

Nigerian Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Traditional Classroom Practices and the Promise of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) for Students' Sociocultural Development and Well-Being

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Abstract

Primary education in Nigeria continues to rely on traditional classroom practices such as rote memorisation, strict discipline, and teacher-centred instruction. While these reflect cultural values of respect and authority, they often limit pupil participation, emotional expression, and overall well-being. Despite increasing international attention to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Nigerian education policy and teacher training still prioritise academic achievement over socio-emotional growth. This study explored how socio-cultural norms influence classroom practices and examined teachers' perspectives on the relevance of SEL as a supportive instructional framework. A qualitative approach was adopted, combining document analysis of national education policies with interviews from five primary school teachers in Katsina State. Findings revealed that policy documents emphasise pedagogy and assessment but rarely address emotional or social competencies. Teachers viewed discipline as essential yet restrictive and recognised the importance of empathy and emotional support in classroom life. The study concludes that while traditional norms remain influential, teachers show readiness to integrate SEL into practice to enhance learning and well-being.

Keywords: Traditional Pedagogy, Social And Emotional Learning (SEL), Teacher Development, Classroom Well-Being

Introduction

Formal classroom practices in Nigeria have historically been shaped by cultural norms that emphasise teacher authority, obedience, and strict discipline, resulting in classrooms where pupils are expected to listen quietly and reproduce information rather than question or explore it. These practices draw on deeply rooted socio-cultural values such as respect for elders, communal hierarchy, and the perception of learning as a serious, controlled activity (Okpara & Ezeador, 2024). While such approaches help maintain order and curriculum

coverage, they also limit opportunities for creativity, learner voice, emotional expression, and critical thinking (Chukwuemeka et al., 2025; Adamu et al., 2020).

Within teacher education, these traditional norms are reproduced through lecture-based instruction, limited modelling of interactive strategies, and inadequate emphasis on emotional competence (Chukwuemeka et al., 2025). At the same time, contextual constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional resources, and exam-driven teaching further reinforce teacher-centred methods even when teachers are aware of more engaging pedagogical approaches (Abdullahi, 2022). Research in Nigerian and African contexts shows that although play-based and socio-emotionally responsive teaching improves cognitive and emotional development, these innovations often fail to take root due to rigid curricula and societal expectations that associate learning with discipline and seriousness (Moland, 2017).

These long-standing patterns have significant implications for classroom wellbeing. Teachers frequently experience stress, emotional fatigue, and burnout from managing large classes with limited support, while pupils commonly present low motivation, anxiety, or disengagement (Akinola & Johnson, 2025). Yet, national policy documents such as the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013) continue to prioritise academic outcomes over socio-emotional wellbeing, offering limited guidance on how teachers might integrate emotional support into their daily practice. This policy–practice gap underscores the need to explore approaches that balance cultural expectations with relational and emotional dimensions of learning.

Globally, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a transformative framework for improving classroom relationships, fostering empathy, and strengthening teacher–pupil connections (Wolf et al., 2018). However, there is limited understanding of how SEL aligns with Nigeria’s socio-cultural context or how teachers perceive SEL within traditional classroom structures. In Northern Nigeria in particular, strong cultural expectations of hierarchy and respect may shape how teachers define discipline, emotional expression, and appropriate behaviour. Thus, examining SEL within this unique cultural environment is critical for informing relevant teacher development initiatives.

This study therefore explores how socio-cultural norms shape traditional classroom practices in Nigerian primary schools and examines teachers’ perceptions of SEL as a pathway for improving classroom wellbeing. By combining document analysis with insights from practicing teachers in Katsina State, the study provides a grounded understanding of the tensions teachers navigate as they balance cultural expectations with the emotional needs of learners.

Although research has examined discipline, rote learning, and teacher-centred methods, no previous study has connected these socio-cultural norms to teachers’ perceptions of SEL in this region. This work provides the first qualitative evidence showing how cultural expectations influence teachers’ emotional practices and openness to SEL.

SEL research in Africa largely applies Western frameworks or focuses narrowly on program outcomes.

This study advances the field by demonstrating how SEL can be adapted to Nigerian cultural values such as respect, harmony, patience, and communal relationships, offering a culturally grounded understanding that has been missing from the literature.

The findings reveal specific cultural and emotional barriers that limit effective teaching, stress, emotional strain, lack of policy support which current teacher training programs do not address. The study therefore provides evidence-based recommendations for integrating SEL into teacher education in ways that align with Nigerian norms, making it an important contribution to education reform and teacher competence development.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore how traditional classroom practices in Nigerian primary schools, shaped by long-standing cultural values of respect, hierarchy, and teacher authority, influence the wellbeing of both teachers and pupils. It also examines how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can serve as a constructive framework for improving classroom relationships and promoting emotionally supportive learning environments. The study seeks to understand how cultural expectations shape daily classroom interactions and emotional expression, as well as the challenges teachers encounter when trying to balance discipline with care. Using insights from policy documents and teachers' lived experiences, this paper highlights the limitations of teacher-centred methods while pointing to the transformative potential of SEL in nurturing empathy, collaboration, and emotional resilience. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how SEL can be meaningfully adapted to Nigeria's cultural and educational context to enhance teacher competence, strengthen pupil wellbeing, and support more holistic approaches to teaching and learning.

Research Objectives

1. **To examine** how traditional classroom practices in Nigerian primary schools are influenced by socio-cultural norms such as respect for authority, hierarchy, and communal values.
2. **To explore** the relationship between these socio-cultural influences and the overall wellbeing of teachers and pupils within classroom settings.
3. **To investigate** teachers' perceptions of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a potential framework for fostering emotional awareness, empathy, and positive classroom relationships.
4. **To analyse** how integrating SEL principles into classroom practices could support both teacher and pupil wellbeing, and contribute to more inclusive and emotionally responsive learning environments.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study was conducted in Katsina State, Nigeria, involving five primary school teachers selected through purposive sampling. The teachers represented both urban and semi-rural government primary schools under the Katsina State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB). Each participant had a minimum of five years of teaching experience and held either a Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) or a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), aligning with the national teacher qualification requirements. The researcher personally conducted all semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, either face-to-face or via online conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability. Each interview

was recorded with the participants' full consent and accompanying field notes were kept capture important details, such as the setting, tone, and non-verbal expressions that enriched the interpretation of data. These interviews were complemented by document analysis of national education policies and curriculum frameworks, ensuring triangulation between policy intentions and teachers lived classroom experiences.

Document Analysis

A range of official documents including the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013), the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Curriculum Framework, and selected Teacher Professional Development manuals were reviewed to examine how emotional wellbeing, inclusion, and social competence are addressed in Nigerian education policy. The analysis concentrated on uncovering recurring patterns concerning pedagogical approaches, methods of classroom management, teacher responsibilities, and the extent to which emotional and social learning dimensions were addressed within policy and practice.

Participants

Participants' Background

Five primary school teachers from Katsina State, Nigeria, participated in the study. They were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus on classroom practices, wellbeing, and socio-emotional learning. The selection criteria required that each teacher have at least five years of continuous classroom experience, providing sufficient professional maturity and reflective capacity. Participants represented both urban and semi-rural schools, allowing for comparison between differing educational contexts within the same region.

The group consisted of three male and two female teachers, reflecting a balanced gender distribution commonly observed in the state's public primary schools. All participants held either a Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) or Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), meeting the national standard set by the Teacher Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), which recognises the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) as the minimum qualification for primary school teaching. They had prior exposure to classroom management or guidance and counselling practices, either through formal training or school-based professional development.

Collectively, this diverse sample offered valuable insights into how contextual realities such as school environment, teacher experience, and socio-cultural expectations shape emotional expression, pedagogical style, and teacher–pupil relationships. The mix of backgrounds also allowed for a richer understanding of how both seasoned and relatively younger teachers navigate the challenges of maintaining authority, managing pupil behaviour, and fostering socio-emotional wellbeing within traditional Nigerian classroom settings.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for this study was carried out in two complementary phases: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. This combination allowed for both a policy-level understanding of teaching practices and firsthand insights from teachers' lived experiences. In the first phase, relevant national and institutional policy documents were reviewed, including the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013), Universal Basic Education (UBE) Framework, and Teacher Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) Professional Standards. The

aim was to examine how these documents frame teacher roles, classroom management expectations, and references (if any) to emotional or socio-relational competencies. This analysis provided the contextual foundation for interpreting teachers' perspectives within broader systemic and policy constraints.

The second phase involved Semi-structured interviews were carried out among five purposively selected primary school teachers who shared detailed reflections on their classroom practices, emotional experiences, and perceptions of pupil wellbeing. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and took place either face-face or virtually, depending on the participants' availability and convenience. secure online platforms, depending on school schedules and accessibility. The interview protocol covered key areas such as teachers' classroom practices, perceptions of pupil wellbeing, challenges of implementing learner-centred methods, and awareness of socio-emotional learning principles. Open-ended questions encouraged reflection and detailed responses, while follow-up probes helped clarify meanings and elicit deeper insights.

All interviews were conducted in either English or Hausa, based on each participant's language preference, to promote comfort and clear communication. With their consent, each session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed word-for-word to allow for a thorough and accurate thematic analysis. In addition, field notes were maintained throughout the interviews to document non-verbal cues, classroom context, and researcher reflections that enriched the interpretation of the data. The combination of document analysis and teacher interviews ensured data triangulation, enhancing the study's credibility and providing a holistic understanding of how traditional classroom practices, socio-cultural norms, and emotional factors intersect in Nigerian primary education.

Table 1

Integration of Interview Question Mapping, Data Analysis, and Trustworthiness Interview Question Mapping to Research Objectives

Research Objective (RO)	Sample Interview Questions	Purpose/Expected Insight
RO1: To examine how traditional classroom practices are influenced by socio-cultural norms such as respect for authority, hierarchy, and communal values.	1. How would you describe a "good" pupil in your classroom? 2. How do cultural values like respect and obedience shape the way you manage your classroom?	To explore how teachers' beliefs about respect, hierarchy, and obedience influence classroom control, communication, and pupil participation.
RO2: To explore the relationship between socio-cultural influences and the overall wellbeing of teachers and pupils.	1. How do classroom rules and expectations affect how pupils behave or feel during lessons? 2. What challenges do you face in maintaining order and supporting pupils' emotional needs?	To provide insight into classroom climate, teacher stress, and pupil confidence under strict discipline.
RO3: To investigate teachers' perceptions of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a potential framework for fostering emotional	1. What do you understand by emotional learning or empathy in teaching? 2. Do you think Nigerian classrooms can benefit from training teachers to understand pupils' emotions?	To identify teachers' awareness, attitudes, and openness toward SEL and its relevance to their teaching practice.

Research Objective (RO)	Sample Interview Questions	Purpose/Expected Insight
awareness and positive relationships. RO4: To analyse how integrating SEL principles into classroom practices could support teacher and pupil wellbeing.	1. What changes would you like to see in how teachers and pupils interact? 2. How might teaching be improved if teachers had more training in social-emotional skills?	To generate practical insights and reform suggestions linking SEL to improved wellbeing and teaching effectiveness.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which includes *data reduction*, *data display*, and *conclusion drawing/verification*.

1. Data Reduction: Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed to identify relevant statements. Codes were generated to represent emerging concepts such as "discipline and hierarchy," "emotional strain," and "openness to SEL."
2. Data Display: The codes were organised into a thematic matrix that aligned with each research objective. This helped visualise patterns and relationships across teacher responses and document analysis data.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Themes were refined and validated through iterative comparison. Triangulation between document analysis and interview findings enhanced the robustness of interpretations.

This process resulted in three overarching themes: (1) Discipline and Hierarchical Relationships, (2) Emotional Needs and Teacher Wellbeing, and (3) Growing Openness to SEL Practices.

Table 2

Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the study adopted the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1994):

Criterion	Strategy Applied	Application in This Study
Credibility	Triangulation of multiple data sources and member checking	Data from document analysis and interviews were compared for consistency; participants reviewed their transcript summaries for accuracy.
Dependability	Documentation of coding procedures and audit trail	Each analytical step, including coding, theme development, and interpretation, was documented for transparency and replicability.
Confirmability	Reflexive journaling to reduce researcher bias	The researcher maintained a reflexive log noting assumptions, decisions, and reflections during analysis.
Transferability	Thick contextual description	Detailed accounts of teacher background, school type, and cultural context enable readers to judge relevance to similar settings.

This structured approach ensures the reliability, transparency, and academic integrity of the study's qualitative findings.

Findings And Discussions

The study employed systematic document analysis and semi-structured interviews with five practicing primary school teachers to examine how socio-cultural values influence classroom practices and teacher–pupil well-being. The analysis explored how socio-cultural traditions influence classroom practices, affect teacher–pupil well-being, and how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) might offer reform potential. Three interrelated themes emerged: (1) Discipline and Hierarchy in Classroom Culture, (2) Emotional Needs and Well-being, and (3) Openness to SEL as Transformative Pedagogy.

Theme 1: Discipline and Hierarchy in Classroom Culture

Description

Explain how respect for authority and strict discipline define traditional Nigerian classrooms. Teachers rely heavily on control, recitation, and obedience (Hardman et al., 2008). Cultural values of hierarchy and seniority reinforce teacher-centred instruction.

Interview Insight

"Here, children are expected to listen respectfully and avoid talking back to adults that's how we were raised and how we teach."

(Teacher 3) reflects the deep-rooted socio-cultural expectation in many Nigerian classrooms that pupils demonstrate respect through silence and compliance. This hierarchical pattern of interaction places the teacher at the centre of authority, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is transmitted in a one-way flow from teacher to pupil. While such practices sustain classroom order and align with societal values of obedience and deference to elders, they inadvertently limit opportunities for critical thinking, creativity, and self-expression among learners.

Adamu et al. (2020) similarly observed that teacher-centred instruction dominates Nigerian primary schools, with pupils expected to absorb rather than question information. Likewise, Okpara and Ezeador (2024) argue that this pattern stems from the philosophical roots of traditional education, where learning was seen as imitation rather than exploration. Although these norms maintain social cohesion, they can suppress curiosity and reduce learners' confidence to engage in dialogic exchanges.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, effective learning occurs through social interaction and dialogue within the learner's *zone of proximal development*. In this context, the teacher's role should evolve from that of an authoritarian transmitter to a facilitator who scaffolds learning through meaningful communication. Encouraging dialogue allows pupils to articulate understanding, negotiate meaning, and internalize knowledge through shared experiences. Thus, while the teacher's authority remains culturally important, creating space for learner voice and interaction can enhance both cognitive development and socio-emotional growth.

*Theme 2: Emotional Needs and Well-Being of Teachers and Pupils**Description*

Highlight how traditional discipline often overlooks emotional dimensions of teaching and learning.

Many teachers described feeling emotionally drained by the pressure to maintain discipline in large, demanding classrooms. Pupils, in turn, often appeared anxious or disengaged, reflecting a lack of emotional support and understanding.

“Sometimes I feel bad shouting at pupils, but if I don’t, the class becomes noisy.” (Teacher 1)

This tension illustrates how the emphasis on authority and obedience can undermine both teacher and pupil wellbeing. Similar to findings by Akinola and Johnson (2025) and Soffer-Vital and Finkelstein (2024), limited emotional awareness and inadequate training in behaviour management contribute to stress and burnout among teachers. Without structures that prioritise empathy, self-regulation, and relational skills, classrooms may become emotionally rigid, reducing motivation and connectedness. Integrating socio-emotional practices could help teachers manage stress constructively and create a more supportive, caring learning environment for pupils.

Document Analysis

Policy documents (FGN 2013; NERDC curriculum) prioritise academic achievement with little mention of emotional well-being.

*Theme 3: Openness to SEL as a Transformative Pedagogy**Description*

Teachers expressed growing curiosity about integrating SEL principles empathy, self-awareness, and relationship-building into lessons. SEL seen as compatible with local moral values of cooperation, respect, and community. Teachers believe it could make classrooms calmer and improve relationships.

Interview Insight

Despite the dominance of traditional methods, many teachers expressed openness to adopting Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies, recognising their potential to improve classroom relationships and reduce stress. Teacher 2 noted,

“If we can be trained to handle emotions ours and pupils’ teaching will be easier and more peaceful.”

This indicates an increasing recognition that psychological awareness and empathy are crucial for effective pedagogy. Teachers viewed SEL not as a foreign concept but as compatible with cultural values such as patience, respect, and communal harmony. These findings align with Agbo, (2022), who found that SEL interventions enhance teachers’ emotional regulation and create more positive classroom climates.

Across the three themes, a consistent pattern emerges: Nigerian primary classrooms remain strongly shaped by cultural norms of authority and discipline, yet teachers are increasingly aware of the emotional dimensions of teaching and learning. Traditional practices provide structure and respect but often limit pupil participation and emotional expression, as shown

in Theme 1. Meanwhile, Theme 2 highlights that both teachers and pupils struggle with emotional strain in environments where wellbeing is undervalued. However, Theme 3 reveals a readiness among teachers to embrace SEL principles as a means of restoring balance preserving respect while fostering empathy, self-regulation, and supportive communication. Together, these insights suggest that integrating SEL into teacher professional development could bridge the gap between cultural expectations and contemporary educational needs, promoting classrooms that are both disciplined and emotionally responsive.

Acknowledgement

The research promotes the insertion of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into teacher education and ongoing professional development programs in Nigeria. Training should prioritise emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship management to improve instructional effectiveness, cultivate positive teacher-student dynamics, and create emotionally supportive classroom environments. Educational authorities, including UBEC, should promote culturally relevant social-emotional learning frameworks that integrate discipline with emotional support. Improving teachers' social and emotional competencies would foster more inclusive, empathic, and effective learning environments in Nigerian primary schools.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that traditional classroom practices in Nigerian primary schools are deeply shaped by socio-cultural values that emphasise respect, hierarchy, and obedience. While these norms help maintain discipline and order, they also limit pupil participation, emotional expression, and opportunities for collaborative learning. The interviews showed that teachers often rely on strict, teacher-centred methods because of cultural expectations, classroom pressures, and limited professional support. However, this approach places emotional strain on both teachers and pupils and contributes to stress, burnout, and strained teacher–pupil relationships.

Despite these constraints, the findings also reveal a clear openness among teachers to adopt practices aligned with Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Teachers expressed interest in building empathy, emotional regulation, and stronger relationships with pupils, recognising that such skills can make classrooms calmer, more inclusive, and more supportive. Importantly, teachers viewed SEL not as a foreign concept but as compatible with cultural values such as patience, respect, communal harmony, and cooperation. These perspectives suggest that SEL can serve as a culturally relevant bridge between traditional expectations and modern educational needs.

The document analysis further showed that Nigerian education policies continue to prioritise academic outcomes over socio-emotional wellbeing, offering little guidance on how teachers might integrate emotional or relational competencies into classroom practice. This policy practice gap, combined with teachers' emotional pressures and lack of structured SEL support, underscores the need for professional development initiatives that intentionally incorporate SEL principles alongside pedagogy.

Overall, this study contributes new knowledge by providing one of the first context-specific examinations of how socio-cultural norms in Northern Nigeria shape teachers'

emotional experiences and openness to SEL. It highlights the potential for SEL to transform classroom practices by balancing cultural expectations of respect and discipline with relational, reflective, and emotionally responsive teaching. Embedding SEL into teacher education and ongoing professional development could strengthen teacher competence, enhance pupil wellbeing, and support more holistic approaches to teaching and learning in Nigerian primary schools.

Future work should explore how culturally adapted SEL programs can be scaled within resource-limited school systems, and how long-term support such as mentoring, reflective practice, and policy alignment can sustain meaningful change. This study provides a foundation for designing interventions that are both contextually grounded and pedagogically transformative.

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