

INTERCULTURAL DYNAMICS AND GROUP IDENTITY AMONG CHILDREN IN DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Increasing cultural diversity in contemporary educational settings has transformed schools into important social spaces where children encounter, interpret, and negotiate cultural differences. These interactions play a crucial role in the early formation of group identity, belonging, and social relations. This study aims to examine intercultural dynamics and the processes of group identity formation among children in diverse educational contexts, with particular attention to everyday peer interactions and classroom practices. The research employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design involving classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with children and teachers, and sociometric mapping in culturally diverse primary schools. The findings reveal that children frequently form peer groups based on cultural and linguistic familiarity, while intercultural interaction increases primarily in structured learning situations supported by teacher mediation. Differences in perceived group belonging between majority and minority cultural groups indicate uneven experiences of inclusion within the same educational environments. The study concludes that cultural diversity alone does not automatically foster inclusive group identity among children. Intentional pedagogical strategies, cooperative learning structures, and supportive school cultures are essential in promoting meaningful intercultural engagement and equitable social participation. These findings underscore the central role of schools in shaping children's early experiences of diversity and contribute to a deeper understanding of how inclusive group identities can be cultivated in multicultural educational settings.

Keywords: Children; Educational Diversity; Group Identity; Intercultural Dynamics; Social Interaction



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INTRODUCTION

Increasing cultural diversity in educational settings has become a defining feature of contemporary societies as a result of globalization, migration, and demographic change (Alibali & Cook, 2025). Schools are no longer homogeneous social spaces but represent complex environments in which children from different cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds interact on a daily basis (Rapanta et al., 2025). These interactions play a critical role in shaping children's social development, identity formation, and understanding of difference from an early age.

Childhood is a formative period during which social identities and group affiliations begin to take shape (Fu et al., 2026). Within school environments, children learn not only academic content but also social norms, values, and perceptions of in-group and out-group membership (Aljehani et al., 2025). Intercultural encounters in classrooms provide opportunities for mutual understanding and cooperation, yet they may also generate tensions, misunderstandings, and processes of exclusion if not adequately supported through educational practices.

Educational contexts thus function as key sites for examining intercultural dynamics and group identity among children (Osborne et al., 2025). Understanding how children negotiate belonging, difference, and social boundaries in diverse classrooms is essential for fostering inclusive learning environments (Ding et al., 2025). Research on these dynamics contributes to broader discussions on social cohesion, equity, and the role of education in preparing young learners to live in pluralistic societies.

Despite growing diversity in schools, educational practices often lag behind the social realities experienced by children (Ding et al., 2025). Many classrooms lack explicit strategies for addressing intercultural interaction and identity negotiation, leaving children to navigate cultural differences on their own (Wang et al., 2025). This situation may reinforce stereotypes, social segregation, and unequal participation within peer groups.

Empirical observations suggest that children tend to form social groups based on perceived similarities such as language, ethnicity, or cultural background (Jawwad et al., 2025). These group formations can unintentionally marginalize minority students and limit opportunities for meaningful intercultural engagement (Uluğ et al., 2025). Without intentional pedagogical intervention, such patterns may contribute to the early development of social biases and exclusionary attitudes.

The problem addressed in this study concerns the limited understanding of how intercultural dynamics operate at the micro-level of children's everyday interactions in diverse educational settings (Hamidi, 2025). Existing educational policies often promote inclusion in principle, yet insufficient attention is given to how group identity is constructed, negotiated, and transformed through daily social practices among children (Chan et al., 2025). This gap hinders the development of effective strategies to promote intercultural understanding and social integration in schools.

The primary objective of this study is to explore how intercultural dynamics influence the formation and negotiation of group identity among children in diverse educational contexts (Sharma et al., 2025). The research seeks to examine patterns of interaction, affiliation, and boundary-making that emerge within multicultural classrooms.

A further objective involves identifying the social and contextual factors that shape children's intercultural experiences (Krueger et al., 2025). Attention is given to peer relationships, classroom norms, teacher practices, and institutional cultures that either facilitate or constrain positive intercultural engagement (Grosu & Nicola, 2025). Through this objective, the study aims to uncover how educational environments mediate children's perceptions of belonging and difference.

An additional objective is to generate insights that can inform inclusive educational practices and policies (Su et al., 2025). By analyzing children's lived experiences of diversity,

the study seeks to contribute empirically grounded knowledge that supports the development of learning environments fostering mutual respect, cooperation, and shared group identity across cultural differences.

Existing research on intercultural education has largely focused on curriculum design, teacher competencies, and policy frameworks (Zuniga-Montanez et al., 2025). While these studies provide valuable macro-level insights, they often overlook the everyday social interactions through which children experience and interpret cultural diversity (Deng et al., 2025). The voices and perspectives of children themselves remain underrepresented in the literature.

Research on social identity development in childhood frequently examines individual psychological processes or family influences, with limited attention to intercultural classroom dynamics (Rayas et al., 2025). Studies that do address peer interaction often treat cultural diversity as a background variable rather than a central analytical focus (Alghamdi et al., 2025). This approach constrains understanding of how group identities are actively constructed in diverse educational contexts.

A notable gap also exists in comparative and context-sensitive research that examines intercultural dynamics across different educational settings (Teo et al., 2025). Many studies are situated within specific national or cultural contexts, limiting the generalizability of findings (Kuyler et al., 2025). The lack of integrative frameworks connecting intercultural interaction, group identity, and educational practice highlights the need for research that bridges sociocultural and educational perspectives.

The novelty of this study lies in its child-centered examination of intercultural dynamics and group identity within everyday educational settings (E. Yu et al., 2026). By foregrounding children's interactions and social experiences, the research moves beyond policy discourse and adult-centered perspectives (Montero-Sieburth, 2025). This approach provides nuanced insights into how diversity is lived, negotiated, and sometimes contested at the classroom level.

Another innovative aspect of the study is its integration of sociocultural theory and educational research to analyze group identity formation (Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2024). Rather than treating identity as a fixed attribute, the study conceptualizes it as a dynamic process shaped through interaction, discourse, and social practice (Ishak et al., 2025). This perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural relations among children.

The justification for this research is grounded in the increasing urgency of fostering inclusive and cohesive educational environments (Desmarchelier et al., 2025). As societies become more culturally diverse, schools play a crucial role in shaping future citizens' attitudes toward difference and belonging. By illuminating how intercultural dynamics operate among children, this study contributes theoretically and practically to efforts aimed at promoting social inclusion, equity, and intercultural competence in education.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design to explore intercultural dynamics and group identity formation among children in diverse educational contexts (Nambiar & Arunachalam, 2025). The qualitative component was central to capturing the complexity of children's social interactions, meanings, and identity negotiations within multicultural classrooms. Meanwhile, the quantitative component supported the analysis by identifying broad patterns of interaction and group affiliation (Scorer & Vardy, 2025).

By combining these approaches, the design allowed for an in-depth examination of both observable behaviors and underlying social processes shaping intercultural relations among children. The qualitative-dominant framework ensured that rich narrative insights were

prioritized while being grounded by systematic quantitative patterns. Consequently, this methodological integration provided a holistic and nuanced understanding of how young learners navigate cultural differences and build group identities in daily school life.

Research Target/Subject

The population of the study consisted of children enrolled in upper primary grades within culturally diverse public schools (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2025). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select specific schools and classrooms that represented varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Evaldsson & Kyratzis, 2025). This target group was strategically selected to focus on a crucial developmental stage where peer relationships and social identity formation become increasingly prominent.

The research participants included children from different ethnic and cultural groups who interacted regularly within the same learning environments (S. Yu & Olğün-Baytaş, 2026). The final sample was deliberate and curated to ensure richness of data, reflecting a broad spectrum of intercultural experiences. By focusing on these specific subjects, the research effectively captured authentic daily interactions across diverse demographic groups within natural educational settings.

Research Procedure

The research procedures formally began with securing necessary ethical approvals and obtaining informed consent from school administrators, parents, and participating children. Following institutional clearance, preliminary observations were conducted in the selected classrooms. These initial visits allowed the researcher to become familiar with the classroom contexts and establish essential trust and rapport with the children prior to formal data gathering.

Once rapport was established, the primary data collection phase took place over several weeks during regular daily routines. Observations, semi-structured interviews, and sociometric mapping activities were carried out systematically without disrupting normal learning activities. The procedure followed an iterative approach, allowing data gathering activities to adjust adaptively to the natural rhythm and operational schedule of the participating schools.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Multiple instruments were utilized to collect comprehensive data on intercultural interaction and group identity. Classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation guide that specifically focused on peer interaction patterns, group formation, communication styles, and inclusion or exclusion behaviors. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were designed for both children and teachers to capture their nuanced perceptions of group belonging and cultural difference.

To complement these methods, reflective field notes and sociometric mapping tools were employed to document social networks and peer affiliations within classrooms. Data collection was carried out through systematic classroom observations, face-to-face interviews, and interactive sociometric activities embedded within regular school routines. This multi-technique strategy ensured triangulation, capturing both the explicit opinions and the implicit social structures of the participants.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with the data collection process to maintain analytical rigor and contextual sensitivity throughout the study. Qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews, field notes, and observational logs were subjected to thematic coding. This process involved identifying recurring themes, categories, and deep conceptual patterns regarding how children negotiate their identities and interact across cultural boundaries.

Simultaneously, the quantitative elements such as sociometric mapping data and structured observational frequencies were analyzed to map social networks and identify measurable interaction trends. The concurrent integration of thematic analysis with quantitative network patterns allowed for continuous cross-verification of findings. This dual analytical technique ensured that the final interpretations were deeply rooted in the participants’ lived classroom experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative data provide an overview of intercultural interaction patterns and group identity indicators among children in diverse educational settings. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize frequencies of intercultural contact, levels of perceived group belonging, and peer interaction preferences. The data reveal variability in children’s social affiliations, with notable differences between majority and minority group members in terms of interaction frequency and group cohesion.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics related to intercultural interaction and group identity indicators. The results show that children in culturally diverse classrooms engaged in both intra-group and inter-group interactions, although the frequency of same-cultural group interactions remained higher. Measures of perceived belonging and peer acceptance varied across cultural groups, indicating differentiated experiences of inclusion within the same educational contexts.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Intercultural Interaction and Group Identity Indicators

Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation
Frequency of intercultural interaction	3.42	0.78
Frequency of same-group interaction	4.15	0.64
Perceived group belonging	3.68	0.72
Peer acceptance	3.54	0.81

The descriptive statistics indicate that intercultural interaction occurred regularly but did not dominate children’s social engagement patterns. The higher mean score for same-group interaction suggests a tendency among children to affiliate with peers sharing similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds. This pattern reflects natural social grouping processes observed in early childhood social development.

Variations in perceived group belonging and peer acceptance highlight the unequal distribution of social inclusion across cultural groups. Children from minority backgrounds reported slightly lower levels of belonging, suggesting that intercultural proximity alone does not guarantee equal social integration. These findings underscore the importance of examining the quality, rather than mere presence, of intercultural interactions.

Qualitative observation data reveal distinct patterns of interaction within classroom and playground settings. Children frequently formed stable peer groups based on shared language, cultural familiarity, or prior friendships. These groups demonstrated strong internal cohesion but limited openness to cross-group participation during unstructured activities.

Structured classroom activities showed a different interaction pattern. Teacher-guided group work created more opportunities for intercultural collaboration, resulting in temporary mixed-group formations. Despite increased contact, interaction depth varied, with some children participating actively while others remained peripheral members of the group.

Inferential statistical analysis was conducted to examine differences in perceived group belonging between children from majority and minority cultural backgrounds. An independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 significance level. Majority-group children reported higher levels of group belonging compared to their minority peers.

Effect size analysis indicated a moderate effect, suggesting that cultural background plays a meaningful role in shaping children's social experiences within diverse educational contexts. These results provide empirical support for concerns regarding unequal inclusion and social positioning among children in multicultural classrooms.

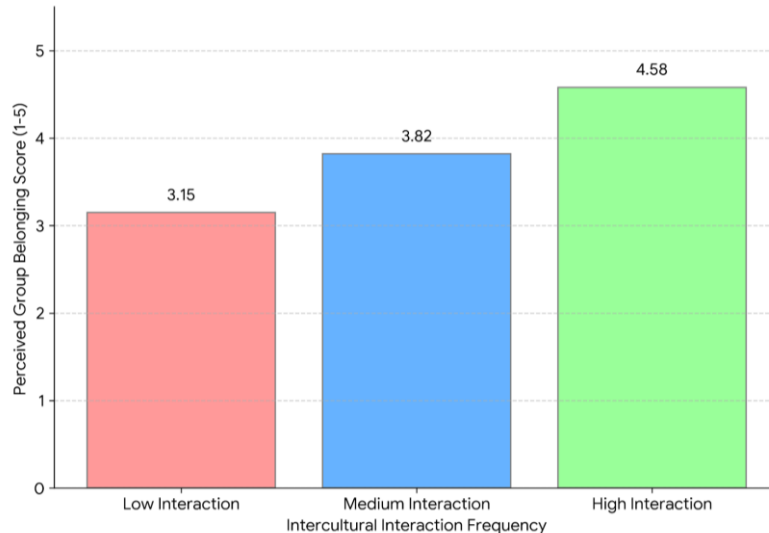


Figure 1. Correlation: Intercultural Interaction vs. Group Belonging

Correlation analysis was performed to explore relationships between intercultural interaction frequency and perceived group belonging. The results indicate a positive correlation, suggesting that increased intercultural contact is associated with higher levels of perceived belonging. Children who engaged more frequently with peers from different cultural backgrounds tended to report stronger feelings of inclusion.

The strength of the correlation, however, remained moderate, indicating that intercultural interaction alone does not fully explain variations in group identity. Other factors, such as peer acceptance, language proficiency, and teacher mediation, appear to influence the relationship between interaction patterns and group belonging.

A focused case study of one culturally mixed classroom illustrates the dynamics of group identity formation in daily practice. Observation of a small peer group revealed initial exclusion of a minority-background child during free-play activities. Over time, participation increased during structured learning tasks where roles were assigned and cooperation was required.

The case study also documents shifts in group boundaries following repeated collaborative activities. Peer interactions became more reciprocal, and the focal child was increasingly included in informal conversations and shared activities. These changes highlight the fluid and context-dependent nature of group identity among children.

The case study findings suggest that instructional structure significantly influences intercultural dynamics. Activities that required shared goals and interdependence reduced social distance between children from different cultural backgrounds. Teacher facilitation and explicit norms for cooperation supported more inclusive interaction patterns.

Unstructured contexts, however, continued to reproduce existing social boundaries. Without adult mediation, children reverted to familiar group affiliations. This contrast emphasizes the role of educational practices in shaping how intercultural relations are enacted and sustained within school environments.

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that intercultural dynamics among children are shaped by both social preferences and institutional contexts. Group identity formation emerges as a dynamic process influenced by interaction frequency, perceived acceptance, and pedagogical structures. Cultural diversity alone does not automatically lead to social integration.

The results suggest that inclusive group identity in diverse educational contexts requires intentional educational strategies. Schools play a crucial role in mediating intercultural encounters and supporting equitable participation among children. These findings provide empirical grounding for educational interventions aimed at fostering inclusive social environments in multicultural classrooms.



Figure 2. Unveiling Intercultural Dynamics in Education

The findings of this study demonstrate that intercultural dynamics among children in diverse educational contexts are complex, situational, and closely tied to patterns of group identity formation. Quantitative results indicate that while intercultural interactions occur regularly in multicultural classrooms, children tend to maintain stronger affiliations with peers from similar cultural backgrounds. These patterns reveal that exposure to diversity alone does not automatically result in inclusive social integration.

Qualitative observations further show that group identity among children is fluid and context-dependent. Structured classroom activities encouraged more intercultural engagement, whereas unstructured settings often reinforced existing social boundaries. Children's sense of belonging varied according to the nature of interaction, the level of peer acceptance, and the presence of adult mediation.

Differences in perceived group belonging between majority and minority cultural groups highlight uneven social experiences within the same educational environments. Minority-background children reported lower levels of acceptance and inclusion, indicating subtle processes of marginalization that may not be immediately visible in formal instructional contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that intercultural dynamics in childhood are shaped by both individual social preferences and institutional practices. Group identity emerges not as a fixed

attribute but as an ongoing social process negotiated through daily interactions in school settings.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research on social identity development, which emphasizes children's tendency to form in-groups based on perceived similarity. Studies in developmental psychology and sociology have long documented homophily as a common feature of peer relationships, particularly in early and middle childhood. The present findings reinforce this pattern within culturally diverse educational contexts.

Differences emerge when comparing this study with research that suggests diversity naturally promotes intercultural understanding. While some studies report positive outcomes associated with multicultural classrooms, the current findings indicate that such outcomes are conditional rather than automatic. Intercultural contact without structured support may reproduce social separation rather than reduce it.

Research in intercultural education has highlighted the role of pedagogy in fostering inclusion, a conclusion supported by the present study. Classroom practices that emphasize cooperation, shared goals, and guided interaction appear to mitigate social distance between cultural groups. This alignment strengthens the argument that educational interventions play a decisive role in shaping intercultural relations.

The contribution of this study lies in its focus on children's lived experiences and micro-level interactions. Unlike macro-level policy analyses, this research provides empirical insight into how intercultural dynamics unfold in everyday school life, offering a more nuanced understanding of group identity formation among children.

The findings signal that group identity formation begins early and is deeply influenced by social environments. Children actively interpret cultural cues, peer behavior, and institutional norms when constructing a sense of belonging. These processes reflect broader social patterns and indicate that identity negotiation is already well underway during primary school years.

Observed patterns of inclusion and exclusion suggest that social inequality can emerge subtly in educational settings. The experiences of minority-background children reveal early manifestations of marginalization that may shape long-term academic and social trajectories. These outcomes serve as indicators of how schools can either challenge or reproduce broader societal inequalities.

The study also reflects the importance of context in shaping social relations. Group identity shifted depending on activity structure, teacher involvement, and interaction demands. This variability suggests that identity is not static but responsive to environmental conditions and social expectations.

From a reflective standpoint, the results highlight education as a critical arena for socialization. Schools function not only as sites of academic learning but also as spaces where children learn how to relate to difference, negotiate boundaries, and define collective identities.

The findings carry important implications for educational practice in culturally diverse contexts. Teachers are encouraged to adopt pedagogical strategies that intentionally promote intercultural interaction and inclusive group formation. Classroom activities that require cooperation and shared responsibility can reduce social distance among children.

Curriculum developers may consider embedding intercultural learning objectives within daily instructional practices. Rather than treating diversity as an abstract concept, learning activities can be designed to engage children in meaningful interaction across cultural boundaries. Such approaches support both social and cognitive development.

School leaders and policymakers may draw on these findings to inform inclusion policies and teacher training programs. Professional development that equips educators with strategies for managing intercultural dynamics can enhance equity and social cohesion in schools.

The implications extend beyond education to broader societal goals. Early experiences of inclusion and belonging influence children's attitudes toward diversity later in life. Schools

therefore play a foundational role in shaping future citizens capable of participating constructively in pluralistic societies.

The tendency for children to form same-group affiliations can be explained through social identity theory. Identification with familiar groups provides a sense of security and belonging, particularly in environments perceived as socially complex. Cultural similarity offers children a predictable social framework for interaction.

Language proficiency and communication ease also contribute to observed interaction patterns. Children often gravitate toward peers with whom they can communicate effortlessly, reinforcing group boundaries based on linguistic familiarity (Miller & Schugurensky, 2025). This dynamic can unintentionally disadvantage children from minority language backgrounds.

The role of educational structure helps explain variation in intercultural interaction. Structured tasks that assign roles and emphasize cooperation create conditions for positive interdependence (Zhou et al., 2025). Such contexts reduce reliance on similarity-based grouping and encourage broader social engagement.

Teacher mediation further shapes outcomes by modeling inclusive norms and facilitating equitable participation (Pennacchia et al., 2025). Adult guidance supports children in navigating difference constructively, highlighting the importance of intentional pedagogical involvement in shaping social relations.

Future research may adopt longitudinal designs to examine how intercultural dynamics and group identity evolve over time (Cénat et al., 2025). Long-term studies could clarify whether early experiences of inclusion or exclusion have lasting effects on academic achievement and social development.

Comparative research across cultural and national contexts may deepen understanding of how institutional and societal factors influence intercultural interaction. Such studies would enhance the transferability of findings and contribute to global discussions on diversity in education.

Methodological expansion using social network analysis or discourse analysis could provide deeper insight into peer relationships and identity negotiation. These approaches may reveal subtle interaction patterns not captured through traditional observation methods.

Practical innovation remains essential for translating research into action. Continued experimentation with inclusive pedagogical models can support schools in responding effectively to cultural diversity. The findings of this study offer a foundation for developing educational practices that promote equity, belonging, and intercultural understanding among children.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is that intercultural dynamics and group identity among children are not solely determined by the presence of cultural diversity, but are shaped by patterns of interaction, peer acceptance, and educational structures. Children tended to form social groups based on cultural and linguistic familiarity, while inclusive group identities emerged primarily in contexts where interaction was intentionally structured and supported. This finding highlights that group identity in diverse classrooms is fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed or naturally inclusive.

The added value of this research lies in its conceptual and methodological contribution to the study of intercultural education in childhood. Conceptually, the study integrates sociocultural perspectives with social identity theory to explain how children negotiate belonging and difference in everyday school interactions. Methodologically, the use of a mixed qualitative approach combining observations, interviews, and sociometric mapping provides a nuanced and child-centered understanding of intercultural dynamics that is often absent in policy-oriented or adult-centered research.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. The study was conducted in a limited number of educational settings, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings across different cultural and institutional contexts. The cross-sectional nature of the data also limits conclusions about long-term identity development. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal and comparative designs, involve a broader range of educational contexts, and examine the impact of specific pedagogical interventions on intercultural relations and group identity formation over time.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used ChatGPT to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

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