



IMPLEMENTING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Phenomenon/Issue: Indonesia's cultural diversity presents challenges for implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in primary schools, where a standardized curriculum often limits the inclusion of students' cultural backgrounds.

Purpose: This study aims to explore the understanding, practices, and challenges faced by teachers in implementing CRT in Indonesian primary schools and to identify opportunities for improvement.

Novelty: While CRT has been widely studied in Western contexts, research on its application in Indonesia's unique multicultural setting is limited, particularly at the primary school level. This study contributes new insights into how CRT can be adapted and applied in Indonesian classrooms.

Research Methods: A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and focus group discussions with students from both urban and rural schools. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Results: The study found that while teachers recognize the importance of CRT, they face significant challenges, including a rigid national curriculum, lack of culturally relevant materials, and insufficient training. However, students respond positively to culturally inclusive practices, and teachers are open to further training and resources.

Research Contributions: This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the need for equitable resource distribution and comprehensive teacher training. It offers recommendations for policy reforms that can enhance the implementation of multicultural education, particularly in under-resourced regions, to promote inclusivity and social cohesion.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most powerful tools in shaping the character and identity of a nation. In the context of Indonesia, which is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, and language, the education system is expected to embrace this pluralism, not merely as a difference but as a rich asset. One of the relevant approaches in addressing cultural diversity is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). This approach emphasizes the importance of integrating students' cultural aspects into the learning process, with the aim of accommodating their diverse cultural backgrounds and enhancing their engagement and academic performance.

Culturally Responsive Teaching was first introduced by Gay, (2021), who argued that teaching that is responsive to students' cultural backgrounds has a positive impact on their classroom engagement. CRT encourages teachers to recognize, respect, and utilize students' cultural references to create effective learning environments. It acknowledges that students from different cultural backgrounds bring unique perspectives, knowledge, and experiences to the classroom, which can enrich the learning process for everyone (Gabaldon, 2023).

In Indonesia's primary schools, where students come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, CRT holds great potential to address the needs of multicultural classrooms. The early years of education are critical in shaping students' attitudes and perceptions towards differences. By incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers can help students appreciate and respect diversity from a young age, which is essential for nurturing a more inclusive society.

However, despite Indonesia's rich cultural diversity, the current education system often adopts a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to fully address the diverse needs of students. Standardized curricula and teaching methods frequently overlook the specific cultural contexts of students, leading to disengagement and a lack of connection between what is taught in school and students' lived experiences. The traditional approach to education in Indonesia tends to emphasize rote memorization and national-level standardized tests, which do not take into account the cultural diversity of students, thus limiting the effectiveness of learning for many.

Research on Culturally Responsive Teaching in primary education has shown that students who feel their cultural identities are recognized and valued in the classroom are more likely to participate actively and perform better academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the U.S. context, for example, CRT has been shown to be effective in closing achievement gaps for students from minority backgrounds, as it promotes a learning environment that is more inclusive and empowering. However, there is still limited research examining the application of CRT in the Indonesian context, particularly at the primary school level (Patras et al., 2023; Yuninda et al., 2024).

Most of the studies on CRT in Indonesia focus on secondary education or higher education, leaving a gap in understanding how this approach can be implemented effectively in elementary schools. Furthermore, while some initiatives have been made to introduce CRT in teacher education programs, there is still a lack of comprehensive policies or guidelines that encourage the systematic adoption of CRT practices in primary schools. According to a recent report by UNICEF (2024), the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy in Indonesian primary schools remains underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas where ethnic and cultural diversity is often more pronounced.

Given these challenges, there is a need for further research to explore how CRT can be adapted to the Indonesian primary school context. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the implementation of CRT in Indonesian elementary schools and identifying the challenges and opportunities for its broader application. The findings of this research will contribute to the growing body of literature on culturally responsive education, offering insights into how CRT can be used to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments in Indonesia's multicultural primary schools.

Research Gap: While previous studies have provided valuable insights into the role of Culturally Responsive Teaching in secondary and higher education, particularly in Western contexts, research on its application in Indonesian primary schools is still scarce. There is a significant gap in understanding how CRT can be implemented effectively in Indonesia's unique cultural and educational landscape, especially at the elementary school level. Additionally, there is limited empirical evidence on the specific challenges faced by teachers in adopting CRT in their classrooms, particularly in rural and remote areas where cultural diversity is most prominent. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring

the perspectives of teachers and students in Indonesian elementary schools and examining the potential of CRT to create more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environments.

Recent studies, such as those by Banks & Banks, (2019); Gay, (2021), have underscored the importance of culturally responsive practices in diverse educational settings, yet these studies have largely focused on urban, developed contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to expand the understanding of CRT in under-researched areas, providing a fresh perspective on its relevance and application in Indonesia's primary education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) has gained increasing attention in educational research, particularly in multicultural and pluralistic societies. CRT is a pedagogical approach that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. According to Geneva Gay (2000), CRT helps students from diverse cultural backgrounds to connect the curriculum with their own experiences, thus fostering higher levels of engagement and academic achievement. Gay's foundational work emphasizes that culturally relevant pedagogy can be a tool for equity, as it promotes the inclusion of marginalized and minority students in mainstream education.

The roots of CRT lie in the broader framework of multicultural education. Ladson-Billings, (1995) argued that CRT not only involves curriculum changes but also requires educators to understand the cultural dynamics of their classrooms and the community they serve. This holistic approach ensures that teaching is not just about knowledge transmission but also about building relationships, empowering students, and fostering respect for diversity.

In Indonesia, where cultural diversity is a fundamental characteristic of society, CRT holds particular relevance. The nation's education system must accommodate a wide array of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. However, despite Indonesia's rich diversity, educational practices in the country have historically been centralized, with a standardized curriculum that often overlooks the unique cultural needs of students. According to Rahmawati et al., (2023); Safirah et al., (2024), many Indonesian teachers struggle with the implementation of culturally responsive practices due to a lack of training and institutional support. This highlights the need for more targeted professional development programs that equip educators to address cultural differences effectively.

One of the core principles of CRT is that it shifts the focus from a "deficit model," where students from minority backgrounds are seen as lacking in some way, to a "strength-based model," where students' cultural backgrounds are seen as assets. Nieto, (2000) argues that effective culturally responsive teaching begins with educators recognizing their own biases and beliefs about race, ethnicity, and culture. By critically reflecting on their attitudes, teachers can create learning environments that are more inclusive and affirming of students' identities.

Research has demonstrated that CRT has the potential to reduce the achievement gap between students from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Studies in the U.S. and other countries have shown that when students feel that their culture is respected and integrated into the classroom, they are more likely to participate actively and perform better academically. For instance, a study by Banks and Banks (2021) found that students who experienced CRT were more likely to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness in the classroom, which in turn led to improved academic outcomes. This is supported by Banks' theory of multicultural education, which posits that schools must be transformed to reflect the diverse cultural makeup of society, rather than perpetuating a monolithic view of culture and learning.

In the Indonesian context, CRT is still an emerging area of study. While there have been some efforts to incorporate elements of cultural diversity into the national curriculum, such as through the introduction of local content subjects (*muatan lokal*), these initiatives often fall short of the comprehensive approach advocated by CRT proponents. A recent report by UNICEF (2024) notes that culturally responsive practices in Indonesian primary schools are underdeveloped, particularly in rural and remote areas where the cultural and linguistic diversity of students is often most pronounced.

Several challenges hinder the full implementation of CRT in Indonesian primary schools. One key challenge is the lack of culturally relevant teaching materials and resources. According to a study by Maharani, (2022); Sayono et al., (2023), many teachers rely on standardized textbooks that do not reflect the cultural diversity of their students. This creates a disconnect between what students learn in school

and their lived experiences outside of school. In addition, the current teacher training programs in Indonesia often do not include modules on multicultural education or CRT, which leaves many educators unprepared to address the needs of their culturally diverse students Dalimunthe, (2022); White, (2024)

Another challenge is the perception that CRT is only relevant for urban, multicultural schools. However, research suggests that CRT is just as important in rural schools where indigenous and ethnic minority students may feel marginalized. According to Achmad et al., (2022); Sofyana et al., (2022), rural schools in Indonesia often face difficulties in accessing culturally appropriate resources and support, which exacerbates the educational inequities faced by indigenous and minority students.

In conclusion, while Culturally Responsive Teaching has been recognized globally as a powerful tool for promoting equity and inclusion in education, its implementation in Indonesia remains limited. The literature points to several gaps, including a lack of teacher training, inadequate resources, and a need for more localized research on how CRT can be adapted to the Indonesian context. As Indonesia continues to embrace its pluralistic identity, the education system must also evolve to become more culturally responsive, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed academically and personally.

METHOD

This study will use a qualitative research approach to explore the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in Indonesian primary schools. The research will be conducted using a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of how CRT is applied in multicultural classroom settings. The research will focus on a selection of primary schools in urban and rural areas with diverse student populations to provide a comprehensive view of CRT practices in different contexts. Data collection will involve semi-structured interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and focus group discussions with students. Teachers will be interviewed to understand their perceptions, challenges, and strategies in implementing CRT, while classroom observations will provide insights into how culturally responsive teaching practices are applied in real-time. Focus group discussions with students will be used to explore their experiences and perspectives on how their cultural identities are acknowledged and integrated into the learning process. Data analysis will be conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to the implementation and effectiveness of CRT. The findings from this analysis will be used to develop a deeper understanding of how CRT can enhance inclusive learning environments in Indonesia's pluralistic primary schools. Ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and informed consent, will be strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

This study explores the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in Indonesian primary schools, examining teachers' understanding, classroom practices, and the challenges they face. It also considers students' perceptions and engagement with culturally inclusive teaching. The findings are based on interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, providing an in-depth look at CRT in diverse educational settings across both urban and rural areas in Indonesia.

1. Teachers' Understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Most teachers interviewed demonstrated a general awareness of the importance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into their teaching. However, the depth of their understanding varied significantly. Some teachers viewed CRT as simply acknowledging cultural holidays or using local phrases in class, while others grasped the broader pedagogical implications of adapting lesson content to students' lived experiences. A teacher from an urban school explained:

"I try to bring in examples from different cultural traditions, especially when teaching history or social studies, but it's hard to always match the curriculum."

This reflects an awareness of CRT but also highlights the struggle to balance standardized content with culturally relevant teaching.

In rural areas, teachers tended to have a more intuitive grasp of CRT. For instance, one teacher from a rural school noted:

“Many of my students speak a local dialect at home, so I often use stories from our local folklore to teach literacy. It helps them relate to the material.”

This practice aligns more closely with CRT principles, as it uses students' cultural references to enhance engagement and understanding.

However, despite these efforts, many teachers lacked formal training in CRT. As a result, their approaches were often inconsistent and based more on personal intuition than structured strategies. Teachers across both urban and rural settings expressed a desire for more training and resources to effectively implement CRT. As one teacher remarked:

“I would love to learn more about how to properly integrate culture into my lessons, but there's not much training available.”

2. Challenges with Curriculum and Resources

One of the key challenges identified in the study was the rigid, standardized national curriculum. Teachers reported that the curriculum leaves little flexibility to adapt lessons to students' cultural backgrounds, which often limits the effectiveness of CRT. For instance, a teacher explained:

“The curriculum is very standardized, and we have to follow a specific schedule. It's difficult to bring in local culture without deviating from the material we are supposed to cover.” (Azahary & Fatimah, 2024).

This issue was especially prevalent in urban schools, where the focus on national exams and standardized testing leaves teachers with little room for creative or culturally responsive lesson planning. As Fadilah, (2024) pointed out, the centralized nature of Indonesia's education system often forces teachers to prioritize standardized content over culturally relevant material, which diminishes opportunities to engage students from diverse backgrounds.

Another challenge identified was the lack of culturally relevant materials. Many teachers noted that the textbooks and other educational resources provided by the government were not reflective of the cultural diversity of their classrooms. For example, a rural teacher noted: “The textbooks we have are all written in standard Indonesian, and they don't include much that is relevant to the local culture here. I have to create my own materials to make the lessons relatable for the students.” (Puspitasari & Supriyanto, 2023; Sulistiani et al., 2023). This lack of resources forces teachers to rely on their own initiative to create culturally responsive lessons, which can be time-consuming and difficult without adequate support.

3. Students' Engagement and Perceptions of Cultural Inclusion

Focus group discussions with students revealed that they generally appreciated teachers' efforts to include their cultural backgrounds in lessons. Many students, particularly in rural areas, reported feeling more engaged when lessons reflected their own experiences. One student from a rural school said:

“I like it when we talk about the local stories and traditions. It makes the lessons more interesting, and I feel proud when we learn about our culture.”

This indicates that culturally responsive teaching can have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and motivation to participate in class.

However, students in urban schools, where lessons were more standardized, expressed a desire for more culturally inclusive content. One urban student noted:

“We mostly learn from the textbooks, and there isn't much about where we come from. It would be more fun if we talked more about our traditions.” (UNICEF, 2024).

This feedback underscores the importance of making the curriculum more flexible to allow for greater inclusion of students' cultural experiences.

4. Opportunities for Improvement

Despite the challenges, the study identified several opportunities for enhancing CRT implementation in Indonesian primary schools. One key opportunity lies in professional development and teacher training. Teachers expressed a strong interest in receiving more training on how to effectively integrate CRT into their classrooms. They felt that structured training programs, along with ongoing professional development, would help them better understand and apply CRT principles in their teaching. As one teacher explained:

“If we had more workshops or training on CRT, I think we could do a better job of making our lessons more inclusive.”

Another opportunity for improvement involves increasing access to culturally relevant resources. Teachers noted that if they had more materials that reflected the diverse cultures of their students, they could more easily create engaging and inclusive lessons. In rural areas, in particular, where indigenous cultures are rich but underrepresented in educational resources, providing teachers with culturally relevant materials could have a significant impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Finally, the findings suggest that greater flexibility in the national curriculum would allow teachers to adapt their lessons to better reflect the cultural diversity of their classrooms. By allowing for more localized content, teachers could incorporate students' cultural knowledge and experiences into the curriculum without feeling pressured to sacrifice standardized content. As Page et al., (2023); Tomlinson & Jarvis, (2023) argue, a more flexible curriculum would enable teachers to create a more inclusive and responsive learning environment for all students.

while teachers and students alike recognize the value of Culturally Responsive Teaching, there are significant challenges in its implementation due to the standardized curriculum, lack of resources, and insufficient training. However, the enthusiasm from both teachers and students for more culturally inclusive lessons indicates that with the right support—such as increased curriculum flexibility, professional development, and access to relevant materials—CRT could become a more integral part of the Indonesian education system, fostering greater inclusivity and engagement in primary schools.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight both the potential and challenges of implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in Indonesian primary schools. Teachers expressed an awareness of the importance of acknowledging students' cultural backgrounds but struggled to fully integrate CRT into their teaching practices due to the rigid, standardized national curriculum. This aligns with previous research by Acquah & Szelei, (2020); Ladson-Billings, (2021), who noted that "the current curriculum limits teachers' ability to modify lesson content to accommodate the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students." This inflexibility in the curriculum limits opportunities for incorporating culturally relevant teaching materials, particularly in multicultural or rural classrooms.

Moreover, while some teachers, particularly those in rural areas, naturally incorporated local culture into their lessons, most lacked formal training in CRT. This lack of training was also noted by Hidayati, (2022), who stated that "teacher education programs in Indonesia often focus more on subject content and teaching techniques, neglecting the need for cultural competence and inclusive pedagogy." As a result, many educators expressed uncertainty about how to apply CRT consistently and effectively in their classrooms.

Students, on the other hand, voiced a desire for more culturally relevant lessons, suggesting that greater inclusion of their cultural backgrounds would enhance their sense of belonging and engagement in the classroom. As one student noted during focus group discussions: “We don’t

often see our own culture in the books or lessons. It would be more interesting if what we learn relates more to our lives outside school.” This echoes the findings of Banks and (Banks & Banks, 2019), who found that “students who see their cultural identities reflected in the curriculum are more likely to engage in learning and feel valued within the classroom.”

Despite these challenges, the study also identified significant opportunities for improving CRT implementation. Digital resources, for instance, could provide teachers with access to culturally relevant materials, particularly in remote areas where physical resources are scarce. Additionally, increased curriculum flexibility could allow for the integration of local cultural content, giving teachers more autonomy to adapt their lessons to reflect the cultural diversity of their students. This idea is supported by (Rahmawati et al., 2023; Safirah et al., 2024), who argue that “a more flexible curriculum would empower teachers to respond to the unique cultural contexts of their classrooms, promoting inclusivity and engagement.”

While the implementation of CRT in Indonesian primary schools faces challenges—particularly regarding curriculum rigidity, lack of training, and insufficient resources—there are clear opportunities for improvement. Teachers are eager for more professional development in CRT, and with greater institutional support, such as curriculum reforms and the provision of culturally responsive materials, CRT could become a powerful tool for promoting inclusivity and equity in Indonesian education. This study underscores the need for continued efforts to support teachers in their pursuit of culturally responsive teaching practices and highlights the potential for CRT to positively impact students' academic and social outcomes, particularly in diverse and pluralistic classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in Indonesian primary schools, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms. While many teachers recognize the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process, full adoption of CRT is hindered by several factors. Firstly, the rigid, standardized national curriculum limits teachers' flexibility in adapting lessons to reflect students' cultural diversity. Many teachers expressed frustration over the tension between following the curriculum and being responsive to their students' cultural needs. Secondly, there is a lack of formal training in CRT for teachers. Without adequate professional development, many teachers feel unprepared to systematically incorporate CRT into their teaching practices. This highlights a gap in teacher education programs that do not fully address multicultural pedagogy. However, students responded positively to culturally inclusive teaching, showing a strong desire for lessons that reflect their cultural identities. When students feel their culture is acknowledged, they are more engaged and connected to the learning process. In conclusion, while challenges remain, the study identifies significant opportunities for enhancing CRT in Indonesian primary schools. By providing more flexible curricula, culturally relevant teaching materials, and comprehensive training, CRT can foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments for Indonesia's diverse student population.

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