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Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Elementary Education: Integrating Culture into Teaching-Learning Practices at Hapao Elementary School

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Abstract

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has emerged as a critical framework for addressing equity, inclusion, and relevance in diverse educational contexts. In indigenous and culturally rich communities, conventional teaching approaches often fail to connect learning content with learners' lived experiences, resulting in disengagement and limited academic participation. This study examined the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy in an elementary school serving a culturally distinct community, focusing on how culture is integrated into teaching-learning practices and how such integration influences learner engagement and participation. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus group discussions with learners at Hapao Elementary School. Findings revealed that teachers integrated local culture through contextualized examples, indigenous stories, community practices, and culturally familiar language. These practices enhanced learner participation, comprehension, and sense of belonging. The study concludes that culturally responsive pedagogy functions as both an instructional and relational approach that supports inclusive learning environments in elementary education. Implications for teaching practice, school leadership, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: *culturally responsive pedagogy, elementary education, indigenous learners, contextualized instruction, learner engagement*

Introduction

Educational systems increasingly recognize that effective teaching must be responsive to learners' cultural identities, experiences, and social contexts. In elementary education, where foundational learning and identity formation occur, culturally disconnected instruction may marginalize learners whose cultural backgrounds differ from dominant curricular norms. This concern is particularly evident in indigenous and rural communities, where learners bring rich cultural knowledge that remains underutilized in formal schooling.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) offers a framework for addressing this gap by positioning culture as a central component of teaching and learning rather than a peripheral consideration. CRP emphasizes the use of learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and ways of knowing as assets for learning, thereby promoting academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Gay, 2018). Empirical studies have demonstrated that culturally responsive teaching enhances learner engagement, motivation, and classroom participation, particularly among marginalized populations (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In the Philippine context, national education policies promote contextualization and localization of instruction, especially in schools serving indigenous communities. However, empirical research documenting how culturally responsive pedagogy is enacted at the classroom level in elementary schools remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining culturally responsive teaching-learning practices at Hapao Elementary School, an elementary school situated in a culturally distinct community. Specifically, the study explores how teachers integrate culture into instruction and how these practices shape learners' classroom engagement and participation.

Related Studies

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy is grounded in the premise that culture profoundly shapes how learners interpret and construct knowledge. Rather than treating culture as an obstacle, CRP views it as an instructional resource that enhances meaning-making and learning relevance. Research indicates that culturally responsive classrooms foster positive teacher-student relationships, affirm learner identity, and promote inclusive participation (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

Culture and Learner Engagement

Learner engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of participation in learning activities. Studies suggest that culturally relevant instruction increases engagement by making learning more meaningful and relatable to students' lives (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In culturally responsive classrooms, learners are more likely to participate actively, express ideas confidently, and sustain interest in learning tasks.

Indigenous Education and Elementary Schooling

Indigenous learners often experience a mismatch between school culture and home culture, which can negatively affect learning outcomes. Research in indigenous education highlights the importance of incorporating local knowledge systems, language practices, and community values into classroom instruction to promote equity and inclusion (Jorgensen & Wagner, 2013; Meaney, Trinick, & Fairhall, 2013). At the elementary level, culturally grounded instruction is especially critical, as early schooling shapes learners' attitudes toward education and self-identity.

Research Gap

While international studies have established the value of culturally responsive pedagogy, there is limited empirical research examining its classroom implementation in Philippine elementary schools serving indigenous communities. In particular, few qualitative studies document how teachers integrate culture into daily teaching practices and how learners experience culturally responsive instruction. This study seeks to address this gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Sociocultural Learning Theory. Culturally responsive pedagogy frames teaching as a culturally situated practice that validates learners' identities and leverages cultural knowledge as instructional capital (Gay, 2018). Sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and is shaped by cultural tools, language, and practices (Nasir, Hand, & Taylor, 2008). Together, these frameworks guided the examination of teaching practices and learner experiences at Hapao Elementary School.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study design to provide an in-depth examination of culturally responsive pedagogy within a specific elementary school context, allowing for rich, contextualized descriptions of instructional practices and participant perspectives as they naturally occurred. The research was conducted at Hapao Elementary School, an institution serving learners from a culturally distinct community, making it a relevant site for exploring culturally responsive teaching practices. Participants included elementary teachers who actively integrated cultural knowledge, values, and practices into their instruction, as well as selected learners who experienced these pedagogical approaches in the classroom. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that all participants had direct and meaningful engagement with culturally responsive pedagogy. Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to strengthen credibility and depth, including classroom observations to document instructional strategies, teacher–learner interactions, and patterns of learner participation; semi-structured interviews with teachers to explore their pedagogical beliefs, instructional decisions, and experiences in implementing culturally responsive practices; and focus group discussions with learners to capture their learning experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses to culturally grounded instruction. All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved systematic coding, identification of recurring patterns, and development of themes that captured shared meanings across data sources. This analytic process enabled the researcher to interpret how culturally responsive pedagogy was enacted in practice and how it shaped learners’ engagement and classroom experiences, while ensuring trustworthiness through data triangulation, reflective analysis, and careful documentation of the research process.

Results/Findings

Integration of Local Culture into Instruction

Findings indicate that teachers at Hapao Elementary School intentionally integrated local culture into classroom instruction by using indigenous stories, examples drawn from community life, traditional practices, and culturally familiar language. Lessons were frequently contextualized around learners’ daily experiences, local livelihoods, and communal values, allowing abstract academic concepts to be explained through culturally meaningful references. Classroom observations revealed that teachers used narratives, analogies, and illustrations rooted in learners’ cultural environment to introduce and explain lessons, thereby bridging school knowledge and community knowledge. One teacher shared, *“Mas madaling maintindihan ng mga bata ang aralin kapag iniuugnay sa kwento at gawain sa kanilang komunidad.”* Learners also recognized this approach, with one stating, *“Mas naiintindihan ko po ang lesson kapag tungkol sa amin at sa lugar namin.”*

This theme illustrates how culturally responsive pedagogy operates through contextualization and cultural integration, aligning with theories that emphasize the importance of connecting curriculum to learners’ cultural funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). By situating instruction within familiar cultural contexts, teachers reduced cognitive distance between learners’ lived experiences and academic content. Prior studies have shown that culturally grounded instruction enhances comprehension and relevance, particularly among learners from indigenous and culturally distinct communities (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The findings affirm that integrating local culture into instruction supports meaningful learning and accessibility.

Enhanced Learner Participation and Engagement

The integration of culturally familiar content was found to significantly enhance learner participation and engagement during classroom activities. Learners demonstrated greater willingness to answer questions, participate in discussions, and engage in collaborative tasks when lessons reflected familiar cultural contexts. Observations showed increased verbal participation and attentiveness during culturally contextualized lessons compared to more abstract or decontextualized instruction. Learners reported feeling more confident and comfortable expressing ideas, as reflected in one learner’s statement, *“Mas gusto kong sumagot kapag tungkol sa alam namin kasi hindi ako nahihiya.”* Teachers similarly observed changes in participation, with one noting, *“Kapag nakikita ng mga bata na konektado sa buhay nila ang aralin, mas aktibo sila.”*

This theme highlights the role of cultural relevance in fostering learner engagement. Engagement theory suggests that participation is enhanced when learners perceive learning as meaningful and relevant (Fredricks et al., 2004). Culturally responsive instruction supports this by validating learners’ experiences and reducing anxiety associated with unfamiliar or alienating content. Existing research confirms that culturally contextualized pedagogy increases learner engagement, motivation, and persistence by promoting emotional safety and relevance (Gay, 2018; Villegas

& Lucas, 2002). The findings underscore the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching in sustaining active learner participation.

Affirmation of Learner Identity and Belonging

Another salient theme emerging from the data was the affirmation of learners' cultural identity and sense of belonging. Culturally responsive practices enabled learners to see their cultural heritage, language, and traditions reflected in classroom instruction, which contributed to positive self-perception and pride. Learners expressed appreciation for lessons that acknowledged their cultural background, with one learner stating, *"Masaya po ako kapag nakikita ang kultura namin sa lesson kasi parang mahalaga kami."* Teachers also emphasized that acknowledging learners' cultural identity strengthened learners' connection to school and learning.

This theme reflects the importance of identity affirmation in culturally responsive pedagogy. Research indicates that when learners' identities are recognized and valued in school, they develop stronger academic engagement and positive attitudes toward learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010). The affirmation of cultural identity contributes to a sense of belonging, which is a critical factor in learner motivation and persistence. The findings support studies suggesting that culturally responsive teaching counters marginalization by positioning learners' cultures as assets rather than deficits (Gay, 2018), thereby enhancing both engagement and well-being.

Strengthened Teacher-Learner Relationships

The findings further revealed that teachers' efforts to understand, respect, and integrate learners' cultural backgrounds strengthened teacher-learner relationships. Teachers demonstrated openness, empathy, and respect for learners' cultural practices, which fostered relational trust and mutual understanding. Learners reported feeling more comfortable interacting with teachers who acknowledged and respected their cultural identity. One learner remarked, *"Mas madali po kaming makipag-usap sa teacher kasi naiintindihan niya kami."* Teachers likewise noted that culturally responsive practices improved classroom relationships, with one stating, *"Kapag nirerespeto mo ang kultura ng bata, mas nagiging bukas sila sa pagkatuto."*

This theme underscores the relational dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy. Positive teacher-learner relationships are foundational to effective teaching and learning, particularly in culturally diverse settings (Wentzel, 2012). Research shows that relational trust enhances learners' willingness to participate, take risks, and engage cognitively (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The findings suggest that culturally responsive teaching strengthens instructional relationships by fostering respect, trust, and emotional safety, which in turn supports active participation and meaningful learning.

Discussions

The findings demonstrate that culturally responsive pedagogy plays a vital role in promoting engagement and inclusion in elementary education by addressing learners' academic, emotional, and social needs in culturally meaningful ways. Consistent with prior research, the integration of learners' cultural backgrounds into instruction enhanced behavioral engagement by increasing participation in discussions and activities, emotional engagement by fostering confidence and interest, and cognitive engagement by supporting deeper understanding and meaning-making (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2018). When lessons were grounded in learners' lived experiences, cultural practices, and community contexts, learning became more relevant and accessible, enabling learners to actively connect new knowledge with prior understanding. These findings align with sociocultural theories of learning, which view knowledge construction as a culturally mediated process shaped by social interaction, language, and shared practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003).

Beyond engagement, the results underscore the inclusive potential of culturally responsive pedagogy in addressing marginalization and inequity in elementary classrooms. By valuing indigenous knowledge, local narratives, and culturally familiar language, teachers challenged deficit-oriented views of learners from culturally distinct communities and repositioned culture as an educational asset. This supports earlier studies showing that culturally responsive teaching contributes to more equitable learning opportunities by validating learners' identities and countering experiences of cultural mismatch between home and school (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010). When learners see their culture represented and respected in the curriculum, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging, which is closely linked to motivation, persistence, and positive attitudes toward schooling (Osterman, 2000).

Importantly, the findings highlight that culturally responsive pedagogy extends beyond instructional techniques to encompass relational and affective dimensions of teaching. Teachers' efforts to understand learners' cultural backgrounds and build respectful relationships fostered relational trust and emotional safety, which in turn supported active participation and risk-taking in learning. This relational aspect aligns with research emphasizing that strong teacher-learner relationships are foundational to engagement, particularly in culturally diverse settings (Wentzel, 2012; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Culturally responsive relationships enable teachers to create classroom environments where learners feel valued and supported, making them more willing to express ideas, ask questions, and engage cognitively with challenging tasks.

Furthermore, the findings resonate with research on funds of knowledge, which emphasizes the importance of drawing on learners' home and community experiences as resources for teaching and learning (Moll et al., 1992). By integrating community knowledge into classroom instruction, teachers not only enhanced engagement but also strengthened school community connections, reinforcing the relevance of education to learners' everyday lives. This approach supports inclusive education goals by bridging cultural divides and fostering continuity between learners' cultural worlds and academic learning.

Taken together, the findings suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy is a powerful framework for promoting both engagement and inclusion in elementary education. Its effectiveness lies in its holistic nature combining culturally grounded instruction, identity affirmation, and supportive relationships to create learning environments that are academically rigorous, emotionally supportive, and socially inclusive. These results reinforce the growing body of literature advocating culturally responsive teaching as a means of improving educational equity and learner engagement, particularly in culturally diverse and indigenous school contexts.

Conclusions and Implications

This study provides empirical evidence that culturally responsive pedagogy plays a significant role in enhancing learner engagement, classroom participation, and a sense of belonging in elementary education. The findings demonstrate that when teachers intentionally integrate learners' cultural backgrounds, community knowledge, and lived experiences into teaching-learning practices, learning becomes more meaningful, relevant, and inclusive. Such integration supports not only behavioral and cognitive engagement but also emotional connection to schooling, particularly in culturally distinct contexts where learners' identities are often underrepresented in formal curricula. By positioning culture as an educational asset rather than a barrier, culturally responsive pedagogy contributes to the creation of equitable learning environments that affirm learner identity and promote inclusive participation.

In terms of teaching practice, the results suggest that elementary teachers should purposefully incorporate learners' cultural knowledge, language practices, and community experiences into instructional planning and classroom activities. Teachers are encouraged to use culturally familiar examples, narratives, and learning tasks that resonate with learners' daily lives while maintaining academic rigor. To support this practice, professional development programs should emphasize culturally responsive teaching strategies, reflective pedagogy, and critical awareness of cultural diversity in classrooms. Ongoing training can help teachers develop the skills and dispositions necessary to adapt instruction, build meaningful relationships, and respond effectively to learners' cultural and learning needs.

At the level of school leadership and policy, the findings highlight the importance of systemic support in sustaining culturally responsive pedagogy. School leaders and policymakers should promote curriculum flexibility that allows for contextualization, support the development and use of localized instructional materials, and ensure sustained teacher training focused on culturally responsive practices. Establishing strong partnerships with local communities is essential in grounding education in cultural realities and community knowledge, thereby strengthening school-community connections. Finally, future research may employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of culturally responsive pedagogy on learners' academic achievement, identity development, and educational trajectories across diverse educational settings, contributing to a deeper understanding of its sustained impact.

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