

Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs and Practices: A Cross-Cultural Study on the Inclusion of Children with Autism

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ABSTRACT:

Educators' attitudes, knowledge and practices make a significant contribution to the successful inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in early childhood settings. The present mixed-methods cross-cultural study involved with the early childhood educators from four different national contexts (312 ECs from India, the United States, South Korea, and Kenya). Data were collected in three broad areas: (a) attitudes towards inclusive education, (b) perceived self-efficacy in supporting children with ASD, and (c) frequency and quality of evidence-based inclusive practices that were implemented in naturalistic classroom settings. Quantitative results showed that there were significant differences ($p < .001$) between the different cultures in attitudinal orientation and in practice implementation, with teachers in the USA having the highest mean self-efficacy scores ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.63$) and teachers in India reporting their highest commitment scores to community-centred inclusion philosophies. The four main themes that emerged from the qualitative thematic analysis were: (1) cultural conceptualisations of disability, (2) resource scarcity and systemic barriers, (3) collaborative family engagement as a central theme and (4) professional development as a transformative lever. The study recognizes subtle cultural mediators which influence both the philosophical understanding of inclusion and the way in which it is practiced in different geopolitical contexts. Consequences are addressed for pre-service and in-service training programmes for culturally responsive early childhood education, for international policy for inclusive early childhood education and for future comparative research about disability and schooling.

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1. Introduction

The concept of inclusive education, which means the deliberate inclusion of children with disabilities in the mainstream school environments, has become a major trend in the education of children with disabilities of the last 30 years. Together, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals fourth objective (SDG4, 2015) have placed inclusive education firmly on the 'must do' rather than 'should do' agenda of human rights obligations. Children with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are a salient group in the scholarly and policy discussion on a group of children who stand to benefit the most from effective inclusive programming.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, including social communication and social interaction difficulties that persist across various settings, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). The prevalence of ASD has been a target of greater epidemiological investigation, with the United States' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023) estimating that 1 in 36 children in the United States alone are diagnosed with ASD, a figure that fluctuates greatly across different regions around the globe due to variations in diagnostic criteria, awareness, and healthcare infrastructure. Regardless of differences in prevalence rates from one region to the next, the education system in virtually every country is faced with the challenge of providing an expanding population of young children with ASD an education that is appropriate.

Early childhood education (ECE) refers to the learning experience that occurs during the birth-to-8 years of development and is one of the most pivotal periods for intervention. Both the cognitive and social impacts of early quality and inclusive experiences are enduring and have been supported by neuroscience research to benefit children with ASD across cognitive, linguistic,

and adaptive domains (Dawson et al., 2010; Zwaigenbaum et al., 2015). For young children with ASD, the quality of inclusion is therefore very much shaped and influenced by the teacher, and not just by the curriculum designed and the resources allocated.

ECEs play a pivotal role in the inclusion experience of children with ASD. The impact of inclusive rhetoric on inclusive reality rests on their beliefs about disability, their knowledge of the instructional strategies related to ASD, and their feelings of personal efficacy in meeting the varied learning needs. But research has continually shown that educators' beliefs and practices are not culture-free. They are situated within, and influenced by, larger sociocultural contexts that represent notions of disability, normalcy, family duty, community duty, and the function of schooling (Artiles et al., 2011; Miles & Singal, 2010). Although there are many articles and reports on inclusive education for children with ASD, there is a gap in the literature that examines the perspectives of early childhood educators from different cultures by comparing their perspectives. While there are many articles and reports on inclusive education for children with ASD, a gap in the literature exists in comparing the perspectives of early childhood educators from other cultures. Most of the published literature comes from Western, industrialised and English speaking contexts, notably the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, and the conclusions are often disseminated in a general way, without an explicit recognition of cultural specificity (Nguyen et al., 2015). This geographical and cultural degree of ignorance does not only restrict the applicability of findings to different educational contexts but also maintain epistemic hierarchies which marginalise the perspectives and knowledge systems of educators working in non-Western contexts.

The present study seeks to fill the above-mentioned gap and takes a rigorous, mixed method and cross-cultural approach to explore the beliefs and practice of early childhood educators on the inclusion of children with ASD in four purposively chosen national contexts;

India, the United States of America, South Korea and Kenya. The four countries were chosen to highlight the substantive variation in terms of economic development, cultural orientations (collectivist vs. individualist), historical and policy trajectories of inclusive education, and geographical location across regions. As a whole, they provide a fascinating comparative backdrop through which to explore the roles of cultural context in shaping educator cognition and instructional actions in inclusive early childhood settings.

The present study aimed to: (1) assess and compare attitudes and beliefs of ECEs regarding the inclusion of children with ASD in four national contexts; (2) examine the levels of educator self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices with children with ASD; (3) explore the frequency and quality of available evidence of inclusive practices in early childhood classrooms across cultures; and (4) identify the cultural, systemic, and professional factors that moderate or mediate the relationship between educators' beliefs and inclusive practices. The results of this investigation are expected to have relevance for cross-national policies, special education and early childhood professional development and future comparative research agendas.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Inclusive Education

Conceptual supports for inclusive education have been built from many disciplines such as disability studies, special education, developmental psychology and sociology of education. The widest interpretation of inclusive education goes beyond just co-locating children with and without disabilities in the same school or setting; it involves access to quality learning experiences, inclusion in social life and the positive values of human diversity (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The social model of disability, which grew out of disability rights literature, offers a specific theoretical perspective, shifting the focus from a person having a disability to a social construction of disability that occurs within the intersection of the person's

disability and their social environment (Oliver, 1990). A complementary model to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is useful for understanding the complex context that can affect children's developmental outcomes in inclusive settings. Ecological factors such as school-level policy, family engagement, community values and cultural belief systems, as well as classroom-level factors, also influence the quality of early childhood inclusion. The ecological orientation is the foundation for the cross-cultural analytical orientation of the present investigation.

2.3 Theories of Learning for Diversity and Inclusion in Education

There is significant research that has documented that ECE beliefs and attitudes about inclusion can be one of the strongest predicting factors of the quality of ECE practices related to inclusion (de Boer et al., 2011; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Koegel et al., 2012). Beliefs are mental schemas that affect educators' perception of children, interpretation of problems and decisions of teaching methods. Creators of deficit-oriented beliefs (who think of children with ASD as having impairments and limitations) create more restrictive teaching environments than creators of strengths-based, neurodiversity-affirming beliefs (who think of children with ASD as having strengths; McGhee Hassrick et al., 2017).

Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory and in particular his model of self-efficacy has turned out to be extraordinarily fruitful in the inclusive education literature. Educator self-efficacy is defined as educators' beliefs about their knowledge and skills in supporting the learning and participation of children with disabilities and their capacity to persist when new strategies to meet the needs of children with disabilities are introduced or when challenges arise to the implementation (Sharma & Nuttal, 2016; Woodcock et al., 2012). Self-efficacy is not permanent; it is malleable—based on mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological states—and all aspects are culturally influenced.

2.3 Cultural Contexts and Autism Inclusion

This cultural context of educational values and practices is well established in the field of comparative educational research. Hofstede's (2001) seminal study on cultural dimensions (a focus on the individualism-collectivism continuum) has been widely used to explain international differences in educational philosophies and disability conceptualisations. The collectivist cultures that are more common in many societies throughout South and East Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, prioritise community harmony, family support networks and the social impact of disability, whilst the more common individualist cultures found in Western European and North American cultures focus on individual rights, autonomy and formal institutional support.

In contexts of East Asia – South Korea, China and Japan – complex intersections of collectivist values, Confucian educational philosophy and stigmatised notions of disability have been documented that can paradoxically promote and motivate families to invest in the education of their children while simultaneously providing barriers to the formal process of diagnosis-seeking and disclosure (Kim, 2012; Park & Kim, 2018). In the Indian context, spiritual and religious aetiological explanations of disability have been identified as coexisting with biomedical explanations and that they can have a significant impact on family engagement patterns and educator expectations (Alur & Timmons, 2009; Singal, 2010). In sub-Saharan African countries, such as Kenya, Ubuntu philosophy, which is based on interdependence and collective responsibility of the community, has been identified as a potential cultural strength in inclusive education, together with difficulties related to the scarcity of resources and under-investment in special education infrastructure (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Maguvhe, 2015).

2.4 Professional Development and Training in Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Lack of pre-service preparation and lack of adequate in-service professional development are always reported as significant challenges for effective inclusion at a national level (Forlin &

Looreman, 2014; Able et al., 2015). Research into teacher preparation programs in several countries has shown that many early childhood education teachers report feeling unqualified to deal with children's learning and behavioral profiles, which are often complex (Busby et al., 2012; Scott & Palincsar, 2009). Evidence-based practices for children with ASD in inclusive ECE settings must not only be understood conceptually, but be implemented for long periods of time in situations of genuine instructional supervision (Wong et al., 2015).

Contextual factors also influence the effectiveness of professional development, with the alignment of training content and local cultural values and community priorities, availability of follow-up coaching and mentorship, degree of administrative support for implementation, and structural time provided to teachers for reflective collaborative practice all affecting efficacy (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2014). However, there is a lack of cross-cultural research on professional development in inclusive education, which hampers the ability of international organizations and national governments to create evidence-informed and contextually relevant professional development programs.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative survey data and qualitative interview and observational data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and subsequently integrated at the interpretive stage. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it enables the breadth of cross-cultural comparison afforded by survey methodology to be enriched and contextualized by the depth and nuance achievable through qualitative inquiry. This is particularly appropriate given the complexity of educator beliefs and the culturally embedded nature of inclusive practices.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

A quantitative phase took place with a total of 312 early childhood educators from four countries: India ($n = 82$), the United States ($n = 78$), South Korea ($n = 76$), and Kenya ($n = 76$). The educators participating were selected using purposive sampling, and included those working in public or private early childhood settings (ages 3-8 years) in specific metropolitan and peri-urban districts in each country. Eligibility included (a) having a recognised early childhood education qualification or a closely related field; (b) at least one year of professional teaching experience; and (c) teaching in a classroom environment with a child with a documented developmental disability or developmental concern.

The qualitative phase involved conducting semi-structured individual interviews and structured classroom observations with a purposively selected sample of 48 teachers (12 teachers per country). Qualitative sampling emphasized maximum variation of sample characteristics such as years of experience, level of educational qualification, school type and urbanicity. Demographic characteristics of the total sample are presented in Table 1.

The gender distribution of participants showed that the majority were female (87.5%) consistent with the gender distribution of the global early childhood workforce. In Kenya, mean years of teacher experience was 6.2 years ($SD = 3.8$) and 9.7 years ($SD = 5.1$) in the United States. Qualifications included basic training up to post graduate study in special education, and there was significant variation in the availability of specialist training in ASD across the countries.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

This study used three main data collection tools. All quantitative participants completed the researcher-developed, instrument comprised of 68 items across four validated subscales, that is, the Educator Beliefs and Practices Survey (EBPS). The subscales measured were: (a) General Attitudes toward Inclusive Education (18 items, adapted from the Multidimensional

Attitudes Scale; Mahat, 2008), (b) ASD-Specific Knowledge and Preparedness (16 items, adapted from the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale – Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), (c) Inclusive Practice Self-Efficacy (20 items, adapted from the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale – Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), and (d) Perceived Institutional Support for Inclusion (14 items). Items were rated on a 5-pointized Likert scale (from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 5 "Strongly Agree") on which higher scores represented more positive orientations. The internal consistency of the four sub scales in the present study were reliable ranging between .79 to .88 (Cronbach's alpha).

Next, the qualitative group of participants ($n = 21$) were interviewed semi-structuredly using secure video-conferencing platforms (for international participants) or face-to-face in the school environment, for 45-60 minutes. Interviews addressed educators' philosophies about inclusion, their experiences of including children with ASD, strategies used, challenges and supports faced, and understandings of the role of culture and family in the context of inclusion. All interviews were conducted by trained bilingual research assistants in the participants' preferred language and, with consent, audio recorded and professionally transcribed and translated as needed.

Third, we employed an adapted version of the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP; Soukakou, 2016) to observe the quality of inclusive practices for children with disabilities in early childhood environments. Observations for 90 minutes were completed for each classroom on at least two school days resulting in 96 observation sessions. The ICP evaluates 12 dimensions of inclusive quality: adaptive play, adult involvement in peer interactions, conflict resolution, and membership and belonging, among others.

3.4 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed by IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28.0). All survey subscales were calculated to obtain descriptive statistics. One-way MANOVA was used to statistically test for differences between the four national groups

for composite and subscale scores, and Tukey HSD follow-up tests were used to determine specific between-group differences. Partial eta-squared (η^2) was used to calculate effect sizes. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to explore relationships between the four survey subscores.

The reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) was used for qualitative data analysis of the data collected in the form of interviews and field notes of observations. This consisted of an intensive six-step data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme building, theme review and refinement, theme definition and naming, and report production process. Analysis was undertaken in NVivo (Version 12), and coding was performed independently by two members of the research team and then discussed together to reach agreement about coding, and to maintain reflexive audit trails. To confirm initial interpretations, member checking was done with six participants in each country.

Joint display approach (Fetters et al., 2013) was used to integrate quantitative and qualitative results, by systematically comparing the group-level findings from the quantitative data with the themes found in the qualitative data to identify convergence, divergence, and elaboration across data strands.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Cross-Cultural Differences in Educator Beliefs and Attitudes

The MANOVA results showed a medium to large overall effect (Wilks' $\Lambda = .61$, $F(12, 861) = 14.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$) for the combined EBPS subscale scores for the national context. There were significant differences between groups in all four of these subscale scores in univariate follow-up analyses (all $p < .001$).

The educators from the United States ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.54$) scored on the positive side of the General Attitudes subscale, closely followed by the educators from India ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.61$), Kenyan ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.58$) and South Korea ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.71$). Post-hoc comparisons

showed that the South Korean educators were significantly lower than those of the other three groups (all $p < .05$), and the US, India, and Kenya educators did not significantly differ from one another.

ASD-Specific Knowledge and Preparedness scores were significantly lower compared to other subscale scores across all four groups, indicating an overall lack of formal training in ASD across cultural groups. The mean preparedness scores were highest for U.S. teachers ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.78$) and lowest for South Korean teachers ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.82$). The interview findings aligned with these findings where educators in all four contexts identified lack of specialist training as a key barrier to effective inclusion.

As with attitudes, the general pattern of the scores for Inclusive Practice Self-Efficacy was that US educators had the highest scores ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.63$), while South Korean educators had the lowest ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.74$). Specifically, the mean scores ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.69$) for self-efficacy were greater than mean scores ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.82$) for ASD knowledge scores; this was interpreted as a result of community-based resourcefulness and collaboration among educators for teaching ASD in Kenya, which is lacking in the formal system. Positive associations were found between each of the four subscales of the EBPS (all r 's $> .38$, all p 's $< .001$), with more favourable attitudes being linked to higher levels of self-efficacy, more knowledge, and perceptions of institutional support.

4.2 Inclusive Classroom Practices: Observational Findings

ICP global quality scores across the 96 observed classrooms ranged from 1.9 to 5.8 on a seven-point scale. US classrooms obtained the highest mean global ICP score ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.81$), indicating adequate-to-good inclusive practice quality, followed by Indian classrooms ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.94$), Kenyan classrooms ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.02$), and South Korean classrooms ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.88$). ICP subdimension analysis revealed that the greatest cross-cultural variation was observed on dimensions of Peer Interaction

Facilitation (range $M = 2.88$ to 4.71) and Adaptation of Materials and Activities (range $M = 2.64$ to 4.55), while greater consistency was observed on dimensions of Membership and Belonging (range $M = 3.84$ to 4.43) — suggesting that physical and social belonging was more consistently enacted than instructional accommodation across cultural settings.

4.3 Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis of data from interviews and observations was conducted, which resulted in four major themes and multiple sub-themes. They are outlined below, one by one.

Theme 1: Cultural Conceptualisations of Disability and Autism. In all four national settings the beliefs of educators were strongly influenced by the culturally mediated concepts of disability. Teachers in the US expressed a rights-based approach most often, focusing on the legal rights of children with ASD and the professionals' responsibility to meet the needs of all children. Legislation (including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) was often mentioned as a basis for the practice of the participants. Conversely, South Korean teachers often expressed ideas that were shaped by anxieties about group harmony and acceptance by their peers, and that their students' behaviours might be disruptive if they were too different. One South Korean participant ("Hyejin") said: "We wanted all children together, but sometimes I'm concerned about how the other children feel, because it's important in Korea to fit in."

In the case of India, educators reported a complicated picture where biomedical explanations of ASD were in parallel with spiritual explanations and familial honour issues and community-based thoughts on care. Some of the participants spoke about the role of the extended family in determining the child's educational setting, indicating a collectivist family structure. For Kenyan teachers, the issue of communal responsibility was also highlighted and several teachers referenced the Ubuntu-based values: "A child who struggles is not just that family's problem, it's the village's problem. The communal orientation was found to be a

strength, helping children to accept peers and engage with families, as well as a potential constraint, as community stigma about disclosure of disability reduced the likelihood that families would seek diagnosis or support.

Theme 2: Resource Scarcity and Systemic Barriers. Resource constraints occurred across the board as an obstacle to inclusive practice, but were not the same in all cultures or in all settings in terms of what resources were scarce and how. The availability of class size and the lack of specialised co-teachers or teaching assistants was often reported as a major limitation by South Korean teachers. The Teachers in Kenya reported a dire lack of fundamental teaching tools, assessment experts, trained teachers and teachers' manuals, as well as overcrowding and poor physical facilities. Indian teachers expressed the inequality in access to government-funded support services, specifically in non-metropolitan environments. Although overall access to resources was higher than in other countries, U.S. educators recognized that there were systemic issues such as fragmented coordination of services between education and health services agencies and ongoing lack of behaviour support specialists. It was being felt that the rhetoric of systemic policy commitments to inclusion was more advanced than the allocation of resources needed to make inclusion more than just 'symbolic'.

Theme 3: Family Engagement as a Primary Tenet of Inclusion. In each of the four contexts, teachers saw the quality of family-educator relationships as a key factor in the achievement of inclusive results for children with ASD. Families were always stressed to educators that they have irreplaceable knowledge about their children's communication profile, sensory sensitivities, reinforcement preferences, and culture(s) that, when systematically brought into educational planning, greatly improves the effectiveness of inclusive programming. In the same way, teachers have also reported conflicts with families regarding family engagement, such as families' ambivalence towards diagnostic labelling, cultural stigmas related to discussing neurodevelopmental differences with extended

family, and practical barriers to parents' involvement in school activities. A few teachers from the south Korean setting expressed that some ASD-affected families did not wish to tell the school or peer group about their child's condition, citing that they were concerned about stigma.

Theme 4: Professional Development as a lever for change. Professional development was the shared single most important systemic lever identified by educators in all four national contexts to enhance the quality of autism inclusion in ECE settings. Participants whose professional development had included any ASD-specific professional learning (particularly those that were delivered in a sustained, practice-embedded context, rather than via workshop formats) reported qualitatively different relationships to inclusive practice, reporting increased confidence, increased repertoire of evidence-based practice, and increased sense of professional identity as an inclusive educator. There was a high level of inequity in access to quality professional development across contexts, however. The US teachers showed the highest level of access, but with significant variation in training quality reported. The teachers in Kenya and India reported considerable geographical disparities, where the rural teachers had substantially less opportunities for specialist training. There was a call for culturally sensitive professional development which included local language, local knowledge systems, local cases, instead of programmes which were seen as purely 'western' pedagogical transplants.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpreting Cross-Cultural Variation in Educator Beliefs

Students will analyze the differences and similarities in educator beliefs across cultures. The attitudinal diversity and self-efficacy of teachers, and inclusive practices as reported in this study, cannot be explained through a linear ranking of national education systems. Instead, these are best seen as the entanglements of culturally embedded belief systems, policy

ecologies, resource endowments, and professional development ecologies that develop within unique historical histories of disability conceptualization and educational reform. For example, lower attitudinal scores and self-efficacy scores of educators in South Korea do not reflect indifference towards children with ASD but rather the overwhelming responsibility placed on teachers in a collectivist culture where teachers are expected to have a stronger influence on the overall performance of the group, and where children with complex support needs are seen as creating genuine tension between the teachers and the dominant education priorities.

The results are very similar to what Artiles and colleagues (2011) argue inclusive education needs to be viewed as a culturally situated not culturally universal enterprise. Policy frameworks and professional development programmes that are based on the principle of cultural universality may result in inclusion that is legislative, not substantive, meaning that children with ASD may be in the building, but not in the class. True inclusion involves not only training teachers in effective inclusive strategies, but it means engaging with the culture of each community and critically interpreting the concept of "inclusion."

5.2 The Relationship between Beliefs and Practice

One result of this study that is both meaningful and useful for research and practice is the lack of alignment between educators' beliefs and their actual teaching. Relationships between attitudes and self-efficacy on the part of the educators and the ICP observational scores tended to be stronger and more consistent among those with more favourable attitudes and self-efficacy but were not consistently strong or positive in all national contexts. This discovery brings the existing body of knowledge on attitude-behaviour gaps (de Boer et al., 2011) into the cross-cultural field and indicates that even when educators are motivated and positive in their attitudes, they might be confronted with structural barriers due to lack of resources, professional development and administrative support, which can hinder their efforts to

translate inclusive values into inclusive practice. But the relatively high self-efficacy scores compared to the knowledge scores of Kenyan educators indicate that adaptive expertise that emerges through collective learning, community participation, and creative problem-solving might be a dimension of practical competence not adequately captured by standard assessment tools.

5.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

This study has substantive implications in a number of areas. With regard to pre-service teacher education, the cross-cultural universality of the inadequate knowledge of ASD reported in this study provides strong support for the systematic incorporation of autism-specific knowledge and content (such as evidence-based intervention practices, FA principles and naturalistic developmental practices) into early childhood teacher education programmes around the world. In order to do this, however, programme designers need to ensure that this content is integrated into, rather than imposed on, local cultures of disability and supporting children with diverse needs.

Second, the salience of the professional development theme in the qualitative data further supports a well-supported international evidence base of professional learning as a means of supporting the improvement of inclusive practice, when it is sustained and embedded in practice and is supported by coaching. Governments and school authorities should invest in professional development models that are more than just workshops, sustaining opportunities for early childhood educators to access specialist coaching, collaborative inquiry communities and reflective supervision, while being contextually feasible, including in low-resource settings by maximising the use of collaborative support systems and digital learning platforms.

Third, across all four cultural contexts, engagement of families was a central theme, making it crucial to build culturally responsive models of family partnership that extend beyond the traditional bureaucratic process of notifying

families of plans for inclusion to the process of co-construction of inclusive educational plans. Schools and ECE services should ensure that they develop and strengthen the capacity of their schools to engage families, by having at least one staff member who is able to act as a liaison with families, and by ensuring that communication resources are available in the home language of children, and by ensuring that physical and social environments are welcoming where families from diverse cultural backgrounds feel genuinely valued as partners in their children's learning.

Fourth, at the international policy level, findings from this study question the effectiveness of policy frameworks which make demands for inclusive education, but do not require the provision of the resources, training and cultural adaptation that are needed to achieve full implementation. It is crucial that policies for inclusive education are accepted and embraced by low-income and middle-income countries and that the corresponding investments are made in the development of the systems to implement these solutions, not by simply adopting programmatic solutions that exist in high-income countries in the west without first understanding the context.

6. CONCLUSION

This cross-cultural work has given a substantive and empirically informed contribution to understanding how early childhood educators' beliefs and practices are formed and respond to culturally specific contexts. The integration of quantitative survey data, semi-structured interviews and structured classroom observations in four national settings have revealed significant cross-cultural differences in attitudes, self-efficacy, knowledge and the quality of inclusive practice among educators, and have also revealed cross-cultural similarities, such as the importance of professional development, family engagement, and resource adequacy, that are not limited to national boundaries.

The findings do not lend themselves to hierarchical interpretations of the quality of education, but rather a stance of cultural humility in research and practice: an awareness that

inclusion in a diverse community is not to be accomplished through the unidirectional transfer of instructional technologies from high-resource, Western settings, but can only be co-constructed through meaningful engagement with the knowledge systems, values, and material realities of local communities. Future research needs to be further expanded to compare with the longitudinal design, student outcome data, and larger cross-national samples that contain previously under-represented regional contexts such as Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. This is a cross-cultural questioning that is needed and desired – the

aspiration for globally realised inclusive education for children with an autism spectrum disorder.

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