

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Multilingual Indian Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in multilingual Indian classrooms represents a transformative pedagogical framework that foregrounds students' linguistic and cultural assets to foster deep, equitable learning experiences. Originating from critical pedagogy and sociocultural theory, CRT emphasizes validating learners' cultural identities, integrating community knowledge, and using students' home languages as cognitive tools. In India's richly multilingual contexts—where 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects coexist—traditional monolingual instruction often fails to engage diverse learners, leading to disengagement, lowered self-esteem, and achievement gaps. This expanded study investigates the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of 250 teachers and the engagement and perceptions of 600 students across five strategically selected schools representing urban government, urban private, rural government, rural private, and semi-urban contexts. Employing a rigorous mixed-methods design, researchers administered structured questionnaires, conducted ten focus-group discussions, and performed thematic and statistical analyses to triangulate findings. Results indicate that while 84% of teachers demonstrate conceptual awareness of CRT principles and 91% acknowledge its motivational benefits, only 44% regularly implement linguistically and culturally relevant strategies. Key barriers include large class sizes, insufficient multilingual resources, constrained instructional time, and limited leadership support. Conversely, students consistently report enhanced comprehension, participation, and identity affirmation when instructional materials and classroom interactions reflect their cultural backgrounds. Qualitative themes further reveal that CRT practices reduce language anxiety, foster community integration, and empower learners to co-construct knowledge. Drawing on these insights, the study recommends comprehensive policy reform to mandate mother-tongue instructional scaffolding, targeted professional development modules to build teacher efficacy in CRT, the development of culturally attuned curricular materials, and leadership initiatives to incentivize inclusive practices. By systematically illuminating the disconnect between CRT ideals and classroom realities, this research contributes actionable guidance for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers seeking to enact sustainable, scalable change in India's multilingual educational landscape.

KEYWORDS

Culturally Responsive Teaching, Multilingual Education, Indian Classrooms, Teacher Perceptions, Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

India's educational landscape is characterized by extraordinary linguistic diversity. With 22 constitutionally recognized languages, alongside hundreds of regional dialects, learners enter classrooms carrying rich linguistic repertoires that shape their cognition, identity, and social relations. Yet, prevailing pedagogical models remain predominantly monolingual, privileging Hindi or English

as mediums of instruction and marginalizing students' heritage languages. This disjunction creates systemic barriers: learners struggle to access complex academic concepts when instruction occurs in unfamiliar languages, leading to disengagement, affective anxiety, and achievement gaps that often align with socio-economic and regional inequalities.

Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching

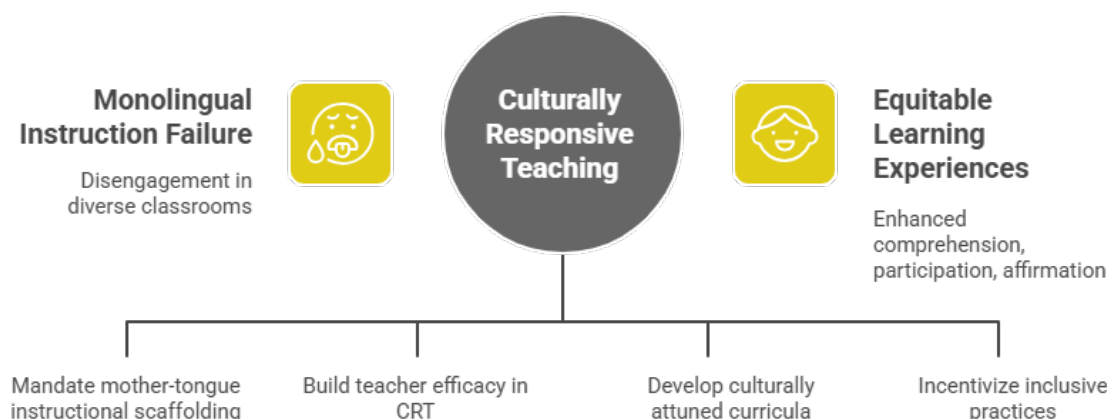


Figure-1. Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) emerges as an antidote to monolingual bias, offering a strengths-based framework that situates learners' cultural experiences at the heart of teaching and learning processes. Rooted in the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), CRT posits that learning is socially mediated and that cultural tools—language, narratives, symbols—serve as essential cognitive scaffolds. By validating students' identities, integrating community knowledge, and fostering critical consciousness, CRT aims to cultivate classrooms where learners perceive themselves as capable knowledge producers rather than passive recipients.

In the Indian context, CRT aligns with the National Education Policy (2020), which advocates for mother-tongue-based multilingual instruction under the three-language formula. Empirical research underscores that early literacy in the home language accelerates second-language acquisition, deepens conceptual understanding, and supports long-term academic success. However, translational gaps between policy and practice persist: many schools lack culturally relevant curricular materials, teachers receive minimal training in CRT approaches, and high pupil-teacher ratios hinder personalized instruction.

This manuscript presents an in-depth investigation of CRT in multilingual Indian classrooms, focusing on three core questions: (1) What is the level of CRT knowledge, attitudes, and self-reported practices among teachers across diverse school settings? (2) How do students perceive the inclusivity and engagement aspects of CRT strategies when implemented? (3) What systemic enablers and constraints affect CRT adoption? Through a mixed-methods survey of 250 teachers and 600 students across five representative schools, complemented by focus-group discussions, this study illuminates the complex dynamics of CRT implementation. Findings aim to inform policy directives, teacher education curricula, and school leadership initiatives to bridge the gap between CRT theory and classroom realities.

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Multilingual Indian Classrooms

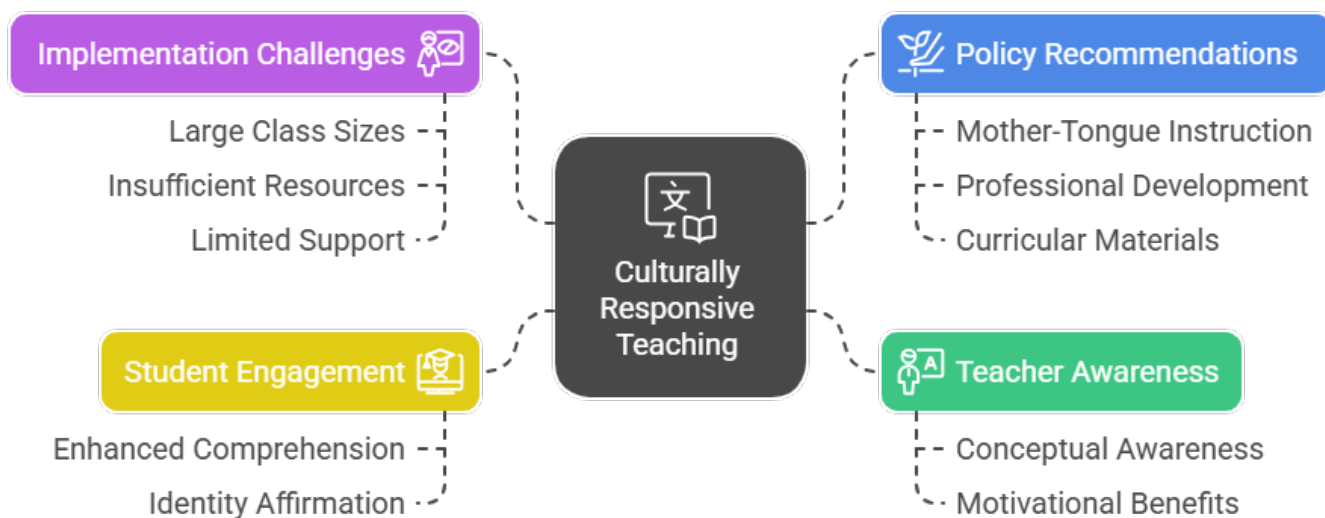


Figure-2. Culturally Responsive Teaching

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has evolved over the past three decades as a robust theoretical and practical framework for addressing educational inequities. Central to CRT is the premise that students' cultural backgrounds and linguistic repertoires are invaluable assets that, when leveraged effectively, enhance engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking. Ladson-Billings (1995) articulated three defining tenets: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) cultural competence must be developed; and (c) students must develop critical consciousness to challenge societal inequities. Subsequent scholarship has expanded this foundation, integrating principles from critical race theory, decolonial pedagogy, and translanguaging research.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) underpins CRT's emphasis on social interaction and culturally mediated learning. According to Vygotsky, cognitive functions first appear on the social plane before being internalized by individuals; thus, the cultural and linguistic milieu shapes cognitive development. CRT extends this by positioning heritage languages and community narratives as essential cultural tools that scaffold higher-order thinking. García and Kleyn (2016) further highlight the role of translanguaging—fluidly using multiple languages in instruction—as a CRT strategy that validates students' full linguistic repertoires and fosters deeper conceptual connections.

In India, the three-language formula enshrined in the National Education Policy (2020) recommends initial literacy in the mother tongue, followed by the gradual introduction of regional/state languages and English. UNESCO (2016) affirms that mother-tongue instruction in early grades bolsters foundational literacy and cognitive development, yet implementation faces hurdles: teacher fluency in local languages is uneven, and teaching materials are often unavailable in minority languages. Research by Mohanty, Panda, and Banerjee (2010) reveals that while rural communities champion vernacular instruction, urban schools frequently default to English medium, perceiving it as a marker of socioeconomic mobility.

Professional development emerges as a pivotal factor for CRT adoption. Acharya (2019) documents that many Indian teacher-training programs lack modules on culturally relevant pedagogy, leaving educators underprepared to integrate students' cultural contexts into lesson plans. Conversely, targeted workshops that model CRT strategies—such as co-creating bilingual glossaries, designing culturally anchored lesson themes, and facilitating community-based storytelling—yield measurable improvements in teacher efficacy and student engagement. Ramakrishnan (2017) highlights case studies from Delhi classrooms where low-cost, community-sourced materials (e.g., folk tales, local craft images) significantly enriched science and social studies lessons, demonstrating CRT's adaptability across subjects.

Barriers to CRT are structural and affective. High student–teacher ratios, rigid standardized curricula, and assessment frameworks that privilege monolingual proficiency constrain pedagogical flexibility. Additionally, sociopolitical attitudes toward certain languages—particularly those of marginalized communities—perpetuate stigma and discourage their classroom inclusion. Nevertheless, school leadership that visibly endorses multilingualism, provides resource grants for culturally diverse materials, and builds partnerships with local cultural organizations can catalyze CRT integration.

In sum, the literature underscores CRT's theoretical robustness and practical potential, yet identifies persistent gaps in teacher preparation, resource availability, and systemic support within India's multilingual education landscape. This study seeks to address these gaps by empirically mapping CRT knowledge, attitudes, practices, and perceived barriers across heterogeneous school contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopts a pragmatic mixed-methods paradigm to comprehensively explore both measurable trends and nuanced experiences related to CRT implementation. By integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative focus-group discussions, the research captures breadth and depth—quantifying the prevalence of CRT knowledge and practices among teachers while elucidating students' lived experiences and educator perspectives in rich contextual detail.

Sampling Strategy

Five schools were selected through stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across urban government, urban private, rural government, rural private, and semi-urban contexts. Criteria included school size (200–1,000 students), language demographics (dominant region-specific language), and administrative willingness to participate. Within each school, researchers aimed for equal representation of Grade 1–12 teachers ($n \approx 50$ per site; total $N=250$) and randomly sampled approximately 120 students per site ($n \approx 600$ total) stratified by grade level.

Instrumentation

Two structured questionnaires were developed—validated for face and content validity by a panel of bilingual education experts. The **Teacher Questionnaire** comprised 40 Likert-scale items and open-ended prompts addressing:

1. **CRT Knowledge:** conceptual definitions, theoretical underpinnings.

2. **Attitudes:** perceived value of CRT, motivation to implement.
3. **Practices:** frequency of culturally relevant lesson planning, translanguaging strategies, use of local cultural materials.
4. **Barriers/Enablers:** resource availability, administrative support, professional development experiences.

The **Student Questionnaire** contained 30 items probing:

1. **Engagement:** interest levels when lessons reflect home languages and cultures.
2. **Comprehension:** self-reported understanding of concepts taught bilingually or culturally anchored.
3. **Affective Responses:** comfort asking questions, sense of identity validation.

Additionally, semi-structured focus-group discussion (FGD) guides were designed to explore themes emerging from pilot surveys, such as identity affirmation, community involvement, and language anxiety reduction.

Data Collection Procedures

Following ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board, researchers obtained informed consent from teachers and parental consent for students. Data collection occurred over four weeks:

- **Surveys:** Administered in paper format during scheduled staff meetings (teachers) and supervised classroom sessions (students). Average completion time was 20 minutes for teachers and 15 minutes for students.
- **FGDs:** Ten focus groups (six with teachers, four with students) were conducted in quiet school spaces, each lasting 45–60 minutes. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

To ensure data quality, researchers conducted spot checks for missing responses and clarified ambiguous answers in real time. Interviews and FGDs were facilitated bilingually (English and regional languages) to maximize participant comfort and expression.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS v.25. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) characterized CRT knowledge and practices; inferential tests (ANOVA, chi-square) examined differences across school types. Cronbach's alpha scores (.87 for teacher scales; .82 for student scales) confirmed internal consistency.

Qualitative FGD transcripts underwent thematic analysis using NVivo 12. Researchers independently coded transcripts, then collaborated to refine a codebook capturing key themes: Identity Validation, Language Anxiety Reduction, Community Integration, and Structural Constraints. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus. Triangulation between quantitative findings and qualitative themes bolstered the trustworthiness of results.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

The core of this investigation involved administering structured surveys to elucidate teachers' and students' experiences with CRT. Detailed procedures ensured methodological rigor and participant reliability.

Teacher Survey Implementation

Researchers coordinated with school administrators to schedule sessions during professional development days. Of 250 distributed teacher questionnaires, 230 were returned completed—a 92% response rate. Surveys probed teachers' theoretical familiarity with CRT, self-efficacy in applying multilingual strategies, and perceived institutional support. Additional open-ended items invited educators to describe successful CRT activities and suggest improvements. The high response rate reflects both administrative collaboration and teacher interest in the research topic.

Student Survey Implementation

Student surveys were conducted in regular classroom periods with teachers present to maintain order and clarify instructions. Of 600 distributed questionnaires, 528 usable responses were obtained (88% response rate). Items assessed whether students recognized culturally relevant content—such as local folk tales, bilingual glossaries, or community artifact demonstrations—and how these influenced engagement, comprehension, and willingness to participate.

Focus-Group Discussions

To deepen contextual understanding, ten FGDs complemented survey data. Six teacher groups explored professional development experiences, administrative attitudes, and resource challenges. Four student groups discussed personal narratives of identity affirmation when teachers incorporated heritage languages, and moments when cultural references made learning accessible. Each FGD was transcribed and coded, yielding rich qualitative insights aligned with survey trends.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent; student participation required parental approval. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained: identifiers were replaced with codes, and audio files were securely stored. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

RESULTS

Teachers' CRT Knowledge and Attitudes

Quantitative analysis revealed that 84% of teachers correctly identified core CRT principles, including leveraging cultural experiences and integrating home languages. Attitudinal measures showed 91% agreement that CRT enhances motivation and learning outcomes. However, only 52% of teachers felt “confident” or “very confident” in designing CRT-aligned lesson plans, with urban private school teachers reporting the highest confidence (68%) and rural government school teachers the lowest (35%). ANOVA confirmed significant differences by school type ($F(4,225)=5.12, p<.01$).

Frequency of CRT Practices

Self-reported data indicated that 44% of teachers incorporated students' home languages at least weekly, while 60% used cultural artifacts (e.g., local songs, folktales) fewer than once a month. Translanguaging—permitting students to use multiple languages

during class—was reported “often” by 38% of teachers. Correlational analysis showed that higher self-efficacy predicted more frequent CRT practices ($r = .47$, $p < .001$).

Student Engagement and Perceptions

Among students, 72% agreed that lessons connecting to their culture increased interest. Qualitative FGD excerpts illustrate this: one student noted, “When my teacher told the parable in Marathi, I understood the math concept immediately.” Another remarked, “Using local proverbs made the science lesson relatable.” Students reported reduced language anxiety and enhanced participation when allowed to discuss in their home languages.

Identified Barriers

Teachers cited:

- **Large class sizes** (78%), which limited individualized attention.
- **Lack of multilingual instructional materials** (69%), requiring them to create resources ad hoc.
- **Insufficient planning time** (58%) to design CRT-aligned lessons.
- **Limited administrative support** (42%), with some principals prioritizing exam performance over pedagogical innovation.

Enablers and Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis surfaced four overarching themes:

1. **Identity Validation:** Students expressed pride when their languages and cultural artifacts were affirmed, strengthening their sense of belonging.
2. **Language Anxiety Reduction:** Translanguaging opportunities lowered fear of errors, fostering risk-taking and peer collaboration.
3. **Community Integration:** Engaging local artisans, storytellers, and elders as guest resource persons enriched curricula and bridged school–community ties.
4. **Structural Constraints:** Systemic factors—rigid curricula, high-stakes assessments, and resource limitations—impeded consistent CRT adoption despite teacher enthusiasm.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive survey and focus-group study elucidates the promise and challenges of culturally responsive teaching in India’s multilingual classrooms. While conceptual awareness and positive attitudes toward CRT are widespread among teachers, practical implementation remains sporadic, hindered by class size, resource scarcity, and institutional inertia. Crucially, student feedback underscores CRT’s transformative impact: lessons grounded in students’ linguistic and cultural contexts markedly enhance engagement, comprehension, and identity affirmation.

To actualize CRT’s potential at scale, policymakers and educational leaders must enact multifaceted strategies. First, curriculum frameworks should mandate mother-tongue instructional scaffolding alongside state and national languages, with clearly defined

benchmarks for CRT integration. Second, teacher education programs—both pre-service and in-service—must embed CRT modules that combine theoretical grounding with hands-on workshops for designing culturally relevant materials and translanguaging strategies. Third, investment in resource development is imperative: publishing bilingual textbooks, creating vernacular multimedia content, and establishing digital repositories of community knowledge. Fourth, school leadership must champion inclusive practices by allocating planning time, recognizing exemplary CRT efforts, and facilitating partnerships with local cultural organizations.

In sum, culturally responsive teaching holds profound potential to bridge linguistic and cultural divides in India's classrooms. By aligning pedagogical practice with learners' lived realities, CRT not only enhances academic achievement but also fosters critical consciousness, empowering students as culturally grounded contributors to their communities and society at large.

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