Bridging Educational Gaps: A Systematic Review of Culturally Responsive Education to Promote Equity

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ABSTRACT

This review study explores the significance of culturally responsive education in addressing educational disparities among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. By leveraging students' cultural experiences and knowledge, CRE aims to enhance academic performance, cultural competence, and socio-political awareness. This review examines the evolution, significance, and challenges of culturally responsive education (CRE) in addressing educational inequities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. CRE aims to utilize students' cultural knowledge, values and experiences to improve academic performance, cultural competence, and socio-political awareness. Through an analysis of various studies, the review explores the impact of CRE on student outcomes, particularly for marginalized communities and identifies barriers to its effective implementation. Neoliberal education reforms, deficit thinking, and resistance to systemic change are highlighted as key challenges that hinder the broader adoption of CRE. Despite these obstacles, the review emphasizes the transformative potential of CRE in fostering inclusive, equitable learning environments. The study pointed out the need for comprehensive teacher training, institutional support, and a deeper critical reflection on power structures within education systems to fully operationalize CRE in schools.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Education (CRE), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), Neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION

Culturally responsive education involves constructing the school learning relevant and effective by drawing on students' cultural knowledge, experiences, languages and communication styles. It centers on using what students know and how they know it as the basis for classroom interactions and curriculum development. While beneficial for all students, this approach is especially important when there are significant differences between the teacher's world and the student's world. Every student possesses cultural "funds of knowledge," which include the skills and understanding needed for their personal growth and well-being, and these can be leveraged for formal learning in the classroom.

Culturally responsive education values the rich cultural knowledge and skills that students bring as a resource for developing multiple perspectives and approaches to learning. Teachers work with students, acknowledging their knowledge and experiences, to build new learning collaboratively. This approach focuses on fostering positive interpersonal relationships and dynamic, socially-constructed forms of instruction and assessment. Importantly, the principles of CRP align with the principles of effective teaching.

Many schools and teachers find it challenging to engage students from cultural backgrounds that differ from the dominant culture present in mainstream education. New Zealand has one of the largest achievement gaps in the OECD, some students perform at very high levels, while others struggle significantly. When other factors are considered, educational outcomes in New Zealand can be linked to culture and ethnicity. Specifically, Māori and Pasifika students, as well as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, tend to underperform compared to other groups. Additionally,

Sources of Articles with Database and Keywords:		
Database	Journals	Relevant Keywords
Google Scholar	1. American Educational Research Journal 2. American Educational Research Journal 3. Educational Researcher 4. Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research 5. Online Learning	Culturally Relevant Praxis, Cultural Competence, Cultural Relevance education, Inclusive Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Professional Development, Inclusive Teaching Practices, Culturally relevant Teaching, Culturally relevant pedagogy.
JSTOR	1. American Educational Research Journal	
SAGE Journals	1. *Urban Education* 2. *American Educational Research Journal,* published by the American Educational Research Association (AERA). 3. *Researcher,* It is also published by AERA. 4. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research,* 5. *The Journal of Educational Research*.	
ERIC	1. *American Educational Research Journal.* 2. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research* 3. *Online Learning* 4. *The Journal of Educational Research*	

Articles Classification and selection:		
Articles Searched	Criteria to selecting article to include in this research	No of article have been selected
Around 100 articles have been searched on the basis of provided keywords from the respective databases	Articles has been select on the basis of the title which is associated with Culturally Responsive/Relevant education, cultural competence on teachers and inclusive pedagogy, cultural	Approx 15 articles have been shortlisted to include in this systematic review article

students from culturally diverse backgrounds face more disciplinary issues compared to their peers from mainstream cultures.

Most schools, teachers and curriculum materials reflect the values and perspectives of dominant culture, often excluding or overlooking those of minority groups. For students whose home culture aligns with the mainstream, school activities are familiar, allowing them to use their cultural understanding to grasp school content. However, students from diverse backgrounds may struggle when their cultural knowledge and values don't match or conflict with school expectations and norms.

METHODOLOGY

The article employs a Systematic Review methodology, analyzing a variety of literatures on culturally responsive education (CRE). The author searched approximately 100 articles using relevant keywords, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive teaching practices, and cultural competence, from databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and ERIC. From this search, around 15 articles were shortlisted for in-depth analysis based on their relevance to the study. The selected articles were systematically reviewed to understand the evolution, significance, and challenges of implementing CRE, particularly focusing on marginalized communities and the barriers to effective practice in real-world educational settings

Genealogical Analysis of CRP:

By using genealogical methods, Schmeichel traces how CRP emerged as a response to the failure of traditional educational methods to meet the needs of students of color. In the 1960s, students of color were often seen as culturally deficient, a perception rooted in the white, middle-class norms that dominated educational thinking (Schmeichel, 2012). This perspective implied that the academic struggles of students of color were a result of their cultural background rather than systemic inequities within schools.

The shift toward CRP in the 1980s and 1990s sought to move beyond this deficit model by recognizing the cultural strengths that students of color bring to the classroom. Schmeichel highlights how educators and researchers, particularly through the work of Ladson-Billings, sought to affirm the cultural identities of students of color while also challenging the power dynamics that marginalized these students (Schmeichel, 2012).

However, Schmeichel critiques the limited implementation of CRP, noting that it often focuses on cultural differences without fully addressing the broader societal inequities that affect educational outcomes.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and Equity:

CRP, as Schmeichel (2012) outlines, has emerged from a broader push in education policy to fill the achievement gap between students of color and their white counterparts. Proponents of CRP argue that this teaching approach promotes academic performance by engaging students in learning that reflects their cultural backgrounds. This theory, rooted in the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), suggests that effective teaching for students of color must not only focus on academic achievement but also affirm cultural competence and promote socio-political awareness (Schmeichel, 2012).

However, Schmeichel (2012) challenges the way CRP has been taken up as an activity that educators can "do" rather than as a critical, ongoing stance. This framing risks simplifying CRP to a set of practices that can be applied without sufficient reflection on deeper systemic inequalities. The researcher emphasizes that a truly equitable approach requires educators to interrogate the power structures in society and schools that perpetuate disparities.

Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:

Morrison, Robbins, and Rose (2008) synthesize 45 classroom-based research studies to explore how culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is implemented in practice. The authors highlight that although teacher education programs emphasize the importance of CRP, many educators struggle to operationalize this theory in real-world classroom settings. Drawing from Ladson-Billings' (1995) framework, they categorize CRP into three key areas: high academic expectations, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Each of these areas is examined through various classroom actions, such as setting rigorous academic standards while supporting students (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).

The highlights how culturally relevant teachers use students' cultural backgrounds as starting points for learning and cultivate environments that nurture cooperation and inclusivity. They reshape prescribed curricula to reflect students' cultural experiences, build on their existing knowledge, and foster relationships between schools and communities (Morrison *et al.*,

2008). Furthermore, teachers encourage critical consciousness by engaging students in discussions of social justice, helping them critique social inequalities, and empowering them to take action. Despite the promise of CRP, Morrison *et al.* (2008) identify challenges, such as the difficulty of applying CRP in diverse classrooms and the systemic barriers educators face. These include time constraints and rigid, standardized curricula that limit opportunities for student engagement. The authors advocate for more comprehensive research and systemic support to enable educators to adopt CRP more effectively in diverse classroom settings.

Marginalization of CRP in the Era of Neoliberalism:

Christine Sleeter argues that culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has been increasingly marginalized over the past two decades due to the rise of neoliberal reforms in education. These reforms prioritize standardized curricula and market-driven models, often ignoring essential cultural and racial contexts that empower diverse learners. Sleeter identifies three main challenges facing CRP: the persistence of simplistic and faulty understandings of CRP, a lack of robust research connecting CRP with student achievement, and political backlash from those resistant to addressing systemic inequities. To strengthen CRP, Sleeter advocates for more complex understandings, rigorous research, and strategies to anticipate and address backlash (Sleeter, 2011).

Impact of Neoliberal Reforms:

Sleeter (2011) highlights the impact of neoliberal reforms that emphasize standardization and market-driven approaches, sidelining CRP. These reforms often ignore the cultural and racial contexts that are crucial for empowering diverse learners, focusing instead on individualism and competition . Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is increasingly marginalized due to neoliberal educational reforms that emphasize standardization, often neglecting the cultural contexts vital for empowering diverse students (Sleeter, 2011). A persistent issue is the oversimplification of CRP, where it is reduced to superficial cultural elements, missing deeper academic engagement (Foster, 2018). Research linking CRP to improved student outcomes remains limited, which hinders its broader implementation (Brown, 2007). Additionally, CRP faces political resistance as it challenges systemic inequalities, making its adoption in schools more difficult (Sleeter, 2011). Effective CRP

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(965)

requires teachers to be well-prepared through professional development, enabling them to create inclusive environments that respect and integrate students' diverse cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2000; Foster, 2018).

Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Diverse Classrooms:

Diversity in today's classrooms, characterized by factors such as ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status, has significantly increased (Young and Sternod, 2011). To foster inclusive learning environments, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) can bridge cultural differences and create a bond between students' learning experiences regardless of background (Ladson-Billings, 1992). CRP emphasizes the importance of incorporating students' cultural references in teaching, helping them understand themselves and others while fostering meaningful social interactions and knowledge acquisition (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This approach is essential for student success as it promotes a safe and inclusive learning environment. In physical education (PE), culturally relevant physical education (CRPE) is critical for addressing the diverse needs of students, yet many PE teachers continue to plan lessons based on their own ideologies rather than student needs (Theodoulides, 2003). Flory and McCaughtry (2011) propose a three-step process for CRPE that involves understanding the student community, identifying cultural distances, and developing strategies to bridge those gaps. By doing so, teachers can create a more inclusive and culturally responsive PE environment that benefits all students.

Teacher-Student Relationships and Cultural Identity:

A key theme in both studies is the significance of teacher-student relationships in culturally responsive pedagogy. Savage *et al.* (2011) found that Mâori students who experienced culturally responsive teaching felt a stronger sense of belonging and were more engaged in their learning. This aligns with Siwatu's (2011) findings, which emphasize the importance of teachers building trust and fostering personal relationships with students. Culturally responsive teachers who demonstrate authentic care for students' cultural identities create more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Both studies highlight that teachers who are confident in their ability to build positive relationships with students and incorporate their cultural backgrounds into the learning process are more likely to succeed in promoting academic achievement among diverse students (Savage *et al.*, 2011; Siwatu, 2011).

Culturally responsive pedagogy and the self-efficacy of teachers in applying these practices are closely intertwined. Both Savage *et al.* (2011) and Siwatu (2011) underscore the importance of professional development and practice-based opportunities in building teachers' confidence and competence in culturally responsive teaching. While both studies highlight challenges in implementation, they also emphasize the transformative potential of culturally responsive pedagogy in improving educational outcomes for marginalized students. To achieve this, teacher education programs must prioritize CRP and offer more comprehensive and practical training opportunities for preservice teachers.

Teacher Self-Efficacy in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:

Teacher self-efficacy plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of CRP. According to Siwatu (2011), self-efficacy refers to teachers' confidence in their ability to use culturally responsive practices. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adopt and sustain these practices, leading to better student outcomes. Savage *et al.* (2011) found that professional development significantly enhances teachers' confidence in applying culturally responsive teaching, while Siwatu (2011) emphasizes that preservice teachers' exposure to culturally diverse settings helps build their self-efficacy. However, preservice teachers often lack sufficient practical experience in diverse classrooms, limiting their confidence and competence in CRP.

Impact of Professional Development:

Professional development is highlighted as a key factor in fostering teachers' culturally responsive practices. Savage *et al.* (2011) found that programs like Te Kotahitanga improved teacher competence in integrating Mâori cultural references into classroom lessons, which strengthened students' identity and participation in school. Siwatu (2011) supports this finding, suggesting that mastery experiences during teacher training are essential for developing culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy. However, both studies note that professional development alone may not be sufficient. A more comprehensive approach, including sustained support and subject-specific training, is needed to ensure long-

term success in CRP.

Critical Consciousness in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:

While CRP aims to promote academic success and cultural competence, fostering critical consciousness—students' ability to critique social inequities—remains underdeveloped in many classrooms. According to Savage *et al.* (2011), few teachers fully embrace the sociopolitical dimensions of CRP. Siwatu (2011) similarly notes that while preservice teachers may appreciate cultural diversity, they often lack the critical consciousness necessary to address broader systemic inequalities. Developing this critical dimension requires not only professional development but also a shift in the overall goals of teacher education programs, moving beyond academic achievement to include social justice.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Teacher Education:

The article by Allen *et al.* (2017) presents a critical examination of the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) into teacher education programmes. The authors emphasize that many teacher education programs have struggled to prepare candidates to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse students. CRP is rooted in social justice that seeks to address needs of diverse students by fostering academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. The article critiques the existing frameworks in teacher education, particularly regarding governance, curriculum, and accountability, for failing to adequately address issues of race, power, and privilege. The authors propose a conceptual framework to support the integration of CRP through critical reflection, social justice action, and critical questioning. This framework aims to transform teacher education programs to better equip future educators in addressing the diverse cultural realities of their students (Allen *et al.,* 2017).

CRP in Educational Research:

Aronson and Laughter (2016) provide an insightful synthesis of research surrounding culturally relevant education (CRE) across various content areas. Their work emphasizes that while many educators and researchers have claimed to implement CRE, its effectiveness is often marginalized due to standardized curricula and neoliberal education reforms. By advocating

for pedagogies rooted in social justice, Aronson and Laughter (2016) argue that CRE can counter individualistic educational models and promote collective empowerment in classrooms, making it a critical framework for addressing the needs of diverse student populations (Aronson and Laughter, 2016). "Culturally Relevant Education: Think Local Within a Holistic Orientation" by Pang *et al.* (2021). It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and integrating students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the educational process. By adopting a holistic approach, educators can create a more engaging and meaningful learning environment that resonates with students' identities. Dive in to explore how culturally relevant education can transform classrooms into spaces that celebrate diversity and foster motivation.

Institutionalization of Culturally Responsive Education:

It advocates for institutionalizing Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) in schools as a professional expectation. CRE promotes academic achievement and sociopolitical awareness by honoring students' cultural identities. Despite evidence of its effectiveness, CRE faces resistance from various groups, particularly against discussions of systemic racism. The authors argue that rational arguments are unlikely to change opposition; instead, they encourage educational leaders to persist in implementing CRE. Recommendations include integrating CRE into all aspects of school systems and ensuring ongoing professional development for educators Parkhouse (Parkhouse *et al.,* 2022).

Culturally Responsive Education as a Professional Responsibility:

Parkhouse *et al.* (2022) focuses on the importance of institutionalizing Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) as a professional responsibility for educators. The authors argue that CRE should not be treated as a temporary initiative or an elective professional development topic. Instead, it must be established as a fundamental expectation for all educators. This institutionalization is essential for achieving high academic performance and sociopolitical awareness in students, especially those from historically marginalized communities. The article highlights that despite the wealth of evidence supporting CRE, there is still resistance, both within and outside educational institutions, due to political opposition and

ideological barriers (Parkhouse *et al.*, 2022).

The Importance of CRE:

Culturally relevant education is described as an educational approach that fosters students' understanding and respect for their own cultural backgrounds while it also provides them access to broader cultural norms. This method, according to Ladson-Billings (2006) and others, promotes academic success and critical thinking among all students (Parkhouse *et al.*, 2022). Research has repeatedly demonstrated the positive impact of CRE on student outcomes, particularly for those who have been underserved by traditional educational systems. For instance, studies have shown improved graduation rates and higher academic performance among students exposed to CRE (Cabrera *et al.*, 2014; Dee and Penner, 2017).

Challenges and Resistance:

Despite its proven efficacy, CRE faces substantial resistance, especially in the current socio political climate. Many of the arguments against CRE stem from broader criticisms of educational efforts to address systemic racism. The authors cite research from political psychology and critical Whiteness studies to explain that the opposition is not necessarily based on the effectiveness of CRE, but rather on deeply ingrained ideological beliefs about race and meritocracy (Parkhouse *et al.,* 2022). Opponents of CRE often frame their arguments as a rejection of "indoctrination" or "political bias," disregarding the empirical evidence in favor of CRE.

Legal and Ethical Imperatives:

In addition to being a scientifically backed approach, CRE is also presented as a legal and ethical obligation. Schools are legally required to provide an inclusive environment where all students feel safe and valued, irrespective of their background (Eckes, 2020). Ethically, CRE is vital in ensuring dignity and equal educational opportunities for historically marginalized students. The authors assert that CRE should be seen as a civil right, essential for fostering a truly democratic society (Parkhouse *et al.*, 2022).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as an Equity Practice:

Mardi Schmeichel's article (2012) explores culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as a key equity practice within education, particularly for students of color. The focus is on how CRP, once viewed as an innovative approach, has now been adopted into mainstream discourse as essential for filling the achievement gap. Schmeichel critiques the genealogy of CRP, arguing that its promotion often stems from a deficit model of thinking where students of color are viewed as culturally lacking rather than having valuable cultural assets. The study uses Foucauldian genealogical methods to trace the historical development of this educational concept and challenges the notion that CRP, as it is often enacted, fully addresses equity.

Critiques and Limitations:

One of the key critiques Schmeichel offers is that while CRP is widely accepted as good teaching, its implementation often falls short of truly promoting equity. Many educators treat CRP as a checklist of culturally responsive activities rather than a transformative framework that requires deep critical reflection (Schmeichel, 2012). This limited approach reduces CRP to surface-level engagement with students' cultures rather than addressing the root causes of educational inequities, such as racism and socioeconomic disparities.

Moreover, Schmeichel argues that the emphasis on cultural difference as the basis for CRP can unintentionally reinforce the notion of students of color as "other." This emphasis risks perpetuating the same deficit thinking that CRP was designed to counter, as it often positions white, middle-class norms as the benchmark for success (Schmeichel, 2012). For CRP to be truly transformative, it must go beyond recognizing cultural differences to actively challenging the systems of oppression that create and sustain educational inequities.

CRP has the potential to be a powerful tool for promoting equity in education, its current implementation often falls short of its radical promise. For CRP to truly fulfill its potential, educators must adopt it as a critical stance that involves continuous reflection on their own biases and the systemic inequalities that shape educational experiences. Without this deeper engagement, CRP risks becoming just another educational fad that fails to produce lasting change for students of color (Schmeichel, 2012).

Challenges in Implementation:

Despite the successes, the study revealed several challenges in fully realizing the potential of culturally responsive pedagogy. One significant barrier was the

persistence of deficit thinking, where some teachers viewed Mâori students' underachievement as a result of their cultural background rather than a reflection of the school's failure to accommodate their needs. Moreover, racism and low expectations continued to affect the classroom experiences of some Mâori students, particularly in schools with low implementation of culturally responsive practices (Savage *et al.*, 2011). These challenges suggest that teacher training alone is insufficient, and broader systemic reforms are necessary to address deeper issues of inequity.

The research underscores the importance of CRPs in improving educational outcomes for indigenous students, but it also highlights the complexities involved in implementing these practices effectively. Only through a combination of teacher training and broader school reforms can culturally responsive pedagogy become a sustained and transformative force in education (Savage *et al.,* 2011).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogies and Self-Efficacy in Teaching:

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is rooted in the recognition that teaching practices must reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of students to foster effective learning environments. Savage *et al.* (2011) emphasize the importance of aligning teaching strategies with the cultural identities of students, especially for marginalized groups like indigenous Mâori students in New Zealand. They argue that a lack of culturally relevant instruction often results in disengagement, low academic performance, and a weakened sense of identity among minority students. Similarly, Siwatu (2011) points out that culturally responsive teaching (CRT) involves utilizing students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and values to enhance learning. These frameworks offer alternative approaches to traditional education, which often marginalizes non-dominant cultures.

Conclusion:

Culturally responsive education acknowledges and incorporates students' cultural identities into the learning process, providing a potentially effective structure for eradicating educational gaps. To reach its full potential, however, this analysis identifies a number of crucial issues that educators and legislators need to resolve. Significant obstacles include neoliberal changes that place a high priority on uniformity, a paucity of credible data connecting CRE to quantifiable student results, and political reluctance to address systemic injustices. For teachers to address such, CRE needs to be formalized as an essential component of teaching, along with ongoing professional development for educators and a dedication to taking on the power structures that support inequality. When used effectively, CRE can advance a more equitable and inclusive society in addition to enhancing student performance.

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Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci. |Nov. & Dec., 2025| **12** (11&12)|