

Cultural Competence as a Tool for Conflict Resolution and Social Cohesion in Adult Learning Contexts

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Abstract

This paper examines cultural competence as an essential tool for conflict resolution and social cohesion in adult learning settings. Using conceptual analysis, literature review, and illustrative case studies, the study emphasises how cultural competence helps educators and learners navigate diversity, reduce bias, and turn potential conflicts into opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. The research applies Intercultural Competence Theory to show how attitudes, knowledge, and skills promote inclusivity, trust, and positive conflict transformation in multicultural environments. Two case studies, an interethnic miscommunication during the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and a classroom conflict related to cultural differences in hierarchy and egalitarianism, illustrate the practical use of cultural competence in resolving disputes. The paper states that adult learning environments, increasingly influenced by globalisation and diversity, need deliberate policies, institutional support, and ongoing professional development to integrate cultural competence into curricula and practice. It concludes that cultural competence not only helps reduce conflict but also advances equity, peacebuilding, and social cohesion in adult education.

Key words: Cultural competence; Conflict resolution; Social cohesion; Adult learning, and Intercultural learning

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INTRODUCTION

With the ongoing impact of globalisation and the rapidly evolving demands of the modern workplace, adult learning contexts have increasingly emerged as vital platforms for intercultural exchange, personal growth, and collective development. Adult learning contexts are environments where individuals from diverse cultural, social, and personal backgrounds, including ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, nationality, sexual orientation, ability or disability, political perspective, and religion, interact in ways that lead to learning, whether consciously or unconsciously. As Merriam and Bierema (2014) observe, adult learning is socially situated and shaped by diversity and lived experience. Brookfield (1986) similarly emphasises that adult learning is embedded in cultural and political contexts that influence how learners interact and construct meaning, while Jarvis (2004) highlights that such learning occurs across formal, non-formal, and informal settings. Mejiuni, Cranton, and Taiwo (2015) also stress the importance of viewing the education system holistically, recognising formal education, non-formal education, and informal learning as interconnected components of lifelong learning. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that diversity and context are not incidental but central to shaping adult learning processes across settings.

While these differences can enrich learning environments, they may also present challenges, such as misunderstandings, conflict, and biases occurring as a result of a lack of deliberate efforts to encourage inclusivity and mutual respect for a peaceful learning environment (Baron, 2023; Sarino, 2012). It is at this juncture that cultural competence becomes very

important. Cultural competence, sometimes distinguished from intercultural competence, refers to the ability to understand, communicate effectively, and work with people from a culture different from your own. Cultural competence goes beyond just working with others; it inspires one to be well-informed about one's viewpoint and helps establish a positive outlook toward others. It encourages individuals or organisations to acquire knowledge and skills that will eventually assist them in handling cultural diversity in a respectful, informed, and equitable way (Kimmerer, 2013). Cultural competence is important because it equips individuals and institutions to effectively navigate increasing diversity and globalisation, reduce bias and discrimination, and foster respectful, inclusive, and productive interactions across cultural differences (de Guzman, Durden, Taylor, Guzman, & Potthoff, 2016). Cultural competence involves recognising one's own culture, developing essential skills for navigating life, accepting people from cultures different from one's own, reducing conflict, and fostering peaceful coexistence. Cultural competence in education involves recognising, understanding, and valuing diverse cultures and integrating them into teaching practices and institutional policies (Eden, Chisom & Adeniyi, 2024). When integrated into adult educational practices, cultural competence can help transform likely causes of conflict into opportunities for dialogue, understanding, and solidarity (Cross, 2021).

Therefore, cultural competence is highly relevant in adult education, especially in a diverse society where historical injustices, widespread disparity, and division regularly occur. Cassara (1994) explains that with globalisation, adult educators now serve clientele from diverse countries, even within their own country. Adult learners are expected to bring to the learning situations a wealth of life experiences, including encounters with conflict, discrimination, and exclusion. Knowles (1984) asserts that "the greatest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves" (p. 57). He emphasised that adults bring a wealth of experience to learning, shaped by their life histories and accumulated over time, which differs significantly from that of younger learners. Many view adult education as a second-chance opportunity, not just to get formal education, but to develop more skills, for career advancement, social development, and to even regain lost opportunities (Stewart, 2024). This, therefore, makes it mandatory for facilitators in adult learning contexts to make sure that a safe, inclusive, and culturally friendly learning environment is created. Cultural competence plays a crucial role in fostering the transformative learning environment that adult education seeks to create by encouraging learners to challenge ethnocentric worldviews and cultivate empathy for others. Lee et al. (2007) describe the outcome of cultural competence in education as equity in access and

opportunity for all students, while Gay (2000) emphasises that culturally responsive teaching aims to improve academic achievement and cultivate students' cultural identity.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Several scholars have written on the issue of cultural competence, its value in transforming the educational system, institutional goals, and the various processes involved, as it has become more than just a trend in the 21st century. Professor Zachary Falcon of Unity Environmental University observed that, despite their diverse ages, backgrounds, and political affiliations, his students engaged in respectful dialogue without external guidance, even when discussing sensitive topics such as voting choices (Unity Environmental University, 2024). While this illustrates the potential of learners to practice civil discourse, limited research has examined how cultural competence can be intentionally cultivated in adult learning contexts to ensure such outcomes consistently. Ramirez (2010) examined strategies for fostering inclusivity and diversity awareness within educational settings, while Crawford-Mathis (2009) emphasised valuing cultural assets in adult education. Rowland (2006) explored cultural competency as a means to reduce inequalities in healthcare, and Rhodes (2018) focused on culturally responsive teaching with adult learners. However, a gap remains regarding how cultural competence among adult learners can be leveraged to resolve conflict. This paper therefore, explores how cultural competence can promote conflict resolution and foster social cohesion in adult learning contexts. To achieve this aim, the study asks the following questions:

- What is the role of cultural competence in managing conflicts in adult learning environments?
- How does cultural competence contribute to social cohesion among adult learners?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach, based on conceptual analysis and illustrative case studies, to examine how cultural competence can serve as a tool for conflict resolution and social cohesion in adult learning environments. It employed a conceptual research design, emphasising the synthesis and interpretation of existing knowledge rather than collecting new empirical data. This method is suitable for addressing theoretical and policy-related questions, particularly within the context of adult education and intercultural learning. The study gathered data from three primary sources. Firstly, an extensive literature review was conducted, examining peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy papers, and institutional documents related to cultural competence,

adult education, social cohesion, and conflict resolution. This review helped establish a conceptual foundation for the research. In addition to the literature review, policy documents and institutional reports were consulted. These included frameworks from organisations such as UNESCO, ministries of education, and adult learning regulatory bodies. Analysing these documents provided an understanding of how cultural competence is currently addressed in educational practices. The study also drew on illustrative case studies to contextualise theoretical arguments and demonstrate practical applications. Two qualitative case pieces were analysed, based on documented experiences and interviews with adult educators and learners. These cases showed the role of cultural competence in conflict resolution within adult learning environments, offering valuable lessons for practice. Following data collection, a thematic content analysis was conducted on the literature review findings and case study data. Key themes such as cultural awareness, intercultural communication, inclusivity, and conflict transformation were identified and used to structure the findings. The cases were interpreted using Intercultural Competence Theory (Deardorff, 2006) as a guiding framework to explain how specific attitudes, knowledge, and skills contribute to positive conflict resolution outcomes. Although the study is primarily conceptual, ethical considerations were observed in the handling of anecdotal data and interview-based cases. In addition, we utilised two illustrative case studies to explore cultural competence as a tool for conflict resolution and social cohesion in adult learning contexts. These cases were drawn from documented examples rather than from primary fieldwork. The first case, based on a National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) cohort experience in Ekiti State, Nigeria, demonstrates how linguistic and cultural miscommunication can be de-escalated through timely, culturally sensitive intervention. The second case, drawn from a multicultural classroom setting in Edo State, Nigeria, illustrates how an educator's mediation of a hierarchy/egalitarianism clash fosters collaborative learning. Although neither case was generated through our own fieldwork nor required formal ethical approval, we have treated each narrative with care, verifying details against published reports and anonymising participants' identifiers, to ensure respect for the individuals involved and the integrity of the examples.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants. Instead, it drew on illustrative case studies derived from documented examples to examine cultural competence as a tool for conflict resolution and social cohesion in adult learning contexts.

As such, no formal ethical approval was required. Nevertheless, care was taken to anonymise identifiers and present the narratives respectfully, in line with established ethical standards for research and reporting.

The paper advances literature on inclusive and transformative adult education, cultural competence, and education for peacebuilding and social cohesion. The paper is divided thus: the first part gives a brief about cultural competence and its importance. The second part talks about cultural competence among adult educators and learners. The third part focuses on the current level and practices of cultural competence in institutions. While the fourth part is on the impact of cultural competence on conflict resolution, the fifth part looked at building social cohesion through intercultural learning. Challenges in building social cohesion in educational learning environments are the sixth part, and the last part is the recommendation and conclusion.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Culture shapes how we perceive the world. It influences our thoughts as human beings. In a broad sense, culture shapes how we perceive the world. It influences our thoughts, actions, values, communication styles, relationships, and beliefs. Simply put, culture refers to the way of life of a people, with cultural practices varying significantly across societies. For example, African cultures differ in significant ways from those of Arabs, Europeans, and Chinese, among others. According to Davis (2019), culture is a complex whole that encompasses knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society. This indicates that culture provides a framework through which we view the world, and our behaviour or interactions with others are greatly influenced by our perspectives on their cultures.

Cultural competence, often discussed in contrast to intercultural competence, refers to the ability to understand, communicate effectively, and work with individuals from cultures different from our own. Cultural competence encourages individuals to be well-informed about their own cultural perspectives, which, in turn, helps establish a positive outlook toward others (Indiana Arts Commission, 2023). Similarly, Navita (2014) defines cultural competence as the ability to participate ethically and effectively in personal and professional intercultural settings. It encompasses a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together within a system, organisation, or among professionals, enabling effective work in cross-cultural situations.

With ongoing diversification worldwide driven by globalisation, technological advancements, migration, and intercultural exchanges, there is an urgent need for everyone to develop cultural competence to mitigate

misunderstandings and foster inclusivity. Cultural competence involves being aware of, knowledgeable about, and skilled in engaging respectfully with diverse cultural values to people from different cultural backgrounds (Manning & Mitchell, 2010). As societies become increasingly interconnected, misunderstandings, stereotypes, and unintentional disrespect are rising, causing conflicts. It equips individuals to accommodate, communicate, foster inclusive relationships, and contribute positively to their environments, whether in schools, workplaces, communities, or on an international level. Thus, cultural competence is an essential tool for promoting global unity.

Although some assume that cultural competence simply requires having an open mind toward others, this view is misleading. Cultural competence is a lifelong journey and an ongoing process of learning, unlearning, and relearning (Banks, 2016). Rather than a one-time achievement, it represents a continuous commitment to growth. It is crucial for fostering transformative learning and building an inclusive society by enabling individuals to understand, appreciate, and respect diverse ways of knowing, thinking, and acting. Furthermore, it encourages respectful communication across cultures, helps navigate multicultural environments with sensitivity, reduces conflict, and strengthens relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intercultural Competence Theory

The study adopted the Intercultural Competence Theory (ICT) as proposed by Deardorff (2006). This theory is based on three major components: attitude, knowledge, comprehension, and skills. It emphasises valuing other cultures, avoiding judgment, and demonstrating tolerance toward differences. This attitude fosters the right mindset for engaging with diverse perspectives. The theory advocates for cultural self-awareness, which involves understanding the values, norms, and communication styles of other cultures and being able to interpret and relate across cultures. According to the theory, skills developed through experience, reflection, listening, observing, interpreting, evaluating, and critical thinking will help individuals apply knowledge meaningfully.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG ADULT EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS

Cultural competence in education refers to the ability of educators and learners to interact effectively and in a respectful way, bearing in mind their different cultural backgrounds. It is the ability to demonstrate a deep understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural perspectives, thereby fostering an inclusive and equitable

learning environment where all participants feel valued and respected. In adult education, it not only promotes mutual respect but also improves communication between students and educators. Furthermore, it creates a supportive environment for marginalised learners, enhances critical thinking, and stimulates innovation. Adult education is widely regarded as a vehicle for promoting social mobility. As the world becomes increasingly globalised and multicultural, adult education contexts are no longer culturally homogenous but instead reflect a wide range of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural identities. Therefore, fostering cultural competence is essential to ensuring inclusivity, mutual understanding, and equity.

Among the adult learners and the educators, there are various cultural heritages and life experiences. Cultural competence is therefore essential for recognising and validating their different ways of understanding, which will help the educators in adopting the *teaching methods, use of language, and classroom practices*. This approach will enhance the learning experience and reduce misunderstandings, marginalisation, and instances of cultural insensitivity (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Again, cultural competence encourages social cohesion, especially in conflict-prone areas or in a highly diverse community. By promoting a safe and respectful learning environment, adult education contexts can serve as platforms for dialogue, dismantling stereotypes, fostering empathy, encouraging critical reflection on biases and privileges, and developing intercultural communication and cooperation skills.

CURRENT LEVELS AND PRACTICES

Some institutions and learning centres have developed policies and strategies that promote cultural inclusivity. However, these efforts remain largely fragmented and inconsistent. Cultural competence is rarely embedded in curricula or professional development programmes for educators. Many adult learning centres do not make room for training on how to manage cultural conflicts, nor do they provide resources to encourage culturally responsive teaching practices (Banks, 2019). Again, cultural competence is often regarded as non-essential rather than a core educational competency, leading to its marginalisation in both policy and practice. In terms of the institutional syllabus, very little progress has been made in decolonising content and incorporating indigenous knowledge systems. In places where inclusive curricula exist, they are often used trivially, without meaningful communication or learners' engagement. Language is another major barrier to cultural inclusion, especially in countries where colonial language legacies still exist. Learners with limited proficiency in the instructional

language, frequently, often feel excluded or undervalued. This is bound to make matters worse, especially when the inclusion of different languages is not considered (Rafid & Khotimah, 2021).

IMPACT OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is a natural phenomenon, often arising from differences in thoughts, interests, and opinions. In learning environments, conflict is inevitable due to the diverse perspectives, goals, and interests of both learners and educators. Developing effective conflict resolution skills is therefore crucial for fostering a positive and inclusive atmosphere that supports growth and development. Addressing conflict constructively creates safe contexts for open dialogue, encourages critical thinking, and promotes collaboration (Deutsch, 2006). Cultural competence begins with understanding the cultural context in which conflict arises. People from different backgrounds may perceive and respond to issues in varied ways; thus, cultural competence enables individuals to recognise these differences and approach conflict sensitively. For educators and learners, being culturally aware helps to challenge previously held beliefs that may fuel conflict and instead foster new, more inclusive perspectives (Bell, 2023).

Cultural awareness involves consciously identifying and understanding the values, beliefs, and worldviews that shape people's behaviour. It goes beyond mere tolerance, requiring openness and curiosity. A culturally open-minded person is likely to question stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions they may hold. According to Earley and Ang (2003), such beliefs are often unconsciously developed and can lead to miscommunication, mistrust, and conflict. A culturally unaware individual may misinterpret behaviours, causing offence or frustration, whereas a culturally competent person responds differently, seeking understanding before reacting. This mindset fosters dialogue rather than defensiveness and helps to build bridges. Furthermore, cultural competence not only promotes inclusivity and respect in learning environments but also challenges dominant narratives and amplifies marginalised voices. In doing so, it reduces power imbalances and promotes a sense of belonging and equity, both of which are vital for peaceful coexistence between learners and educators (Okoye-Johnson, 2011).

Furthermore, cultural competence creates space for negotiation and joint problem-solving grounded in mutual respect rather than cultural superiority. It not only challenges harmful stereotypes but also fosters the emotional intelligence and critical thinking required for building trust, managing differences, and sustaining a peaceful learning environment. According to Darling-

Hammond (2017), when learners and educators are culturally aware and respectful of others' cultures, they are better prepared to handle conflict with empathy and understanding. Such awareness can also help prevent conflict before it arises.

Cultural competence in the learning environment enables both educators and learners to express their views and actively listen to others' perspectives without being judgmental or biased. This approach helps to uncover the root causes of conflict, promotes the search for common ground, and supports collaboration among conflicting parties. It also allows for effective follow-up on resolutions, ultimately restoring relationships. When educators and learners are comfortable engaging with people from different cultures, institutions also benefit (Hammond, 2015). This is because cultural misunderstandings often trigger conflicts. Actions or statements that may be harmless within one culture can be misinterpreted as offensive in another. In this context, cultural competence fosters empathy and encourages individuals to interpret others' behaviours and communication more accurately, thereby reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings.

Effective communication is crucial to conflict resolution because it allows all parties to express their concerns, understand one another, and work collaboratively toward lasting solutions. Woldemichael (2012) observes that communication is vital even in everyday interactions, but in diverse settings it becomes more complex due to differences in language, values, nonverbal cues, and worldviews. This is where cultural competence plays a critical role. Cultural competence involves the knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity needed to navigate cultural differences respectfully (Yuni, Tham, & Azam, 2020). It equips individuals to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries while minimising offence and misunderstanding. Culturally competent individuals recognise how cultural backgrounds shape communication styles, decision-making processes, and perceptions of conflict, and they can adapt their communication accordingly. This fosters trust, openness, and mutual respect. As Thomas (2022) notes, such inclusiveness not only helps de-escalate tension but also creates safe contexts for honest dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. Ultimately, cultural competence strengthens relationships, builds bridges across differences, and leads to more sustainable and peaceful conflict resolution. Without communication rooted in cultural competence, attempts at conflict resolution risk failure or superficial solutions that ignore underlying issues.

Trust is a crucial factor in conflict resolution because it provides the foundation for open and honest communication between conflicting parties. Without trust,

individuals may withhold information, remain defensive, or resist collaboration (Omoleka & Gunu, 2022). Cultural competence plays a key role in building trust by enabling individuals to demonstrate respect and understanding across cultural differences. When people acknowledge diverse values, customs, and communication styles, they signal that others' identities and experiences are valued. This sense of respect and inclusion helps break down barriers of suspicion and hostility (Angelo, 2019). As a result, conflicting parties are more likely to feel heard, validated, and safe in the resolution process. Once trust is established through culturally competent interactions, cooperation increases, tension decreases, and parties can work toward mutually acceptable solutions that address the root causes of conflict.

Cultural competence enhances the ability to mediate and negotiate effectively in multicultural conflict settings. In such environments, conflicts often arise from misunderstandings rooted in differences in communication styles, beliefs, values, and social norms (Adham, 2023). A culturally competent mediator or negotiator recognises these differences and is equipped to navigate them respectfully and constructively. They can interpret cultural cues accurately, avoid bias, and create neutral contexts where all parties feel valued. This fosters trust, reduces tension, and helps build common ground. Cultural competence also promotes the use of inclusive language, empathy, and culturally sensitive practices that strengthen cooperation (Yuni, Tham, & Azam, 2020). Consequently, culturally competent mediators and negotiators are more likely to facilitate fair, balanced, and mutually beneficial agreements, contributing to sustainable and peaceful outcomes.

Sometimes, particularly in adult education contexts, conflict resolution requires more than seeking compromise between opposing parties. It may involve conflict transformation, where disputes are not only addressed but also used as catalysts for positive change and growth. In diverse learning environments, conflicts often stem from cultural misunderstandings, value differences, or miscommunication. When approached constructively, however, such conflicts can foster greater awareness, mutual respect, and stronger relationships among learners and educators (Dickie, 2015). Conflict transformation encourages individuals to explore the root causes of disputes, challenge assumptions, and develop collaborative solutions that advance equity and inclusion. This process enriches the learning experience by promoting critical thinking, empathy, and cooperation (Brower & Darrington, 2012). Ultimately, when adult education contexts view conflict as an opportunity for transformation, they become more resilient, inclusive, and effective in supporting both personal development and social cohesion.

Cultural competence is an essential tool for conflict resolution, particularly within adult education contexts.

These environments bring together learners from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, making them fertile ground for misunderstanding and conflict. Cultural competence equips educators and learners with the awareness, skills, and sensitivity to recognise and value these differences rather than view them as sources of tension. By fostering cultural awareness, individuals are more likely to approach situations with empathy and openness, reducing miscommunication and dismantling stereotypes that often lie at the root of conflict.

Furthermore, cultural competence enhances communication by promoting inclusive language and respectful interaction. It builds trust among learners, as individuals feel acknowledged, respected, and valued. Culturally competent individuals are also better equipped for mediation and negotiation, enabling them to de-escalate tensions and facilitate mutual understanding. Institutions that prioritise cultural competence are more capable of turning conflicts into opportunities for growth, learning, and community-building. In sum, cultural competence enhances harmony and productivity in adult learning contexts by fostering peaceful coexistence and constructive conflict transformation.

To further illustrate how cultural competence facilitates conflict resolution and promotes social cohesion, two case examples are presented below. These cases, drawn from lived experiences and field data, demonstrate how misunderstandings rooted in cultural and linguistic differences can be transformed into opportunities for learning, respect, and collaboration when approached with cultural sensitivity.

Case 1: Interethnic Miscommunication during National Youth Service Corp (NYSC)

In 2006, during my compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) year in Ekiti State, South-West Nigeria, I resided in a lodge with other corps members from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Benue, Edo, Cross River, and the northern region of Nigeria. The community was small, with the secondary school serving as the only functional institution, and all corps members were assigned there. On one occasion, an incident occurred when a corps member from the North discovered that a goat had eaten from a pot of rice he had cooked. In his distress, he repeatedly shouted "gaooot," which, due to his accent, was initially misunderstood by the rest of us until we saw him chasing the goat. While one corps member found the pronunciation amusing, we cautioned against laughter and explained that the variation was due to linguistic and accentual differences rather than error. This incident, which could have escalated into conflict, was resolved through timely intervention and served as a reminder for us to interact with sensitivity to each other's ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Corp member/Female/Ekiti State/2006.

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Corp member/Female/Ekiti State/2006.

The data above was an example of an interethnic interaction, cultural miscommunication, and the importance of cultural sensitivity. First, the NYSC programme was originally designed to promote national integration by posting graduates to regions different from their own. The misunderstanding arose when a language accent “gaooot” instead of “goat” led to confusion among those unfamiliar with Northern Nigerian English phonetics. This highlights how accents and dialects shape communication and how language can become a site of both humour and potential conflict. This could have escalated into a serious interethnic conflict, especially when one person started laughing, possibly perceived as mocking the Northerner. Such responses can easily trigger feelings of disrespect, marginalisation, or ethnic prejudice, especially in a setting where individuals are adjusting to unfamiliar cultural norms. The timely intervention and empathy were able to de-escalate the situation by correcting the laughter and explaining the misunderstanding. This reflects intercultural competence, a key component of peaceful coexistence, where individuals learn to recognise and respect differences in behaviour, language, and customs. The incident made the group become more conscious of ethnic and linguistic diversity. This marked a turning point in their interactions as they began to relate more sensitively and inclusively, taking each person’s cultural background into account. The data offered a rich example of how cultural competence and conflict resolution skills are critical in diverse, multicultural environments like Nigeria. The response of the Corp members, moving from misunderstanding to mutual respect, embodies the core of intercultural competence: learning to live together in diversity with empathy, humility, and open-mindedness.

Case 2: Classroom Conflict in a Multicultural Setting

A conflict arose between two adult learners in a multicultural classroom. The younger learner, who came from a culture that valued egalitarianism, perceived the older learner as overly authoritarian and dismissive of her ideas. Conversely, the older learner, from a culture that emphasised hierarchy and respect for authority, interpreted the junior learner’s behaviour as disrespectful and confrontational. Recognising the cultural underpinnings of the disagreement, the educator intervened to facilitate understanding between the two parties. He explained the cultural significance of hierarchy and authority to the junior learner while encouraging the senior learner to be more receptive to alternative perspectives. Through this mediation, both learners were able to appreciate each other’s cultural orientations, find common ground, and establish a more collaborative learning relationship. **Adult educator/Male/Edo State/2025)**

The data presented a case study of cultural competence and conflict resolution in a multicultural adult learning environment. It showed how deeply ingrained cultural values, particularly around authority, respect, and communication styles, can lead to misunderstanding and conflict when not effectively managed. In this case, the educator demonstrated cultural competence by recognising that the disagreement was not personal but rooted in cultural norms. The younger learner came from a background that emphasised egalitarianism, where all voices are considered equal, while the older learner valued hierarchy and deference to authority, a perspective common in many traditional cultures. Rather than taking sides, the educator acknowledged the validity of both frameworks, explained the cultural context behind each learner’s behaviour, and reframed the disagreement as a clash of values rather than insubordination or arrogance. This reduced tension and opened a pathway for resolution. As a result, the younger learner learned to appreciate authority without feeling silenced, while the older learner became more receptive to others’ input. By recognising and addressing cultural differences, the educator prevented escalation and helped build a shared framework for interaction. Such resolutions not only settle individual disputes but also foster inclusivity and social cohesion, which are vital in multicultural adult education contexts.

Taken together, these two cases highlight the importance of cultural competence in resolving conflicts across different settings. In the first case, an interethnic misunderstanding caused by language and accent was resolved through empathy and cultural sensitivity, which helped prevent prejudice and encouraged respect. In the second case, a classroom conflict stemming from differing cultural values of hierarchy and egalitarianism was turned into a chance for collaborative learning via the educator’s culturally competent mediation. Both examples show

that conflicts in multicultural environments are often not personal but rooted in cultural differences. When approached with cultural competence, such conflicts can lead to greater understanding, inclusion, and social cohesion in adult learning contexts.

BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Regardless of learners' age or level, it is essential to build social cohesion within adult learning environments by incorporating activities that promote cultural awareness. According to Baron (2023), social cohesion can be fostered through mutual understanding and respect. Intercultural learning enables individuals to recognise and value cultural differences and similarities by engaging with others' traditions, values, and perspectives. This, in turn, encourages empathy, mutual respect, and a shared sense of belonging. Davis (2021) notes that educators can lead by example by designing inclusive curricula. Reviewing curricula and teaching materials regularly ensures consistent representation of minorities and diverse cultures. Such efforts democratise the learning process and provide equal opportunities for all learners (Deutsch, 2006).

Another way to build social cohesion through intercultural learning is by reducing prejudice and conflict. Conflict often arises from fear or ignorance, but intercultural learning provides individuals with tools to question biases and challenge cultural assumptions. According to Levine (2009), this helps reduce xenophobia, racism, and ethnocentrism, thereby managing intercultural tensions and fostering stronger relationships among learners from diverse backgrounds. It also promotes cultural sensitivity in the classroom by giving educators the opportunity to understand students' cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives. In turn, this creates a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where students feel safe to express themselves and engage in meaningful cross-cultural exchanges.

Furthermore, intercultural learning promotes justice, equality, respect, and peace by fostering shared values and collective identity while preserving cultural uniqueness. Respecting and accepting diverse cultural norms is essential for creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Educators can encourage respect for cultural diversity by emphasising the value of different customs, traditions, and beliefs (Kimmerer, 2013). By promoting a culture of respect and acknowledgment, they help learners appreciate the richness of cultural diversity and develop more inclusive and tolerant mindsets (United States Department of Treasury, 2023). Educators can also initiate discussions on cultural diversity and the value of different customs, thereby fostering respect, appreciation, and acceptance across the learning community.

According to Davies (2021), encouraging civic engagement and social participation among learners is a powerful way to build social cohesion in educational settings. Teachers can facilitate group discussions, collaborative projects, and cultural exchange activities that allow learners to share their experiences, perspectives, and traditions. By fostering open communication and mutual respect, educators help learners develop intercultural competence and empathy, thereby strengthening social cohesion in the learning environment.

Again, educators should engage in continuous professional development in cultural competence, as it is essential for improving teaching practices and promoting inclusivity in the classroom. By attending workshops, training sessions, and courses on cultural competence, teachers can deepen their understanding of diverse cultures and learn effective strategies for fostering cultural sensitivity. Continuous professional development also equips educators to create a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment that celebrates diversity and builds mutual respect among students. Engaging in such professional growth ensures that educators remain responsive to the needs of diverse learners, strengthen their ability to manage cultural dynamics in the classroom, and promote equity in the learning process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The significance of this article lies in its ability to emphasise the necessity for national and institutional educational policies to recognise and promote cultural competence as a core value and operational standard. It shows the urgent need to introduce cultural competence into the foundational framework of adult education systems.

Policy Development

This is possible with the Ministries of Education and adult learning regulatory bodies developing inclusive policies that make diversity training, intergroup dialogue facilitation, and conflict-sensitive educational activities in adult learning centres compulsory. The study revealed a gap in the current adult education curriculum that has to do with intercultural communication, identity awareness, and conflict transformation strategies.

Curriculum Reform

It encourages curriculum developers to include units that focus on these areas, to get learners equipped with the cultural sensitivity and critical reflection skills needed in their different learning environments.

Professional Development

Again, the article identified a pressing need for professional development programmes that will enhance

both educators' and learners' cultural competence. It stressed that training should go beyond technical instructional methods to include thoughtful practices that question educators' biases, improve their ability to mediate intercultural conflicts, and foster inclusive classrooms.

Capacity-Building Initiatives

The article also emphasised that workshops and certification programmes should be organised, which will look into building skills in cultural self-awareness, intercultural dialogue facilitation, and adaptive conflict transformation methods suitable for adult learners.

Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion

The paper argued that in an environment where division, conflicts, and religious tension exist, social cohesion is urgently needed, and this is what this paper is all about: to provide the possibilities for reconciliation in adult learning centres during a conflict situation. Cultural competence, when deliberately cultivated, can serve as a bridge for conflict resolution, helping learners to engage in meaningful dialogue, understand the root causes of conflict, and make deliberate and collaborative efforts towards shared goals. It contributes to the creation of what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire refers to as a "dialogical" educational space, deeply rooted in mutual respect, critical consciousness, and the co-construction of knowledge (Freire, 1988, pp. 88-92). Culturally competent learners and educators see and appreciate the cultural diversity being brought into the learning environment.

CHALLENGES IN BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION IN EDUCATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Resistance to Change

One of the major challenges in building social cohesion in educational environments is resistance. This resistance comes not only from learners but also from educators and administrators. At times, it stems from a strong attachment to cultural, religious, or ideological beliefs, a sense of cultural superiority, or an unwillingness to engage in intercultural dialogue and diversity initiatives (Escudero, 2013). Educators may resist incorporating cultural competence into the curriculum if they feel unprepared, view it as an additional burden, or lack adequate training. Similarly, some learners are reluctant to embrace cultural competence due to limited understanding, prior social conditioning, or resistance to change.

Institutional Limitations

The absence of systemic institutional support is another major challenge in building social cohesion within educational environments. Many institutions lack clear

policies, as well as the frameworks and leadership commitment necessary to support inclusivity. In some cases, curricula are outdated and fail to reflect the multicultural realities of learners. As a result, the marginalisation of minority cultures and languages becomes highly visible. Furthermore, some institutions lack inclusive policies on conflict resolution, anti-discrimination, and equity, which can lead to issues such as bullying, exclusion, and identity-based conflicts (Farinde-Wu, Glover, & Williams, 2017).

Resource Constraints

Building social cohesion in educational environments also requires adequate financial, human, and material resources. A major challenge, however, is that these resources are often limited or unavailable. Institutions may lack the funding to provide training for educators on cultural competence, employ staff from diverse cultural backgrounds, organise cultural exchange activities, or purchase inclusive learning materials (Moro, Pires, Rita, & Cortez, 2020). Even when plans exist, resource constraints can significantly hinder the scope and sustainability of social cohesion initiatives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as adult learning contexts keep reflecting the cultural complexities of the global world, cultural competence emerges as a very important tool for conflict resolution and social cohesion. It equips individuals to get involved with cultural differences, change learning centres into a site of healing and dialogue, and give all the necessary support to the broader goals of peace and justice. In welcoming cultural competence, adult education will fulfil its highest promise of not just to transmit knowledge, but to build bridges, restore dignity, and inspire collective transformation.

RECOMMENDATION

To build an inclusive, equitable, and socially cohesive learning environment, policymakers should mandate training on cultural competence for all adult educators. Such training will equip promote mutual respect in increasingly diverse learning environments. Adult learners bring with them varied cultural backgrounds, worldviews, and lived experiences, which makes it essential for educators to be culturally responsive and adaptable.

Therefore, policymakers should develop a standard framework for intercultural training, integrating it into teacher certification and professional development programs. Incentives should also be provided to encourage continuous professional learning. Collaboration among institutions, community leaders, and cultural organisations is necessary to ensure that the training reflects both

local realities and global diversity. Additionally, adequate funding and monitoring mechanisms should be established to assess the effectiveness of the training in improving learning outcomes, reducing discrimination, and strengthening social inclusion.

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