

Exploring Elementary School Teachers' Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Teaching: Insights from Karimunjawa

Fatia Nur Azizah¹, Sarwanto², Roemintoyo³

¹ Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; fatianur58@student.uns.ac.id

² Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; sarwanto_fkip@staff.uns.ac.id

³ Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; roemintoyo@staff.uns.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) plays a vital role in promoting inclusive education. However, its implementation in geographically remote regions remains underexplored. This study investigates elementary school teachers' perspectives on integrating CRT within the Independent Curriculum in the remote Karimunjawa District of Indonesia. A qualitative approach was employed involving ten public elementary school teachers. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Triangulation of sources ensured the validity of findings. The data analysis involved reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that while teachers generally recognize the importance of CRT and possess a basic understanding of its principles, significant barriers hinder effective implementation. These include limited access to professional development, lack of institutional support, and low confidence in applying CRT strategies. Teachers expressed a strong need for culturally relevant materials and methods to better engage students in reflecting on their cultural identities. The study highlights the unique challenges faced by educators in remote areas, particularly in adapting CRT to local contexts. It emphasizes the importance of culturally inclusive pedagogical practices and reveals gaps in training and resources. There is an urgent need for targeted CRT training, improved school support, and policy initiatives that prioritize culturally inclusive teaching in remote settings. These measures are essential to empower teachers and foster equitable learning environments across diverse educational landscapes.

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Corresponding Author:

Fatia Nur Azizah

Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia; fatianur58@student.uns.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

In one of the elementary schools in Karimunjawa, a young teacher faces unique challenges while teaching a class of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. When she asked about local folklore, only a few students were able to recount it evidence that cultural values are beginning to erode. This situation

illustrates a real issue in remote areas like Karimunjawa, where local culture faces the pressures of globalization, while culturally responsive teaching practices remain rarely implemented.

Education serves as a principal pillar in national development, aiming to enhance the quality of human resources. In today's era of globalization, Indonesia's education system is confronted with intricate challenges in the 21st century (Anggraini & Hudaidah, 2021). Education systems are encountering challenges and trends in the 21st century, such as the necessity to build digital skills and adapt to an increasingly diverse and globalized society (Andrey, 2020). This is in line with Almizri's opinion which states that the challenges faced by students today are understanding and appreciating their cultural heritage, even though culture is one aspect of character formation (Almizri et al., 2024). Furthermore, the current phenomenon is that many students do not understand and practice cultural values (Seran et al., 2023)(Yulia & Rachmania, 2023). On the other hand, there are those who understand but do not have a significant impact on their learning outcomes (Ilhami, 2019). From a legal standpoint, the National Education System Law No. 20 of 2003 underscores the importance of education in enlightening the life of the nation (Depdiknas, 2003). Empirically, results from the PISA survey indicate that Indonesian students' literacy and numeracy skills are still low compared to those in developed countries (Know & Do, 2019). This gap underscores the need for more contextualized teaching approaches that align with the socio-cultural realities of students. From a theoretical perspective, constructivist education theory emphasizes that learning should provide meaningful experiences for students (Piaget, 1970).

The current *Merdeka Curriculum* seeks to address these challenges by prioritizing meaningful, student-centered learning. This curriculum aims to accommodate various needs and potentials, making education more relevant and contextualized (Menteri Pendidikan Kebudayaan Riset dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2022). However, many teachers in Indonesia continue to rely on conventional teaching methods, limiting opportunities for exploration and deep understanding (Anggianita dkk., 2020). This indicates a gap between the curriculum's objectives and daily teaching practices.

Integrating students' sociocultural contexts into learning is critical for developing their identity and character. Education that incorporates local cultural values not only enriches students' experiences but also strengthens their sense of cultural belonging (Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), as introduced by (Gloria Ladson-Billings, 1995), offers a proven strategy for addressing cultural diversity in classrooms. CRT involves integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, thus making learning more inclusive and engaging. Successful implementation of CRT in developed countries like the United States and Finland has resulted in improvements in academic performance and student engagement (Banks, 2015)(Sahlberg, 2011). However, globalization has also contributed to the erosion of local cultures in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia (Ullah & Ming Yit Ho, 2021), making the implementation of CRT even more urgent.

While many studies have explored CRT in urban settings or among experienced teachers, this study focuses specifically on teachers who have recently graduated from the Teacher Professional Education Program (PPG) in remote island areas like Karimunjawa. These teachers, as newly trained professionals, face unique challenges related to limited resources, isolation, and cultural complexities that distinguish their experiences from teachers in urban areas.

This study addresses a critical research gap by analyzing the perspectives of PPG graduates regarding the implementation of CRT. Teachers who have recently completed formal training in CRT are expected to possess the skills and knowledge needed for its application. However, understanding their readiness, perspectives, and the obstacles they face provides valuable insights into both their professional development and the challenges of implementing CRT in classrooms.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on the experiences of elementary school teachers in Karimunjawa. By targeting newly graduated teachers in a remote context, the study bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering recommendations tailored to the realities of education in isolated areas.

Many previous studies have emphasized CRT's theoretical benefits or focused on experienced teachers in well-resourced areas. However, few studies have explored how newly graduated teachers,

especially in remote regions, translate their formal training into practice. This study aims to fill that void by examining their perspectives and challenges, thereby contributing to improving CRT implementation in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elementary school teachers in implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Phenomenology is used to uncover the meaning behind participants' firsthand experiences by examining how they perceive and interpret educational practices within their unique contexts (Moleong, 2007). This approach was deemed appropriate, as it allows for a deep understanding of teachers' perspectives, beliefs, and challenges in applying CRT in a remote and culturally diverse setting.

The research was conducted over a three-month period, from May to July 2024, focusing on public elementary schools in the Karimunjawa District, a geographically isolated island region in Indonesia. This location was chosen for its distinctive characteristics: limited educational resources, underdeveloped infrastructure, and rich cultural diversity. These factors make the implementation of CRT both essential and complex. Notably, only public schools operate at the elementary level in Karimunjawa, underscoring the importance of strengthening government-supported education in such remote areas.

Participants were ten teachers who had completed the Teacher Professional Education Program (PPG), as these individuals are expected to have a foundational understanding of CRT. Their insights provided valuable perspectives on both the readiness and barriers to enacting CRT in resource-constrained environments.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of teaching documents. To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied by cross-verifying findings across all three methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Ethical protocols were strictly followed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants' confidentiality, and maintaining anonymity throughout the research process.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

This study examined the implementation of the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach by teachers who graduated from the teacher professional education program (PPG) in the Karimunjawa area. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative method and involving 10 teachers as participants.

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

| Gender | Age | Subject Taught | Level of Education |
|--------|--------|------------------|--------------------|
| Male | 24 y.o | Grade 3 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Male | 25 y.o | Grade 3 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Male | 25 y.o | Grade 4 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Male | 25 y.o | Grade 6 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Male | 26 y.o | Grade 6 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Male | 27 y.o | Grade 6 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Male | 28 y.o | Subject Teachers | Bachelor +PPG |
| Female | 24 y.o | Grade 6 Teacher | Magister+PPG |
| Female | 25 y.o | Grade 2 Teacher | Bachelor +PPG |
| Female | 30 y.o | Grade 5 Teacher | Magister+PPG |

Of all the participants, the average age ranged from 24 to 25 years, who had just graduated from teacher professional education program (PPG). Based on observations with the help of questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis, the following data were obtained.

Table 2. Results of Teacher Perspective Analysis in Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching

| Aspects | Observation Findings | Interview Findings | Document Findings |
|---|--|---|---|
| Knowledge of CRT | All teachers demonstrated knowledge of CRT | All teachers had knowledge from PPG, while 2 teachers who had implemented CRT demonstrated a deeper understanding. | The PPG module covered the theory of CRT, but there was no detailed guidance for practical application. |
| The Importance of CRT Implementation | Teachers generally recognize the importance of CRT for effective learning. | All teachers stated that CRT was important to increase engagement and relevance of learning. | - |
| Self-Confidence in Implementing CRT | Variation in self-confidence was seen; 2 teachers were confident, 8 teachers were less confident. | Some teachers feel confident in implementing CRT, while others feel hesitant or unprepared. | The questionnaire results showed that 8 teachers were not confident in implementing CRT. |
| Training on CRT | There is no indication of specific CRT training; observations suggest general training without a focus on CRT. | All teachers revealed that they had not received any specific training on CRT. | Interview result document do not record any specific CRT training in schools. |
| School Support | School support for CRT implementation varies; some teachers feel supported, others do not. | Some teachers felt supported by the school, but others felt neutral or had little support. | - |
| Use of Learning Materials | Only two teachers had integrated materials reflecting cultural diversity into their teaching. | Two teachers used culturally responsive materials, while the others had not implemented such materials. | The Teaching Module covers some material on cultural diversity, but it is not consistently integrated. |
| Understanding Students' Cultural Background | Some teachers showed a good understanding of students' cultural backgrounds, others remained neutral. | 10 teachers showed good understanding, but 2 teachers who implemented CRT showed deeper understanding. | Non-cognitive diagnostic assessment documents. |
| Culturally Responsive Learning Strategies | 2 teachers implemented culturally responsive strategies, while 8 teachers had not implemented them. | Teachers who implement CRT use culturally responsive strategies, while others are still neutral or have not implemented them. | Teaching Module |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---------------|
| Discussion about culture | Discussions about culture with students varied; only a few teachers actively engaged students in these discussions. | The level of student engagement in cultural discussions varied; the 2 teachers who implemented CRT were more active in these discussions. | Documentation |
| Barriers to CRT Implementation | Significant barriers to CRT implementation include a lack of training and support. | Many teachers identified barriers such as lack of training, school support, and resources. | |

The data analysis revealed that most teachers in Karimunjawa possess a foundational understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and acknowledge its importance in enhancing the learning experience. However, significant variation was found in their confidence and consistency in applying CRT strategies. While many teachers expressed uncertainty and hesitation, two teachers stood out for actively implementing CRT in their classrooms. Their success was largely attributed to strong self-confidence and intrinsic motivation to embed the local sociocultural context into their teaching practices. These educators recognized the value of connecting lessons to students' lived experiences, making learning more relevant and engaging.

A major barrier identified was the lack of formal training in CRT. Without structured professional development, many teachers felt unprepared to apply CRT effectively. This highlights the urgent need for targeted training programs that provide practical strategies and pedagogical tools tailored to culturally diverse classrooms.

Institutional support also varied. While some teachers felt encouraged by school leaders to explore CRT, others reported a lack of administrative backing, which discouraged innovation. This disparity underscores the crucial role of school leadership in fostering an environment where culturally responsive practices are supported and sustained.

Regarding learning materials, a few teachers had taken the initiative to incorporate culturally diverse content—such as local folklore, traditional stories, and real-life community examples. However, the majority relied heavily on standardized textbooks, missing opportunities to connect instruction to students' cultural identities.

Teachers who effectively applied CRT also demonstrated a deeper understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds. This was often facilitated by the use of non-cognitive diagnostic assessments, enabling more personalized and inclusive instruction. Conversely, those without access to CRT training struggled to develop such understanding.

In sum, only two teachers consistently demonstrated culturally responsive teaching strategies, including linking content to local practices, encouraging cultural sharing, and incorporating community-based examples. Their experiences suggest that self-confidence, motivation, and access to practical knowledge—bolstered by supportive leadership—are key drivers of successful CRT implementation.

To bridge existing gaps, the study recommends implementing comprehensive CRT training, enhancing school leadership engagement, and developing culturally relevant teaching materials. These measures are essential to empower more teachers and expand CRT practices across remote learning environments.



Figure 1. Getting to Know Animals Around – Grade 3rd

The learning in Figure 1 above adopts the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach that utilizes the nature and local culture of Karimunjawa to enrich the learning experience of grade 3 students in Chapter 1 "Let's Get to Know Animals Around Us." Learning begins by inviting students to reflect on the animals around them, helping them recognize their identity as part of a community rich in biodiversity, and connecting cultural mindsets with the environment (Self Identification). Students are then invited to explore the relationship between biodiversity and local culture, such as how communities maintain the balance of nature and daily life, fostering cultural understanding (Cultural Understanding). In this process, students work together in groups to observe and record local animals, strengthen communication and collaboration (Collaboration). After that, they conduct critical reflections on the impact of human activities on the sustainability of animals, and question the relationship between culture and nature and their role in maintaining its sustainability (Critical Reflection). Learning already contains elements of CRT, although it has not yet reached the transformative construction component.



Figure 2. How Our Body Moves - Grade 6th.

The material in Chapter 1 "How Does Our Body Move?" in Grade 6 Science can be connected to the apperception of seeing beach animals moving and beach wave movement games through the principle of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Direct observation of beach animals and physical activities such as imitating wave movements make learning more relevant and interesting by linking the concept of body movement to students' local experiences. This activity supports a better understanding of how the body moves and adapts, as well as appreciating the diversity of body adaptations in the context of the environment. This is in line with the principle of CRT which emphasizes the importance of connecting the material to the cultural and environmental context of students.

These teachers also engaged students in discussions about culture, although the level of engagement varied. Many teachers identified obstacles in implementing CRT as significant, underscoring the need for further support and capacity building to overcome these challenges. Apart from that, one of the participants said that the obstacle was, "because they have not been placed for long, they do not yet know the local culture in depth." The results of this study provide a detailed view of teachers' perceptions and experiences in applying CRT and identify areas requiring further attention to enhance the effectiveness of this approach in Karimunjawa.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that while many elementary school teachers in Karimunjawa possess a basic understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), a significant gap remains between knowledge and practical implementation. Most teachers reported low levels of confidence in applying CRT strategies, largely due to insufficient training and limited access to relevant teaching resources. This pattern aligns with findings from North Sumatra, where only 30% of teachers showed an accurate understanding of CRT, and just 20% had applied it in their classrooms (Sani et al., 2024).

These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and sustained professional development that addresses both theory and practical application. Training programs should include interactive workshops, mentoring, and context-specific modules tailored to the cultural characteristics of the local environment. As emphasized by Day and Beard (2019), ongoing professional development combined with strong support from school leadership is essential for the successful integration of CRT into daily teaching practices. Moreover, improved access to culturally relevant learning materials—especially those reflecting local customs, traditions, and lived experiences—would further support teachers in embedding cultural values into their pedagogy.

This study also underscores the diverse and complex challenges teachers face in implementing CRT, particularly in remote regions like Karimunjawa. These challenges are not unique to Indonesia. Similar difficulties have been identified globally. In Namibia, for example, the lack of resources is a primary obstacle in CRT implementation (Constantino, 2021). In Malaysia, challenges extend beyond resources to include teachers' limited knowledge, self-efficacy, and issues related to curriculum and assessment (Jia & Nasri, 2019). In the broader ASEAN context, teachers often struggle with misconceptions about CRT and a lack of cultural responsiveness skills (Trisnawati et al., 2020).

To address these issues systemically, pre-service teacher education must also be reformed. CRT principles should be embedded more deeply into teacher training curricula, especially during practical field experiences, to foster competence and confidence from the outset (Jia & Nasri, 2019).

Overall, the challenges observed in Karimunjawa reflect a broader, global concern regarding the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy. Addressing this issue requires multi-level collaboration between government bodies, educational institutions, and school leaders. Tailored interventions—including robust teacher training, equitable access to resources, and inclusive education policies—are essential to closing the gap between understanding and effective practice of CRT in both local and international contexts.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights that can serve as a foundation for future research on the impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in remote and culturally diverse regions such as Karimunjawa. One important direction for future studies is to examine the effect of CRT implementation on student learning outcomes, particularly in comparison to traditional teaching approaches. By analyzing differences in academic performance, engagement, and classroom participation, researchers can gain a clearer understanding of CRT's effectiveness in promoting equitable education.

Expanding the scope of research to include other remote or marginalized regions could also reveal patterns of common challenges, as well as innovative solutions that may be transferable or adaptable to the Karimunjawa context. Such comparative studies can inform region-specific strategies while contributing to a broader understanding of CRT implementation across diverse educational settings.

Moreover, future research should investigate the influence of CRT on student motivation, engagement, and identity development, especially in areas with rich cultural heritage. Understanding how culturally responsive practices affect students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy can provide deeper insights into CRT's holistic benefits.

To enhance the effective implementation of CRT, contextualized and longitudinal studies are needed. These should explore not only short-term academic outcomes but also long-term impacts on student attitudes, teacher-student relationships, and classroom inclusivity. By conducting more

detailed and location-specific research, educational stakeholders can better tailor CRT approaches to the unique cultural and infrastructural realities of each region.

In conclusion, broader, interdisciplinary, and in-depth research is essential to fully realize the potential of CRT in addressing educational inequality and enriching learning experiences in remote, resource-constrained, and culturally diverse environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that while most teachers in the Karimunjawa District demonstrate a foundational understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and acknowledge its significance in promoting inclusive education, substantial challenges hinder its effective implementation. These include limited access to structured training, a lack of culturally relevant teaching materials, time constraints, and inconsistent institutional support. Although some teachers have taken the initiative to incorporate local cultural elements into their lessons, overall confidence and readiness to implement CRT remain low—highlighting the need for targeted professional development and stronger leadership engagement.

The research is limited by its small sample size and its focus on newly graduated teachers, which may not fully represent the experiences of more seasoned educators. These constraints limit the generalizability of the findings across broader educational contexts. Future studies should consider involving a larger and more diverse sample, including experienced teachers, to gain deeper insights into CRT implementation across different teaching careers and settings. Additionally, longitudinal research is recommended to examine the sustained impact of CRT on both teacher practices and student learning outcomes over time.

The implications of this study extend beyond Karimunjawa, offering valuable insights for other remote or culturally diverse regions facing similar obstacles. To advance CRT practices, stakeholders—including policymakers, educational leaders, and curriculum developers—must prioritize context-specific, ongoing training, foster school-level mentorship systems, and support the integration of local cultural resources into the curriculum. By addressing these critical areas, efforts to build culturally inclusive classrooms can lead to greater student engagement, equity, and academic success, particularly in geographically isolated communities where cultural diversity is both a strength and a challenge.

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