



## Transforming Teacher Practice through Action Research: A Study on Teacher Cultural Competence on Story Education

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### ABSTRACT

Story education requires research into teacher cultural competence. This paper reports on an action research inquiry meant to improve infant teachers' practice on the teaching of story education in contexts of diversity. A qualitative approach was employed, where purposive sampling was used to select six infant teachers and three community elders as study participants. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and stories (ngano) from indigenous elders. Through action research, three dimensions were identified as possible strategies for enhancing teacher cultural competence in story education, namely, improving on their story education teaching methods, collaborating with each other, and engaging elders from the surrounding communities. In the analysis, we described story education practices and how teachers changed and improved their teaching in relation to cultural competence. Based on the findings, story education in multicultural settings may be best presented in terms of what is called the Zunde model, analogous to how granaries in Zimbabwean villages accommodate the needs of all members of a community. Recommendations were made for infant school teachers and policy makers.

**Key Words:** Action research, Indigenous elders, Infant learners, Story Education, Multicultural settings, Teacher cultural competence; Zunde model



## INTRODUCTION

The role of teacher cultural competence in story education is viewed as critical since we are living in times when school populations are increasing in cultural diversity, particularly in urban settings (Gay, 2015; Tanase, 2022). At infant school level (Grades One, Two and Three), the culturally-diverse learners need to be involved in story education, which is one of the important educational foci in Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based curriculum (HBC). Story education fits well within the philosophy of HBC since traditional stories aim at transmitting and preserving cultural and traditional knowledge. Specifically, in a multicultural context, traditional stories are of vital importance among infant learners from diverse cultures as they help to improve on their values, knowledge acquisition and morals (Mallan, 2000; Curenton & Justice, 2008; Martin & Spencer, 2020). Therefore, for good story education to be realised at infant level, it is critical to engage culturally-competent teachers who can be effective to learners from diverse cultures.

The changing profile of class requires educators to create learning environments that motivate learners to acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to participate

meaningfully in a multicultural society (Lemmer, Meir & Van Wyk, 2006; Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020). With reference to the USA, Mburu (2022) advocates for teacher education programmes that adequately prepare preservice teachers who can implement culturally-responsive practices that meet the needs of today's world. In Zimbabwe, Madzanire's (2019) study yielded results which show the need for education to appeal to the various ethnic groups, given the changing demographics reflected by the mixture of cultural groups found in various school classes. Accordingly, educators in Zimbabwe are required to address the learners' cultural diversity adequately through story education, particularly at infant level.

### The Significance of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education is intended to a great extent to reaffirm the worthiness and dignity of those students who have been looked down upon for a long time because of their cultures (Rychly & Graves, 2012; Azhary & Fatimah, 2024). Learners need to be exposed to a learning environment that encourages them to master some skills and to acquire the knowledge and attitudes that help them participate actively in a multicultural society

(Darling-Hammond, 2015). Multicultural education is of paramount importance in that it develops the intellectual, social and personal growth of all learners to their highest level, often through self-confidence and eagerness to perform well in their school work (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Williams, Williams & Jones-Fosu, 2019; Tanase, 2022).

In the case of teachers, multicultural education helps to increase expectations from learners and enhances cultural sensitivities in a number of teaching styles (Rutledge et al., 2023). In a study conducted in Canada, Mahali and Sevigny (2022) concluded that teaching a body of students from culturally diverse backgrounds requires responsive teaching self-efficacy. Therefore, multicultural education should be regarded as an important approach to education as it integrates knowledge about various ethnic groups and fosters the spirit of inclusivity into the curriculum (Madzanire, 2019; Naz, Saha & Hyun, 2024). The purpose of this study was to develop a framework of understanding how teachers with cultural competence can enhance the use of story education at infant level in Zimbabwe.

### **The Role of Traditional Stories at Infant Level**

Traditional stories can be categorised into folktales, fairy tales, myths, and fables, and these are passed on from one generation to another in the oral form as ancient heritage (Mahanand, 2021). While they are a source of entertainment, traditional stories have a number of benefits for learners. Traditional stories can be useful tools for understanding racial and ethnic differences and to discover new responses to those challenges (Lenox, 2000; Putman, Cash & Polly, 2023). Sawyer and Comer (2000) argue that traditional stories teach the cultural values of society to these infant learners, and also that good wins in the end and evil will be punished. While infants learn about their own cultures through traditional stories, they learn to appreciate other people's cultures as well (Gay, 2015). Traditional stories are an excellent teaching strategy as they help learners to develop listening and comprehension skills and to create vivid mental pictures that activate critical thinking (Baker, 2000). In a study on the role of traditional stories in teaching English language education to English Second Language (ESL) learners in India, Mahanand (2021) concluded that, "...traditional stories have enormous potential for language enrichment, language awareness, and cultural and literary appreciation in the ESL classroom" (p. 82).

## Teacher Cultural Competence

Teacher cultural competence entails a practitioner appreciating differences in beliefs, principles, values and behaviours within cultural groups. The major task of a culturally-competent teacher is to create a conducive environment for all learners, and is able to adjust his or her practice to provide effective interventions within the people from different ethnic groups (Campinha-Bacote, 2001; Pevec-Zimmer, Juang & Schachner, 2024). Teacher cultural competence is demonstrated when the teacher is able to connect to the everyday experiences of students and to integrate learning in class with out-of-class experiences (Diller & Moule, 2005). Though in-service teachers acknowledge the importance of diversity, competence in their classrooms is often determined by their ability to apply their own cultural knowledge in ways that enable students to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2015). It is, thus, the ability of the teacher to communicate, understand and work effectively among learners from multicultural settings (Kima, Kumi-Yeboaha & Mohammed, 2024).

Teacher cultural competence is at work when the teacher understands his or her own culture and ways in which cultural competence can

be developed in schools through policies that place value on diversity and that encourage teachers to collaborate when teaching learners from diverse contexts (Mahanand, 2021). Teachers can develop cultural competence in their classrooms through the formation of culturally responsive classrooms in which they are aware of the culturally diverse learners and connect themselves to the material to be taught (Montgomery, 2001; Williams, Williams & Jones-Fosu, 2019).

Teachers need to be adequately trained if they are to be effective in handling learners from diverse cultures, both during pre-service and in-service training. Pevec-Zimmer, Juang and Schachner (2024) report that their Identity Project seminar raised pre-service teachers' awareness and self-efficacy in engaging in culturally-responsive teaching. For pre-service teachers to be culturally-competent, they need to apply observational, empirical and analytical skills to monitor, evaluate and revise their own teaching practices (Martin & Spencer, 2020).

The cultural competence of pre-service teachers is developed while they interact harmoniously with learners from different

cultures (Naz, Saha & Hyun, 2024). It is also important for in-service programmes to be conducted regularly to upgrade the knowledge base of teachers through advancing cultural awareness in school contexts (Gay, 2002, 2015; Brown, 2003; Cameron et al., 2024). In-service teachers can invite civic leaders and elders from different cultural backgrounds to come and share some cultural information through story telling, for instance, with the learners (Banks, 2001; Mahanand, 2021). Through culturally-responsive teaching methods, teachers get in touch with elders at home, and in this way, they are well informed about the background knowledge of the learners, a situation that enables teachers to teach them better (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). With the increasing diversity in today's classrooms, it is high time teacher education institutions reflected and initiated changes that help to empower teachers to harness cultural diversity effectively for the benefit of learners (Sullivan & Glanz, 2000; Diller & Moule, 2005; Ng et al. 2022; Tanase, 2022; Rutledge et al., 2023).

Ladson-Billings (1994) posits that culturally-competent teachers recognise the importance of including learners' cultural differences in all aspects of learning. When telling stories, the teacher can allow the learners to tell the

story in their vernacular and by so doing, the learners enjoy it as it stimulates their imagination (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Ladson-Billings (2005) further argues that teachers who are culturally-competent develop intellectual, social, emotional and political learning by using cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. Ladson-Billings (2006) notes that teacher cultural competence builds an academic community for learners, teachers respond to the sense of belonging that learners need, honour their human dignity and promote their individual self-concept. Results from a study conducted by Ortiz-Rodríguez et al. (2022) revealed that providing an inclusive, culturally-responsive, and supportive educational environment is likely to have a positive influence on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Statement of the problem

In line with its Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) launched in 2024, recognising the critical role of teacher cultural competence is of paramount importance for Zimbabwe. Teachers should be aware of the challenges of culturally-diverse classrooms in order to develop competences to deal with these

challenges (Gay, 2002; 2015). Recent studies done in other countries suggest that teachers are less confident in teaching strategies that address cultural diversity (Martin & Spencer, 2020; Mahali & Sevigny, 2022; Comstock et al., 2023; Azhary & Fatimah, 2024; Siliunas, Wan & Edejer, 2024). In Zimbabwe, Madzanire (2019) examined educational strategies that may help in reducing cultural conflict in diverse learner populated primary schools. To address the knowledge gap on the role of teacher cultural competence in the use of story education among learners from culturally-diverse settings, this study used action research in a multicultural infant school context. The researchers are not aware of studies on teacher cultural competence, in the teaching of story education, that have been done in Zimbabwe. The question that guided this action research was, *How can we assist teachers to be culturally competent when teaching stories to infant learners from diverse cultural backgrounds?*

## Method

Given the purpose of the study and the focus of the research question on action and change in teacher practice, the study made use of action research (Burns, 2015). Action

research is commonly used for improving conditions and practices in a range of environments (Lingard, Albert & Levinson, 2008). The core of action research is reflected in the term which indicates a juxtaposition of action and research or, in other words, it encompasses practice and theory. Action research is a form of investigation designed for use by teachers in an attempt to solve problems and improve professional practices in their own classrooms (Hendricks, 2017). Practitioners can make use of systematic observations and data collection which can be used in reflection, decision making and the development of more classroom strategies (Ndamba, 2007). Action research was used in this study to empower teachers in traditional storytelling in infant classes in order to improve student learning in a multicultural context. Action research unfolds through a spiral of cycles that consist of plan, act, observe, reflect then revised plan etc. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2002; O’Leary, 2010).

In this study, the cycles involved planning with the teacher participants about their own practices of teaching, and to elicit the importance of cultural diversity. Teachers would conduct some lessons on story education and would be interviewed. Teachers collaborated with colleagues

teaching the same grade. Through this collaboration, the teachers helped each other with ideas on how they could make changes in order to improve practice. During interviews, teachers indicated that elders' indigenous knowledge played a pivotal role in the teaching of story education. As teachers were teaching, it was observed that some learners were not paying attention. It was then that it was noted that the use of elders from the local community could be of vital importance in the teaching of story education. The elders were then interviewed as a revised plan.

This study focused on the role of teacher cultural competence in the teaching of story education among infant learners. A sample of 6 infant teachers and 3 community elders was purposefully selected. The study was limited to one elite private school in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe. It was assumed that when all infant teachers in the school were involved, an intensive action research would be possible. The three elders who were sampled had experience in working with infant learners. Data were collected through the use of face-to-face interviews with community elders and with infant class teachers who had been observed and video recorded while delivering practical lessons in story education. The interviews were

transcribed verbatim. Participants filled in consent forms and guardians completed assent forms for learners to participate in the study.

Memo writing was used in analysing data (Charmaz, 2006). Memos help one to elaborate the processes and actions that are taken for granted under the code. Memo writing consists of writing a 'memo' to oneself about what one feels is happening in the data, making reflections on one's philosophical research position, issues, analytical decision making and developing theory. In the context of this study, an example was how the teachers' body language demonstrated cultural competence and how the learners' facial expression showed whether they appreciated the teacher's method. Memo writing started as soon as interviewing the infant class teachers started and it continued throughout the data collection process.

To enhance credibility, Guba and Lincoln's (1985) prescription that the longer the researcher stays with the participants the more the likelihood of creating a good relationship with them was adopted. The first researcher stayed with the participants until all the data were captured. Confirmability and dependability were assured through



keeping of the original data sources (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) such as audio tapes, video tapes and the transcriptions of the interviews with the teachers and elders. Permission to carry out the study was granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. The purpose of the research study was explained to the participants.

The findings in this study are part of a larger action research inquiry which focused on teacher cultural competence in the teaching of story education to infant learners in a multicultural school context in Zimbabwe.

### Findings and Discussion

The main objective of the study was to explore and gain insight into how teachers may use cultural competence in teaching and how they change practice to make learning from traditional stories more effective. Through memo writing, researchers developed an understanding of the relationship between teacher cultural competence and story education learning, and to create a framework which would best represent this relationship conceptually.

The findings indicate that there were three major dimensions that needed to be considered by culturally competent teachers for effective teaching of story education to learners from diverse cultures, namely; (i) use of various teaching methods, (ii) collaboration with colleagues in preparation for teaching, and (iii) partnering with indigenous people in story education at infant level.

### Use of Various Methods in the Teaching of Story Education

To answer questions on the strategies that could be employed in story education for learners from diverse cultures, the following vignettes represent teachers' views:

I show them lots of pictures from books. Yes....infant teachers learn more through visual memory and auditory memory. If I have an aid or a picture, it helps them to understand, for example the picture of a hippo and that of a lion. I also explain words that they do not understand. (**Teacher E**)

I now make use of dramatisation, retelling the story, and question and answer method mainly. Eeeehh ...I have learnt to use more

of dramatisation because children enjoy it and they understand it better if they dramatise what you will have read to them. (**Teacher A**)

When teaching stories, I have called some well versed elders from the community to come and tell stories to the learners at school. I have used this method and I find it to be very effective. (**Teacher F**)

Findings show that teachers have incorporated their students' interests into the curriculum, making connections with real-life and allowing students to make many choices. Through dramatization, role-playing and answering questions related to the story, learners experience the use of language in a real life situation (Mahanand, 2021). This way, children from diverse backgrounds benefit from the learning environment (Rychly & Graves, 2012; Mahali & Sevigny, 2022). Kieran and Anderson (2019) recommend a change in the teaching paradigm, whereby teachers understand the relationship between students' culture and learning.

### **Collaboration in Preparation for Teaching Story Education**

Reflection meetings during the action research process revealed that it was crucial for culturally-competent teachers to collaborate with colleagues in order to map out the strategies that can be employed in improving the teaching of stories to culturally-diverse learners. One of the teacher participants had this to say:

I sat with a colleague who taught the same Grade to see how we could improve on our teaching methods. Lesson planning that involved collaboration helped me to follow well laid out steps in the teaching of story education. (**Teacher C**)

Working with other teachers during the action research process demonstrated that effective assistance can come from fellow teachers for the benefit of learners (Ndamba, 2007; Martin & Spencer, 2020; Kima et al., 2024). A study was conducted in Dutch schools, on teacher professional learning communities (PLCs), while focusing on culturally-responsive teaching. Findings established that by participating in a PLC, teachers' shared practices seemed to change the attitudes and beliefs of all teachers and the

knowledge and skills of some teachers (Alhanachi, de Meijer & Severiens, 2021). The results from a study conducted by Putman, Cash and Polly (2023), on pre-service teacher education students, indicated that candidates who participated in the internship demonstrated positive self-efficacy for culturally-responsive teaching as compared to those who completed the traditional teacher education programme. In Zimbabwe, findings from an action research study conducted by Ndamba (2007), revealed that student teachers and their mentors had gained reflective skills which empowered them to come up with improved schemes of work and lesson plans. Siliunas, Wan and Edejer (2024) suggest the need for considering specific teacher preparation methods that were found to be critical in enhancing teachers' cultural competence. This implies that teachers need to focus on creating opportunities for them to master cultural competence and relationship-building when dealing with learners from diverse backgrounds.

### **Culturally competent teachers need to partner with Indigenous people**

With reference to engaging indigenous people in the community to become partners in story education, the following is what two of the teacher participants said:

At times I invite elders from different cultures to come and tell stories to learners and through that way learners enjoy it. **(Teacher F)**

In order to change my practice, I call elders from the community. **(Teacher D)**

During interviews with the three indigenous elders, this is how they expressed their views:

The only solution in the teaching of story education to the learners is that each cultural group must tell stories found within its culture.... A day like an open day would do very well. The parents can display hides of some animals so that the learners can master some of these animals. **(Elder 1)**

The school can call us as indigenous people who are well versed in stories to come and tell stories at school and even teach learners some local interesting songs. As elders tell these stories the teachers can write them

down in books for future generations. (**Elder 2**)

The elders can assist in the teaching of story education lessons if there is a day on the school calendar when parents from different cultural groups come and tell children the stories that they teach them at home. ....It is high time we must run away from these foreign stories and come up with our own indigenous stories if our children are to enjoy them. (**Elder 3**)

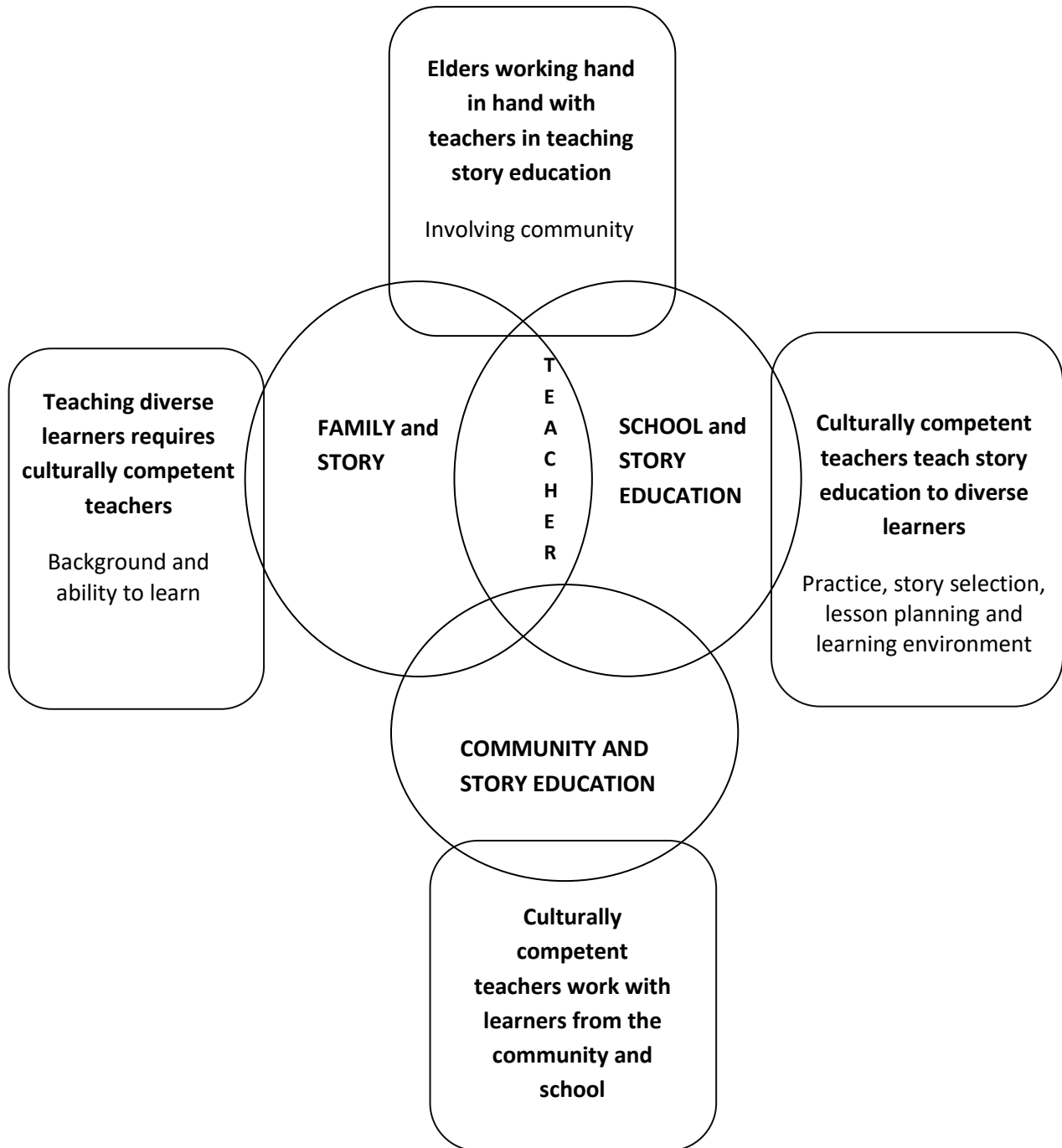
From the above responses, it is clear that in order to embrace diversity, culturally competent teachers need to work hand in hand with elders in their communities (Williams et al., 2019).

Teacher cultural competence is an important pedagogical way of reducing the cultural gaps between teachers and school learners (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Kieran and Anderson (2019) aver that teachers must consider how learners' differences affect learning and make efforts to align pedagogies that address this cultural diversity. In this study, action research was regarded as the best approach in enhancing teacher competence in this specific context (Burns, 2015; Hendricks, 2017; Martin & Spencer, 2020; Siliunas, 2024). The study was

conducted with six infant school teachers, to explore how they can improve practice through employing culturally-responsive teaching of story education at one elite primary school in Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe.

The present study found that culturally-competent teachers need to be empowered on their story of education teaching methods (Ng et al., 2022; Naz et al., 2024; Pevec-Zimmer et al., 2024), and to collaborate with each other to improve their own practice (Kieran & Anderson, 2019; Alhanachi et al., 2021; Putman et al., 2023; Siliunas et al., 2024). The study also revealed that engaging elders from the surrounding communities to come to school to tell stories to the learners was critical in embracing diversity (Madzanire, 2019; Azhary & Fatimah, 2024). Accordingly, the researchers in the current study came up with a relevant framework that would cater for story education in culturally diverse settings.

### Zunde Framework of valuable story education in culturally diverse settings



## The Zunde Concept

Integration of local cultures is crucial in promoting teacher cultural competence (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Ortiz-Rodríguez, 2022; Azhary & Fatimah, 2024). The term 'Zunde' in Shona refers to plenty of grain stored for future use by people in a particular community. Its main purpose is to ensure adequate food storages that could be used in times of food shortages. In other words, it is a guarantee for food security for its people at all times. The elders in this Zunde model act as the granary where the teachers can get traditional stories that they share with learners in class. These stories come from different elders in the community, a situation that enriches the teachers' potential in the use of story education, thereby enriching the teachers in their story education (Comstock et al., 2023).

Instead of teachers relying on stories from books that are divorced from the learners' environment, the elders can be a valuable source of stories and these elders can be equally compared to the granary where food can be got in times of famine. In the Zunde metaphor, the stories from the elders represent the nutritious food that the children can get from the elders. As indigenous elders are regarded as knowledge holders who are

well versed in their culture (Mahanand, 2021), making use of the Zunde framework has the potential to make learners benefit tremendously.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the research makes the following recommendations:

- Open days should be held in the schools where the elders from different cultures are invited to come and share some stories with the infant learners so that these learners can appreciate diversity.
- Infant class teachers in their schools should be encouraged to conduct action research if they are to improve on their practice in the teaching of story education to the infant learners.
- Cluster schools in the infant grades need to collaborate and enlighten each other on how they can improve the learning of story education to the infant learners. This collaboration fosters professional development among school practitioners.
- Institutions that offer teacher education programmes should

advocate for action research as an approach that has the potential to mould practitioners with cultural competence, capable of effectively implementing story education methodologies.

### Conclusion

The study employed an action research method, while focusing on improving infant teachers' approaches in teaching story education to learners from diverse backgrounds. Due to the opportunity to collaborate with each other during the action research process, teachers acknowledged that they had been transformed to become more culturally competent practitioners in story education. It is anticipated that diversity in schools might be better harnessed and managed when infant teachers are empowered to improve their own practice through collaboration with colleagues and community elders. If the Zunde model is adopted, it is likely to have positive effects on the teaching of story education among infant learners in multicultural schools in Zimbabwe. Teachers and learners alike would become aware that there are learners from different cultures and they might learn to respect and accept each other, thereby

enhancing inclusivity in the Heritage-Based Curriculum.

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