strategies and challenges, the findings will foster dialogue around DEI integration and provide tools to create an inclusive learning environment for all children.

2. Literature Review: DEI Theorists

While no single theorist represents DEI, numerous scholars have discussed inclusivity. Reviewing some of their frameworks clarifies how DEI practices have developed in classrooms.

Derman-Sparks et al. [6] pioneered the concept of anti-bias education to promote fairness and inclusion by helping children appreciate diversity. They proposed a broad curriculum framework with four key components (goals) to help children practice anti-bias thinking, develop a strong sense of identity, and learn in an environment that feels warm and safe. The first goal focuses on identity, wherein teachers provide opportunities for children to feel proud of themselves, their families, cultures, and the values they most identify with. The second goal encourages children to appreciate diversity by giving them opportunities to interact with people from varied backgrounds and understand how they may be different and yet similar. The third goal emphasizes fairness

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and supports young children in learning the difference between right and wrong. This includes scaffolding and developing critical thinking skills when they observe unfair situations. The fourth goal encourages children to stand up for what is right and use their voices in ways that promote fairness and care for others [7].

Crenshaw [8] introduces the concept of intersectionality to explain how different parts of a person's identity can overlap and shape their experiences. These can include gender, caste, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, disability, physical appearance, and height. For example, a person can be a woman and also belong to a religious community, and both elements may be relevant in how she understands herself and how others perceive her. Crenshaw often refers to the case *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*[1], in which a group of African American women reported unfair treatment when they tried to obtain employment. They argued that their experiences were shaped by both race and gender. The courts, however, reviewed race and gender separately. They noted that African American men worked in the factories, which was seen as evidence that race was not a barrier. They also observed that white women worked in the offices, which was taken as evidence that gender was not a barrier. Because the court did not consider the combined effect of these identities, the case was dismissed.

Crenshaw's work [8] highlights that children enter schools with multiple identities that shape their experiences regarding belonging, inclusion, and learning. When educators understand that a child's cultural background, language, gender, family structure, and experiences can all interact, they are better equipped to create environments that support each child. Intersectionality encourages teachers to view children as whole individuals and recognize that inclusion requires attention to the many facets that influence a child's sense of self and well-being.

Ladson-Billings [9] develops a framework for culturally relevant pedagogy, which encourages educators to learn about the personal and sociopolitical issues that shape the lives of students, their communities, and the world. Her work supports classrooms where children's cultural backgrounds are valued as strengths. Ladson-Billings explained that children thrive when instruction reflects their experiences and affirms their identities, creating inclusive environments where all children feel capable, valued, and connected to their school community.

Collectively, the works of Derman-Sparks et al. [6], Crenshaw [8], and Ladson-Billings [9] recognize that DEI is essential in early childhood education. Each approaches inclusion from a different angle, but their ideas reinforce one another.

Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model [10] is grounded in the idea that children do not develop in isolation and take an active role in shaping their own environments. His proposed framework consists of nested systems; each connected to the next. Development occurs through bi-directional interactions, meaning the child influences the environment and the environment influences the child. Although Bronfenbrenner's model is not directly linked to DEI, it offers valuable insight into why it is necessary to understand students, welcome them, and create inclusive environments. His approach strengthens student–teacher relationships and influences the well-being of society as a whole.

Within the socio-ecological model, the innermost layer, the microsystem, includes the child's family, school, peers, neighborhood, and preschool settings. The next layer, the mesosystem, includes the relationships among these microsystems. If teachers ignore a child's cultural identity or fail to create an inclusive classroom, the child may feel unseen and misunderstood. This weakens the student–teacher relationship, which is a core part of the microsystem. Once this relationship deteriorates, the child may lose interest in school and disengage from learning.

This disengagement does not remain confined to the microsystem. A child who withdraws academically may be at risk for school dropout, which influences the exosystem and the macrosystem, which include broader community structures such as access to jobs, social support services, and economic opportunities. Dropping out of school can limit access to these systems and increase the likelihood of long-term financial instability. The macrosystem also involves cultural values, societal expectations, and economic conditions. When large numbers of students become disengaged and leave school, it places a strain on societal resources and contributes to cycles of unemployment and dependence.

By understanding how exclusion within the classroom can ripple outward through multiple layers proposed by Bronfenbrenner [10], educators can better recognize the importance of welcoming students and creating inclusive classroom spaces that support long-term well-being.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how early childhood educators promote DEI within their classrooms and campuses. According to the National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC)[2], the early childhood period spans from birth to eight years. To address this research question, it was necessary to select a methodology aligned with the exploratory nature of the study.

A qualitative approach was most appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of educators' perspectives, meanings, and experiences related to DEI practices [11]. In contrast, a quantitative approach was not well suited for this study because the purpose of the researcher was not to measure the frequency of DEI practices but understand how educators conceptualize, interpret, and enact DEI within their classrooms and campuses.

Given the complexity and contextual nature of DEI, particularly across varied cultural and institutional settings, qualitative methods provided the flexibility to capture nuanced insights, contextual variations, and participants' own language and perception. Utilizing a qualitative methodology also allowed the researcher to generate rich, descriptive data that would not have been accessible through standardized instruments or numerical analysis.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the American College of Education, the researcher employed purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Gatekeepers were utilized to help identify and reach initial candidates for the study. Participants included early childhood educators and administrators who work with children enrolled in early childhood education programs. The term "administrator" refers to educators in supervisory roles (e.g., principals or directors). Their titles are used interchangeably in the interviews. Individuals who did not meet this criterion were excluded.

[1] *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, 413 F. Supp. 142 (E.D. Mo. 1976)

[2] National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "Principles of Child Development and Learning and Implications That Inform Practice", https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/principles

Participants were recruited from various parts of the world, including Belize, Canada, the United States of America (USA), Egypt, the United Kingdom (UK), India, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There were a total of 15 study participants. Guest et al. [12] find that thematic saturation often occurs within the first 12 interviews, with subsequent interviews primarily reinforcing existing themes. Therefore, including the perspectives and voices of 15 participants was deemed reasonable and sufficient to generate a rich and meaningful data set for this qualitative study.

The study did not aim to compare practices across countries but instead focused on capturing educators' experiences and perspectives as they described their approaches to fostering DEI within their classrooms and campuses.

3.1. Data collection

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich participants with direct experience in early childhood education.

Purposive sampling was used to intentionally recruit educators who were actively working in early childhood settings and could provide relevant, firsthand insights into how DEI are integrated within classrooms and campuses [13]. This approach ensured alignment between participant expertise and the study's research question.

Convenience sampling was employed to identify an initial group of participants who were readily accessible and willing to participate, facilitating timely data collection [14]. These participants served as an entry point into the field and provided early perspectives that informed ongoing recruitment.

Snowball sampling expanded the participant pool by asking initial participants to recommend additional educators who met the study criteria [15]. This helped recruit participants from diverse contexts and geographic locations who might otherwise have been difficult to access.

Given the global nature of the study, the Zoom platform was the most convenient method for conducting interviews. Prior to participating, each individual received an emailed consent form with instructions to review carefully and contact the researcher with any questions. The consent form explained that each interview would last approximately 45–60 min and would be audio-recorded for accuracy and that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty and assured that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study.

The data collection instrument included a semi-structured interview protocol designed to address the research questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and securely stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they would be comfortable sharing any documents or photos relevant to the topics discussed and whether they consented to the researcher using these materials within the study. Only materials shared voluntarily and with permission were used, and all documents and images were anonymized.

3.2. Participant overview

A brief description of the participants involved in this study appears in Table 1 and in the descriptions below. To protect their confidentiality, names have been omitted and replaced with alphabetic identifiers (e.g., Participant A, Participant B).

Table 1
Participant summary

Participant pseudonym	Country	Role or title
Participant A	Belize	Director
Participant B	Canada	Teacher
Participant C	USA	Director
Participant D	USA	Director
Participant E	USA	Teacher
Participant F	Egypt	Director
Participant G	Egypt	Teacher
Participant H	UK	Director
Participant I	UK	Teacher
Participant J	India	Director
Participant K	India	Teacher
Participant L	Pakistan	Director
Participant M	Pakistan	Teacher
Participant N	UAE	Director
Participant O	UAE	Teacher

1) Participant A serves as both the director and the teacher at a school in Belize. For the purposes of this study, she responded to the set of questions designated for the director of the early childhood facility.
2) Participant B is a teacher at a Montessori school in Canada.
3) Participant C is the director of an early childhood school in the USA. Although the school initially agreed to provide a teacher for the study, they were ultimately unable to identify one who was willing to participate. As participation was voluntary, no teacher was recruited from this school.
4) Participant D is the director of an early childhood center in the USA that follows the Montessori philosophy and incorporates religious studies into its curriculum.
5) Participant E is a teacher affiliated with the same school as Participant D.
6) Participant F is the director of an early childhood school in Egypt that implements the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum.
7) Participant G is an early childhood educator at the same school in Egypt as Participant F.
8) Participant H is a nursery administrator at a school in the UK.
9) Participant I teaches at the same nursery school in the UK as Participant H.
10) Participant J is a director at a school in Mumbai, India.
11) Participant K is a teacher at the same school in India as Participant J.
12) Participant L is the principal of an elementary school in Pakistan.
13) Participant M is a teacher at the same school in Pakistan as Participant L.
14) Participant N is the director of an early childhood center in the UAE.
15) Participant O is a teacher in the same school as Participant N.

Table 2
Example of first- and second-cycle coding using Saldaña's method

Data excerpt	First cycle	Second cycle
It doesn't mean equally being divided, even though it is equal towards the end. However, for example, some students might need more of the teachers' time and resources available by the school compared to another student equity to me means meeting everyone's need, based on what is their need.	Definitions (in Vivo)	Definition of equity
understanding that some students may need a different kind of a support to reach the same level of achievement so recognizing that and providing them that opportunity and support to be able to learn along with the others	Definitions (in Vivo)	Definition of equity

3.3. Data analysis

Thorough familiarity with the data is essential to ensure accurate representation of participant input [16]. To analyze the data for this study, Saldaña's [17] coding method was employed, involving multiple cycles of data review to identify patterns, concepts, and emerging themes. In the initial cycle, descriptive and in vivo coding were used to capture key phrases and ideas from the participants. Color coding was used to create a visual representation of emerging themes, helping the researcher to organize and compare data across transcripts more effectively. These codes were further refined during the second cycle to develop broader thematic categories that directly addressed the primary research question. The final stage of data analysis involved reporting the thematic findings, incorporating documents shared by participants to enrich the analysis and illustrate the connection between the data and the research question [18].

An example to illustrate this coding process is the creation of a broad first-cycle code labeled *definitions*, which was used to capture how participants described DEI (Table 2). All words, phrases, and statements participants used to define these concepts were grouped under this initial code using descriptive and in vivo coding. During the second coding cycle, these first-cycle codes were reviewed, condensed, and reorganized into more focused thematic categories. Using the same example, the *definitions* code was refined into distinct themes for each concept, such as *definitions of diversity, definitions of equity*, and *definitions of inclusion*, allowing for clearer differentiation and deeper analysis of participants' understandings across the data set.

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to maintain confidentiality. All forms of communication including emails, informed consent, and the interview questionnaire were designed to be easily understood, with clear language appropriate for the educational level of the participants and by avoiding technical jargon.

To enhance the credibility and validity of the data and ensure an accurate understanding of participants' responses, a summary of each transcript was sent to participants for review. They were asked to approve or suggest changes within three to four days. This process, known as member checking, allowed participants sufficient time to verify the accuracy of their responses and ensure that their perspectives were represented correctly [19].

In addition to member checking, the researcher engaged in reflexive memoing throughout data collection and analysis to document analytic decisions, emerging insights, and reflections related to positionality. These memos supported ongoing reflexivity and helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Mills [20] and Yin [21] emphasize the importance of incorporating multiple sources of evidence to enhance the credibility of qualitative research. Yin [22] defines triangulation as utilizing multiple methods and evidence sources. This study enhanced trustworthiness by analyzing interviews and participant documents. Participants from developed and underdeveloped countries allowed cross-contextual comparison. Converging findings across data sources and regions strengthened the study's credibility.

3.4. Limitations

There are certain limitations to this study. Although every effort was made to include diverse perspectives, participation was voluntary, and all participants identified as female. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable. Insights from male educators or those who identify as LGBTQ+ might have offered a broader range of experiences and additional insights. While the study included educators from various countries, it is important to acknowledge that other countries might have different policies and perspectives regarding DEI and early childhood education. Given the small number of participants, many of these diverse viewpoints may not have been captured. Nevertheless, the study contributes a valuable understanding of how DEI is promoted across early childhood centers in different parts of the world. Further research using purposeful sampling that intentionally examines the intersectionality of educators' identities, including gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, and professional roles, may provide deeper insight into how DEI is understood and implemented across early childhood education settings.

3.5. Role of the researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher is situated at the center of the research because of their involvement in the data collection process [23]. Therefore, specific steps are taken to ensure that data is collected in a non-biased and ethical manner. Since none of the interviewees held a supervisory role or worked with the researcher, this helped reduce ethical concerns related to power differences or possible conflicts of interest.

Given my experience and expertise as a former DEI manager at an online university, I was aware that I carry certain biases and needed to remain vigilant so I would not unintentionally add my own assumptions to the participants' responses. I kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my thoughts, assumptions, values, and possible biases that could influence the interpretation

of the findings. The reflective journal provided an opportunity to examine my own biases, maintain transparency, and follow ethical practices outlined in the IRB.

3.6. Abbreviations

DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
IRB: Institutional Review Board
EYFS: Early Years Foundation Stage
LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
EAR: Education Against Racism
KHDA: Knowledge and Human Development Authority
TQUK: Training Qualifications UK
COBIS: Council of British International Schools
NEA: National Education Association
LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual
NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

4. Findings

The data analysis yielded several themes that were categorized for effective organization. These include: (a) definitions and understandings of the term DEI, (b) best practices including appropriate representation in the classroom and curriculum, (c) professional development, (d) challenges in promoting DEI, (e) family engagement, (f) policies related to DEI, and (g) sensitive topics (Figure 1). Each theme is separately discussed in the sections below. A summary of findings for each theme is included at the end of each section.

4.1. Definitions and understandings of DEI

Most study participants defined diversity in terms of gender, race, and culture. However, some also included religion, nationality, and ideology, and described diversity as a "melting pot." Participant N compared diversity to a pizza with "50 ingredients . . . and that makes a whole pizza."

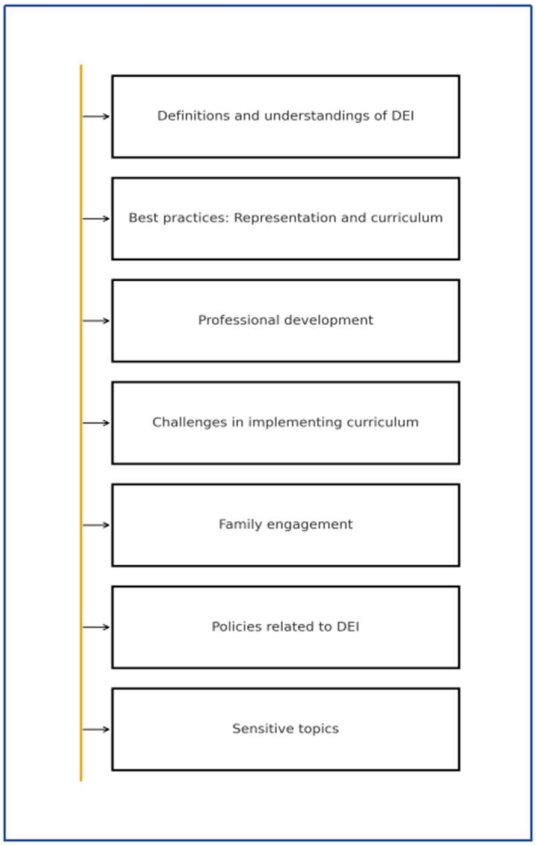
Equity and equality are often used interchangeably, so it was important to highlight the difference between these two terms during the interviews. Some educators described equity using phrases such as equal rights to learn, equal chances, fairness, or justice. Others offered more detailed explanations. Participant D shared:

> *. . . it doesn't mean equally being divided, even though it is equal towards the end. However, for example, some students might need more of the teachers' time and resources available by the school compared to another student equity to me means meeting everyone's need, based on what is their need.*

Participant J shared, "understanding that some students may need a different kind of a support to reach the same level of achievement so recognizing that and providing them that opportunity and support to be able to learn along with the others."

The most common way participants described inclusion was to emphasize that all students, regardless of their abilities, race, culture, or religion, should feel valued, respected, and supported. Participant O described inclusion as "when you put diversity in action, in practice."

Figure 1
Study themes



To summarize, participants explained how they interpreted the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion. Understanding their interpretations is relevant because this study focuses on how these concepts are applied by each participant, within their settings. The explanations demonstrate that each participant viewed these terms in different ways based on their experiences and the context of their work.

4.2. Best practices: representation and curriculum

Participants shared a variety of methods they use to implement best practices related to DEI. This section is divided into two parts: one focusing on how participants promote DEI within their classrooms and the other highlighting DEI-related curriculum practices.

4.2.1. Promoting DEI in the classroom

Participants described numerous classroom activities designed to foster inclusion and celebrate diversity. While many organize multicultural days, others embed DEI into their everyday practices.

Participant K explained:

> *Once a week, children go to the library where the librarian reads books to them. During Literacy Week, we invite different teachers and support staff to read to our students. During Home Language Week, we invite parents and grandparents to bring books from home and read them to our students in their native language. We will celebrate Pink Shirt Day soon.*

When asked to provide additional details about Pink Shirt Day, the teacher responded, "Pink Shirt Day is about being kind to other children and to other people."
Participant B shared:

> *I have a culture tray. Children from different backgrounds bring in different items. For example, I have a dreidel, I have a mojri, which is a type of footwear from Pakistan, I have a dhol, which is a musical instrument from Pakistan, and I have landmarks from all around the world. There is a family with roots in France, so they brought in an Eiffel Tower model.*

Participant C stated:

> *We have books in the classroom. We have a different theme each week as part of our geography and cultural studies. We use real pictures in Montessori. When parents travel, they buy objects and materials from those cultures, and we include them in our continent boxes. That's how we try to ensure our curriculum reflects multiple cultures.*

Participant G added:

> *We have baby dolls in our classrooms. We have three classes, and each class selects one baby doll. I chose the dark-skinned one. You know, in ads for shampoo or soap, you always see a blonde girl or woman, but we don't have any blondes here. So why are we only seeing fair-skinned people represented?*

Participant D. explained, "We have sound boxes designed to help teachers identify if children may have hearing impairments. The material is also set up to support children who are not verbal."

Participant E said:

> *We are a trilingual school. We teach in English, but we also offer Arabic and French. These languages are part of our curriculum. We have an International Day and a Cultural Day coming up. Our focus will be on North America, but students will each choose a country they want to learn more about. They do research about the traditions, culture, geography, flags, nature, food, music, and more. They even get the chance to dress up. We also have a Role Model of the Month, Inspirational Leader of the Month, Poet of the Month, and Artist of the Month. The individuals we highlight are from around the world and from different time periods, some are historical figures, while others are current artists or leaders. We have a lot of diversity in our curriculum.*

Participant J shared:

> *We have inclusive learning spaces where are largely designed to be safe and welcoming to all children and materials sort of reflect diverse ability in family structures and identities and we have a flexible sort of seating arrangement with rugs and low benches that are movable at all times to ensure participation and needs of the students.*

4.2.2. DEI in the curriculum

Participants also described how they integrated DEI concepts into their curriculum in meaningful and age-appropriate ways. Participant F explained:

> *We promote the cultures that are part of our school community, and our curriculum is updated accordingly. Right now, we have a small cohort of Chinese students, so we've updated the celebratory aspects of our curriculum to include Chinese New Year. We have activities throughout the academic year that reflect the diverse student population. For example, we celebrate International Day, Eid holidays, Christian holidays, and others based on the demographics of our students. We also incorporate a subject called Global Perspectives as part of the core curriculum.*

Participant K emphasized using books to teach DEI-related concepts:

> *We have a large collection of books on kindness, feelings, and respecting differences. These children are very young, so what works best with them is discussion—talking to them during circle time and reading a lot of stories that model these values. For example, they draw cards for their friends, explaining why their friends are special, or for their parents or school support staff. This helps them understand why being kind and respectful is important.*

She added:

> *We use the Joey and Jean series, which focuses on kindness and friendship. We also use books by Julia Dawson that address these themes. Michael Pfifer's books about sharing and caring are also part of our library collection. We have a Pratham collection, which includes many relevant titles, and we use the Panchatantra Tales from time to time as well.*

In summary, the second theme consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants described how their schools celebrate diversity and promote inclusion. Examples included Grandparents' Day, Pink Shirt Day, Literacy Week, Cultural Day, and International Day. The second part focused on how participants incorporate DEI into the curriculum. They shared their approaches that reflect their commitment to inclusive practices. Specific examples included teaching a subject called Global Perspectives as part of the core curriculum and reading books such as the *Joey and Jean* series, works by Julia Dawson, books by Michael Pfifer, and titles from the *Pratham* collection.

4.3. Professional development

Only directors were asked to respond to this question because they are responsible for offering professional development sessions.

Participant A shared, "The government offers courses through TLI, and recently they provided a course from the University of the West Indies that focused on DEI. While these courses are made available to teachers, it is not mandatory for them to enroll."
Participant C stated:

> *We have monthly meetings with our lead teachers, and those meeting notes are shared with the assistant teachers. Additionally, we have five staff development days each year where we invite guest speakers. We choose training topics that we feel are important, and they are implemented schoolwide so that everyone receives the same messaging. The workshops vary and may include topics such as cultural sensitivity, working with children with different needs, and inclusive practices within a Montessori framework.*

When asked about how they select guest speakers, the participant added, "There's something called the Texas Trainer Registry, and I usually look for speakers from that registry. It is specific to childcare centers in our state."
Participant F explained:

> *Every year, we are required to complete refresher courses on topics such as equal opportunities and safeguarding. Professional development is strongly encouraged and is an integral part of the staff appraisal process. Staff members also have access to a range of British webinars, including those offered through the Council of British International Schools (COBIS).*

Participant H shared:

> *We are part of a group in Greenwich called Education Against Racism (EAR). As members of the Early Years group, we are also participating in a research project with the University of Greenwich focused on children's identity. Two of our staff members are undergoing training that includes input from researchers. The training covers topics such as unconscious bias and how to discuss ethnicity with both children and adults.*

Participant N noted:

> *Two years ago, we started our own teacher training company. We are accredited by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and by Training Qualifications UK (TQUK). We are also in the process of becoming an independent affiliate with Max, USA. Every staff member completes at least 30 hours of continuing professional training annually, which is funded by the organization.*

Participant J said:

> *We have conducted a few in-house workshops. One focused on using appropriate language in the classroom, especially with younger children, where it's important to be mindful of the words we use. Another workshop addressed strategies for working with children who need additional support or have varying learning abilities. We also have informal discussions and monthly meetings where these topics are sometimes addressed, but we haven't yet conducted formal professional development courses specifically on this [DEI] topic.*

Findings from this theme demonstrate that professional training on DEI topics was offered in various forms in almost all schools that participated in this study. Specific examples cited include training sessions by Training Leaders International; guest speakers from the Texas Trainer Registry; webinars from the Council of British International Schools, Education against Racism, and the Knowledge and Human Development Authority; and courses provided by Training Qualifications UK.

4.4. Challenges in implementing curriculum

While all participants emphasized providing an inclusive curriculum, several also described certain challenges they face. Participant F explained, "Purchasing materials in Egypt is extremely difficult. The taxes are three times the value of any object you bring into the country." Participant A shared, "In Belize, especially in rural areas, it's challenging to get materials. Most of the books I have are donated. We try to be as inclusive as possible, but access to resources remains a major barrier."

Participant J reported:

> *Our socio-economic backgrounds of students are pretty homogenous in our school at least in the early years so we don't have the disparity in terms of the socio-economic thing and gender and all, at this time it is done at a very basic level where they understand that I am a boy, or I am a girl so there is no disparity at all. It is never said that all girls do this or all boys do that. It is always in a group where all are given equal sort of responsibility and all so we have not faced that in terms of that either.*

Participant K, who works at the same school as participant J, shared a challenge with a child who was uncomfortable with going into the Pandal [temple]. "So, he was fixed about things, and we had a major challenge with him." She further explained, "A parent was not comfortable their child going into the Ganpati [statue of a Hindu god] in the pandal because they were Muslims." They explained, "it is just that because it was in the school campus, we took the children but we did not force the child that he needs to put something on his forehead or he needs to eat something from there."

Participant L explained that there are a few students in her school who are on the spectrum. This can sometimes create a challenge to make other parents understand that it is by no means going to interrupt or disrupt their child's learning. She stated, "And you know other parents that do come up with this question, that, why are they there?"

In summary and as with any initiative, participants reported several challenges when promoting DEI within their classrooms. Examples included the cost of materials, working in homogeneous school environments, supporting students on the spectrum in mainstream classrooms, and navigating religious practices.

4.5. Family engagement

Family engagement was important to educators and administrators in every school. While some educators invite parents to participate in celebrations and special events, others focus on keeping families routinely informed and involved through the use of digital apps.

Participant A said that "at the end of each unit, which is at the end of each month, we do a culminating activity which is celebrating wherever we learn through the month." She explained that she had recently started to invite parents, "which usually are the moms, the ones that come, when I say parents. But you know the moms are the ones that come and we show them what they [students] learned through the month."
Participant B shared:

> *Our school uses a platform called Edsby. On our home room page teachers post where all the parents can see what is happening in the classroom. I make sure that I do regular posting whether it is some resources that I am looking for relevant to an upcoming theme or it something that I have done in the classroom or something that the children have come up with entirely on their own, I will make sure that it is written and posted regularly out there so that the parents are aware of what is going on.*

Participant C said, "We celebrate holidays around the world and we encourage family involvement in sharing their traditions."

When asked about how they engage families, participant K explained:

> *. . . mainly we call them to class to read books and we send them newsletters/ We used to send them newsletters every 2 months, now we send them weekly newsletters where we write to them what all we do in class so that really helps them to speak to the children about and give them more information. And we celebrate days like Math evening or literacy week or home language day. Parents come to school and that really helps them understand how we celebrate in school.*

Participant H described an "amazing dad who came in in full African regalia." She explained that it's about that child being able to see their parent and being able to see that, "You know that's a positive image for them." She added, "We have quite a few books with different languages. So the parents will read those stories to them, and sometimes the parents are confident enough to just tell a traditional story from their growing up there."

Participant L listed celebrations where they invite parents. These include graduation ceremonies, parent–teacher meetings, and Iqbal Day. When asked to explain what she meant by Iqbal Day, she elaborated that Allama Iqbal [the national poet of Pakistan] was born on the 9th of November, and he was the first one to "inculcate that idea of making Pakistan for the Muslims." On this day, preschool children put on a small act [skit], and for the older students, there is also "poetry recitation and competition."

Participant M shared that their school celebrates "Grandparents' Day" in which they invite grandparents to their school. "They [grandparents] spent the whole day with us, in which they did so many games. They shared their experience; they shared their love and affection with their grandchildren. They really enjoyed it." When asked how they reach out to family members, Participant M responded that they reach out to families through social media. She further elaborated, "We have different WhatsApp groups. We have our NGS app through which we send our notices we also post through our Facebook and on Instagram." Participant N reported:

> *We don't involve the parents very much in the classroom. We prefer that the parents dropped the children off and leave them as soon as possible. We have meetings with them at the beginning of the term, the middle of the term, the end of the term. We have weekly lesson plans that we send out to them, and then we have recommendations for them in our newsletters. So we'll say, look, this is what we did last month, and this is what we're planning to do next month.*

While this school does not involve parents in the classroom, families participate in their children's growth and development in many other ways, including "book fair, coffee mornings, or inviting a sleep expert, a nutrition expert, a medical expert, an occupational therapist, or a speech and language therapist" to provide a workshop or training for the parents.

Participant G also shared similar celebrations. They also have a special performance for Mother's Day, "where the moms come in and watch the performance, and then they're invited to join their child, and do a craft with their child." However, when inquired about Father's Day, she responded, "We don't celebrate Father's Day in all of Egypt."

The findings from the section of family engagement demonstrate that each school attempts to involve families in one way or another. Some use apps or Facebook to highlight the children's accomplishments, others invite families to celebrate events such as Mother's Day, Grandparents' Day, math evenings, literacy week, the culmination of a project or theme, or holiday celebrations. Participants also shared that mothers are generally more engaged than fathers.

4.6. Policies related to DEI

Many people associate the development of policies with only large and complex organizations. However, the size of the organization should not be the driving force behind development and implementing guiding policies. A policy should provide a framework to guide the mission and vision of the institution. They provide a structure and clarity to the employees within an organization [24]. Effective implementation of the policies is critical to the success of an organization and "reinforces and clarifies standard operating procedure" [25].

When asked about their policies related to DEI, many participants explained that their programs do not have a formal or specific DEI policy. For example, Participant J stated, "We are a progressive school now applying to become a PYP, so in our early years, we unfortunately do not have any policies that are laid down in terms of DEI currently."

Similarly, Participant H explained, "We're in the middle of overhauling them. Because I don't think we've been very good at communicating that. I think it's something that we're aware of." This response suggests that while there may be an awareness of DEI considerations, the policies are currently being revised and have not been clearly communicated. However, a few participants did describe existing policies within their programs that promote DEI.

Participant D shared that DEI principles are included in both the faculty and parent handbooks. She stated, "Everything is talking about no discrimination between any race, religion, background, nationality, and so forth." She further explained that these nondiscrimination statements are also present on their website, in admission documents, and across all official materials.

Participant F reported having a policy that highlights equality of opportunity. She elaborated, "These are communicated to staff through induction as well as to families. We have parent handbooks and staff handbooks, where all our policies are outlined."

Participant N described a policy focused on respect, safety, and addressing each child's emotional, physical, psychological, and developmental needs. She stated, "There are simple things on that policy sheet." She also noted that the policy includes dress code guidelines, explaining, "The clothes that we wear to school is on that policy sheet so that we cover our shoulders, wear fabric to our knees, and don't show our underwear."

With respect to this theme, participants were divided regarding formal policies related to DEI. While some schools had a formal DEI policy, others did not but still emphasized the importance of treating everyone with dignity and respect.

4.7. Sensitive topics

Participant M shared that there was recently a rape case in a college in Punjab and that triggered emotions and concerns with parents.

Although the school has cameras everywhere in our school, even in classrooms, in corridors, and/or outside of the washrooms and everything, but parents were still very concerned. To address

their concerns, we did a skit in the assembly and also shared worksheets (Figure 2).

We highlighted the sensitive parts with red to make students understand "which parts should not be touched by any stranger or other fellows." In the worksheet (Figure 2), these sensitive body parts are circled, and they were highlighted in red during the class exercises, reinforcing the participant's emphasis on areas that require protection and clear boundaries.

Participant B said:

> *It is so funny, when it is about cultural diversity, the parents have very open to it, but when it is related to the family structure, then people are not as forgiving or entertaining as you may think they would be.*

She explained that after doing a lot of research, she purchased a book for her classroom. It was about a family who had a different family structure and was not well received by a school family who wrote to her and said that this was something that they do not encourage or support.

Participant B explained:

> *For many years, I had a child in my class who had a similar family structure and this is the reality of life and this is the world that we live in and as much as I would like to be fair to their family and their family dynamics I would like to be as fair to the other child and his family dynamics. . . . in our society, it is tough to educate the parents and to have them be as receptive to this.*

Participant N described a parent who contacted the director because one of the teachers in their child's class was a person of color. When the parent approached participant N with their concerns, the director shared, "I do not see the color of the skin. I see the color of the heart," and advised the parents to work with the teachers for one whole week and said, "For a week. I won't charge you your fees, or if you've paid them, I'll refund them. Trust me for a week, and see how your little girl gets on with them." The parents agreed, and toward the end, they were so happy that they wanted to see if the teacher who was originally from Kenya could spend a few hours, 3 days a week with her child in the afternoon.

Within this theme, participants described how they addressed sensitive topics. While a few took proactive steps to address sensitive issues and did not face objections from the parents, others reported significant resistance when discussing controversial subjects. Topics related to LGBTQ and race were highlighted as areas that created tension.

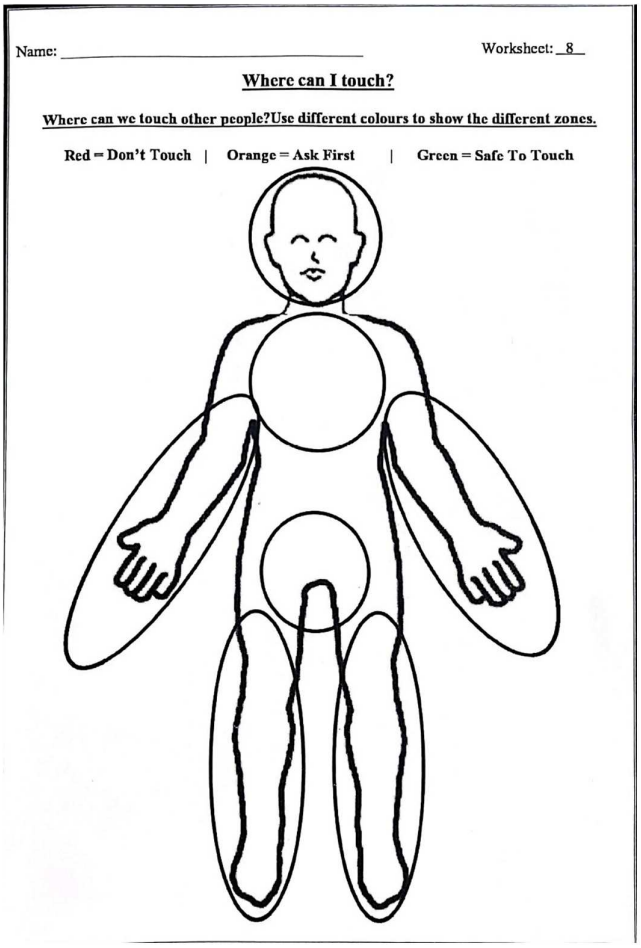
5. Discussion

Participant responses were analyzed based on the framework from the theorists described in the literature review section. Although each participant provided context regarding their own school climate and culture, their perspectives were reviewed to determine whether existing research supports or challenges their experiences. This provides a mechanism to connect the diverse and multinational insights from the participants to the broader literature and examine whether research supports or challenges their experiences.

5.1. Definitions and understandings of DEI

To understand their perspectives regarding DEI, it was important to ensure that participants were familiar with the terms:

Figure 2
Worksheet for teaching sensitive topics related to parts of the body



diversity, equity, and inclusion. Therefore, each participant was asked to define these. Most viewed diversity in relation to gender, race, culture, religion, nationality, and ideology.

Equity is often used interchangeably with equality [26], and this is consistent with the findings from this study. Educators described equity using phrases such as equal rights to learn, equal chances, fairness, and justice. Participant I provided a concrete example to illustrate equity in practice, adapting teaching to support a child who needs to be included in an activity. "If a child is struggling with a long [writing task], I could be providing a chunky pencil for that child to use, making sure no one is left out."

Inclusion was described as ensuring that all stakeholders feel valued, respected, supported, and represented. Participant D emphasized the importance of removing barriers so that everyone has the opportunity to participate, regardless of their background or where they are from. Participants also explained that inclusion involves supporting children with diverse needs and ensuring that each child has a chance to succeed.

5.2. Best practices: representation and curriculum

While many organizations celebrate DEI, their efforts are often fragmented, focusing on specific days or months rather than maintaining sustained commitment throughout the year. This limited approach can create a disconnect between an organization's stated values and the actual implementation of those values.

When organizations celebrate Pride Month but fail to maintain inclusive practices year-round, stakeholders often perceive their actions as rainbow-washing or performative allyship [27, 28]. To foster genuine inclusion, organizations must be intentional and consistent in both their messaging and their everyday practices. Participant H echoed this sentiment:

> *I don't have an issue with Black History Month except I do have an issue with Black History Month. Because it focuses very much on one month. Kind of like fitting everything into that one month, you know. That's when the displays go up about Florence Nightingale, or that's when the displays go up about the Windrush and community and what's happening whereas I just think it's something that we need to be looking at throughout the whole year.*

Thompson and Cuseo [29] caution against tokenism. "Bona fide diversity education involves more than periodic celebrations of cultural differences." This is consistent with a significant component of Derman-Sparks' teachings. She also warns against tokenism because this is the antithesis of inclusion and offers children only a superficial view of diversity. Rather than promoting meaningful equity, a tokenistic approach can reinforce stereotypes. Genuine inclusivity is the foundation of sustainability, and to be truly inclusive, educators must move beyond symbolic gestures and embrace the depth and richness of the diversity that surrounds us. When educational policies or practices make only a symbolic effort to increase diversity, they risk reinforcing exclusion rather than addressing it. This requires schools to intentionally create environments where all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and staff, feel safe, represented, welcomed, and respected. In contrast, when all nested layers, as described by Bronfenbrenner [10], are aligned, students are engaged, motivated, represented, and respected.

5.3. Professional development

Workshops and training sessions are essential to equip staff, educators, and families with tools to consistently promote DEI. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that while some schools offer professional development for faculty and staff, others focus on engaging parents. These sessions vary in purpose and audience, with topics ranging from inclusive language and cultural sensitivity to supporting students with special needs, differentiated instruction, and addressing unconscious bias.

A participant described a workshop called Linger and Learn, where parents are invited to observe how subjects such as phonics and mathematics are taught. This initiative allows parents to reinforce those skills at home. However, no consistent theme emerged across all interviews.

5.4. Challenges in implementing curriculum

The study identified several challenges related to incorporating DEI within classrooms. For example, Participant I noted that financial constraints often make it difficult to ensure proper representation. She explained, "Everything costs so much—resources, trying to get resources." She shared an incident where their director had purchased three diverse dolls to reflect ethnic representation, but they were accidentally left outside in the hot sun and turned green. "Each of those dolls costs about 35 pounds each, so you're looking at nearly 100 pounds just to make sure we still have an ethnically diverse group of dolls in the home corner."

Participant F echoed similar concerns. She explained, "Purchasing in Egypt is extremely difficult. It is extremely difficult to import resources. We are aware that we have some limitations, but we try as much as possible to use online resources."

Participant L explained that to create an inclusive classroom, they accept all children. However, it can be challenging to help some parents of neurotypical children understand the value of inclusion, particularly when there is a child in the class who is on the spectrum. Some parents may express concerns about the possibility that such a child could interrupt or disrupt the classroom environment, potentially affecting their own child's learning. The participant said, "And you know, other parents do come up with this question: Why are they there?"

Such thinking is not limited to Participant L's school. The findings from the current study are supported by others that highlight how children on the spectrum are often bullied, excluded, and isolated [30, 31]. Parents of autistic children face significant additional challenges, including stigma and social isolation, more frequently than parents of children with other disabilities [31]. This reinforces the need to create greater awareness and opportunities for inclusion. This echoes Dumitru et al.'s [32] assertion that inclusion must extend beyond awareness to intentional, system-level practices that actively support children and families.

5.5. Family engagement

According to Barton et al. [33], parental involvement is a dynamic, interactive process in which parents draw on multiple experiences to shape their interactions with schools and other educational stakeholders. Participants in this study shared various strategies used to involve families, such as Mother's Day, Grandparents' Day, Literacy Week, Multicultural Day, and PTO events.

Although educators aimed to include both fathers and mothers, there was recognition that mothers were more likely to attend these events. For example, Participant A explained that at the end of each unit, which concludes each month, the school organizes a culminating activity and invites "the moms." She clarified that when she says "moms," she means "parents," but that mothers are usually the ones who participate.

With the growing prevalence of digital media, the importance of frequent and clear communication has become more evident. This form of communication serves as a foundation for building trust between families and educators [34]. While inviting families to in-person events is valuable, it is now widely understood that not all families are able to attend due to time constraints or work obligations [35]. These events also tend to be occasional and may not provide regular updates on what children are learning or how parents can support that learning at home. Technology has now become a key tool in maintaining family engagement and enhancing communication [36].

Many participants reported using various apps to engage families. For instance, Participant B described using Edsby, a platform based in Toronto, Canada, known for its user-friendly design, which allows educators to upload documents and photos of students, which helps involve parents in their child's education.

Participant I shared her experience using the Tapestry app, which is widely used in UK schools within the EYFS. This app allows educators to document learning activities through photos, observations, and comments. Families receive individual logins to access their child's progress, promoting stronger communication and collaboration between home and school.

Participant N described the use of the NGS School Diary app, a platform tailored to their school to support effective communication with families. They also use WhatsApp groups to share updates about children's growth and development. While many educators rely on structured digital platforms, WhatsApp is becoming increasingly popular because of its accessibility and speed of communication [37].

5.6. Policies related to DEI

Implementing effective policies helps establish a clear framework for how schools can promote educational opportunities for all students [38]. Óskarsdóttir et al. [39] highlight the crucial role school leaders play in setting the standards and expectations for promoting DEI initiatives. When implemented thoughtfully, such policies can effectively foster an equitable learning environment [40]. The anti-bias curriculum proposed by Derman-Sparks et al. [6] requires more than classroom-level teaching and calls for systematic change that influences "program policies, structures, procedures, and processes."

Most participants in this study shared that they had some type of DEI-related policy, which was communicated to parents, faculty, and staff through faculty and parent handbooks. These policies were often reiterated during staff meetings to emphasize that there should be no discrimination based on race, religion, or nationality.

However, not all responses were consistent. For example, Participant J stated, "Unfortunately, we do not have any policies that are laid down in terms of DEI currently. Although we may be working on something." Participant A expressed a similar view, noting, "Honestly, I think we don't really have a specific policy."

5.7. Sensitive topics

Sensitive topics sometimes cause controversy within early childhood centers. While some educators believe these topics should be addressed, others feel they do not belong in the curriculum [41]. As a result, teachers often face challenges when attempting to discuss them.

For example, Participant B shared that she purchased a book about an alternate family structure, which was not well received by a family who did not support exposing their children to such topics. Participant G expressed similar concerns. She must be cautious when selecting books for her classroom and often asks herself, "Is that sensitive? Is that appropriate?" She added, "There are some books, I think you know, that in Egypt—it is a conservative country. It is not as conservative as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, but still there are books on families that are not appropriate, because the books say, you know, some families have two mothers or two fathers, and we have to be very careful." She shared that when she encounters a book with such content, she skips that page to avoid potential backlash. Acknowledging the risks, she noted, "I could get into trouble if the parents found out."

These are not isolated incidents. Similar episodes have occurred in early childhood education settings around the world. In Wake County, North Carolina, a preschool teacher resigned after facing backlash for using flashcards that depicted LGBTQ+ families. Although the flashcards were designed to teach colors through characters' clothing, the inclusion of diverse family representations sparked controversy and led to her resignation [42]. Similarly, in Montgomery County, Maryland, several families objected to the inclusion of LGBTQ-themed storybooks in the elementary school curriculum. The dispute escalated to the US Supreme Court, which is scheduled to hear the case in 2025. Such incidents can have serious implications for how educators create inclusive classrooms that reflect the rich diversity of their communities [43].

Crenshaw's work [8] on intersectionality helps explain why some parents felt uncomfortable or threatened when they encountered identities that fell outside their familiar dominant norms. Instead of supporting equitable representation, the backlash and barriers reveal how DEI efforts can be challenged by competing social norms and belief systems.

6. Implications

The findings from this study are relevant to early childhood educators regarding how DEI can be implemented, supported, and promoted within diverse learning environments. A clear understanding of each component of DEI is essential for effective policy implementation. While educators were able to clearly define diversity and inclusion, there was some ambiguity surrounding the term "equity."

Nadelson et al. [44] explain that equity is a mindset and a lens through which we make decisions every day. Ferlazzo [45] emphasizes the importance of incorporating equity into teaching practices, as children learn in different ways and are more likely to succeed when instruction is tailored to their individual needs. He provides an example of how equity-focused approaches can be applied in the classroom by describing a lesson on natural hazards such as earthquakes and tsunamis for multilingual learners. Instead of teaching all students in the same way using textbooks, videos, or lectures, a teacher from the Professional Learning Group modified the assignment by drawing upon their diverse backgrounds. The teacher invited students to select a natural hazard and design a pamphlet that explained safety procedures and preparation steps in both their primary language and English. This modification supported both science and language learning and made the lesson more accessible and relevant. By incorporating students' languages and connecting to their lived experiences, the activity demonstrated how honoring students' diverse identities can promote deeper engagement and equitable learning opportunities [45].

While some schools have recently begun to incorporate cultural elements into their practices, these efforts are often sporadic and lack consistency. Mugo and Puplampu [46] as well as Camargo [47] explain that cultural tokenism occurs when educators acknowledge or include diverse cultures in superficial ways or only because they are required to do so, rather than out of genuine commitment. Ladson-Billings' work [9] culturally relevant pedagogy emphasizes the importance of affirming students' cultural identities and challenging dominant narratives. When educators begin introducing culturally relevant pedagogical practices, families who are rooted in traditional or dominant cultural norms may feel unsettled or threatened. However, sustained and intentional implementation of inclusive practices can lead to greater awareness and acceptance over time.

Study findings identified concrete strategies that educators can use to ensure that diversity is meaningfully acknowledged and celebrated as part of the classroom culture, rather than being limited to certain times of the year or to specific celebrations. Examples include ensuring that classroom materials such as picture books, images, and music reflect cultural celebrations that children can relate to. For example, having musical instruments from different countries available throughout the year allows

students to explore music from around the world and learn about the instruments used to create it. When teachers embrace an inclusive mindset, children feel a greater sense of belonging, which fosters interest in and respect for one another.

To help teachers create an inclusive classroom environment, administrators should offer professional development opportunities tailored to early childhood education throughout the year. Whenever possible, training and workshops should be age-appropriate and relevant to the early childhood context, and educators may elect to skip the session if the content does not align with the developmental needs of the age group they serve. This aligns with findings from Powell and Bodur [48], who emphasize that generic training content that is not specific to educators' roles or the age group they teach can be ineffective and inadequate.

While age-appropriate professional development is necessary, many preschools do not have enough resources. Sheridan et al. [49] explained that early childhood programs often face challenges such as limited infrastructure, insufficient professional development opportunities, and inadequate resources to support sustained educator growth.

Family engagement is now recognized as essential to a child's overall development; however, many schools rely on software applications to communicate with parents. This can be challenging for parents who are not tech-savvy. Even when parents are familiar with the app used by the school, they may not be fluent in English, which can limit their ability to participate in their child's educational journey. The National Education Association (NEA) recommends using bilingual translation tools for families who speak a different language [50]. This simple step can help more families become involved and communicate effectively with schools [51, 52].

To ensure that teachers are prepared to respond to situations requiring sensitivity and care, preschools should adopt written policies regarding how to address sensitive topics. These include, but are not limited to, family diversity, world events, or identity. Clear policies serve as a framework for all staff members to respond in ways that align with the school's values and guidelines [53]. The policies should be shared with parents, staff, and teachers so that all stakeholders understand, follow, and respect the expectations outlined within them and understand that following them is not arbitrary even if some of these sometimes conflict with personal pedagogical judgment or preferences [54].

7. Conclusions

This qualitative study has explored and amplified the voices of early childhood educators as they work to promote DEI within their classrooms and campuses. The findings revealed a variety of approaches used by educators to foster inclusive environments.

While there was no uniform DEI policy across all participating schools, each educator described intentional approaches to ensure all children felt included and had a sense of belonging and appreciation. These efforts underscore the importance of grassroots initiatives in advancing DEI, even in the absence of formalized institutional policies.

Ethical Statement

This study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the IRB of American College of Education on September 25, 2024. All participants of the study provided their written consent before participating in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support this work are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Author Contribution Statement

Fawzia Reza: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

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