

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Public Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Viewpoints on Promoting Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms in South Central Mindanao, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Context: Philippine public classrooms are becoming more culturally, linguistically, and socially diverse, yet little is known about how regular secondary teachers, and not only teachers in designated Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) schools, understand and enact culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) to build equitable and inclusive classrooms.

Purpose: This study explored how junior high school teachers in public schools in Makilala, Cotabato, describe their experiences in culturally diverse classrooms, the advantages they see in culturally responsive teaching, how they observe cultural thinking skills among learners, and the strategies they use to facilitate CRP.

Method: A descriptive qualitative design was used. Ten teachers with at least five years of service were selected through purposive criterion sampling from four public secondary schools. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion between December 2022 and April 2023 and analyzed thematically.

Findings: Eleven themes emerged across four areas: experiences in diverse classrooms, advantages of CRP, observed cultural thinking skills, and facilitation strategies. Teachers emphasized respect, language translation, equal opportunity, cultural appreciation through IPEd, intercultural communication, real-world connections, culturally grounded lesson planning, and community cultural programs.

Contribution: Teachers enact CRP mainly through respect, local-language accommodation, IPEd integration, and community cultural programs. Practice appears to depend on individual initiative more than on systematic institutional support, pointing to the need for sustained teacher training, locally produced materials, and school-community partnerships.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture shapes how teachers and students understand their classroom roles, evaluate themselves, and take part in learning activities (Sarı & Yüce, 2020). As schools enroll learners from more varied ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, both instruction and classroom management depend increasingly on teachers' capacity to respond to that variety (Garcia & Pantao, 2021). Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is one of the most widely used frameworks for describing such a response. In its best-known formulation, CRP rests on three commitments: students' academic success, the development of cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). The urgency of this agenda was sharpened by the COVID-19 pandemic, when Ladson-Billings (2021) argued that education should not simply return to "normal" but undergo a "hard re-set" toward pedagogy that is more culturally centered.

Syntheses of the literature converge on what such a response involves. A systematic overview of 32

sources identified recurring elements: recognizing students' cultural backgrounds, building positive relationships, adapting instruction, and promoting critical consciousness, with ongoing professional development as a condition for effective implementation (Caingcoy, 2023). Teachers are central to this work. Culturally responsive teachers need to become aware of their own assumptions and prejudices about cultural difference (Karatas, 2020), and studies of teachers' perceptions and practices, including those of nominated exemplar teachers (Debnam et al., 2023), show that teachers' own accounts are a rich source of knowledge about what CRP looks like in everyday classrooms.

Two conceptual points frame how CRP is used in this article. First, CRP is not a fixed set of techniques. Gay (2018) describes it as teaching that draws on students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and ways of communicating, which means that what counts as responsive depends on who the learners are and what their communities value. Second, because teachers bring their own cultural positions into the classroom, responsiveness begins with awareness of

those positions (Karatas, 2020) and with a view of the classroom as a place where learning is bound up with social and cultural practices (Gee, 2007). Together these points explain why teachers' own descriptions of their work, rather than a checklist of strategies, are the starting point of the present inquiry.

The Philippine context makes the question pressing. The country is home to many ethnolinguistic communities, and the Department of Education (DepEd) has given curricular form to the rights recognized under Republic Act No. 8371 through the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2015; Republic of the Philippines, 1997). In 2021, DepEd marked the first decade of the IPEd program, reporting 2.5 million learners served (Department of Education, 2021). Reported IPEd practices include contextualized lesson plans, instruction in the local language, elders serving as teachers and mentors, use of the ancestral domain as a learning space, and the hiring of teachers knowledgeable about local culture (Department of Education, 2021). Policy analysis suggests that IPEd moved away from assimilationist approaches toward an interface model that combines Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems, and that its implementation requires continuing dialogue between Indigenous communities and the state (Mirole, 2024).

Recent Philippine studies have examined culture-based instruction models (Inocian et al., 2020), the delivery of a culturally responsive curriculum in an IP school (Mercado, 2021), practice teachers' competence in culturally responsive teaching (Caingcoy et al., 2022), the competence of non-Indigenous teachers who teach Indigenous learners (Linggan & Ducot, 2025; Sarmiento & Tudy, 2020), and community engagement in Indigenous education in Mindanao (Magdadaro & Sacramento, 2022). Scholarship from Cotabato has likewise begun to document how residents take part in local programs and policies (Osumo et al., 2025b) and how local youth engage with civic life in Makilala (Osumo et al., 2025a).

Much of this work, however, concentrates on designated IP schools, on teacher candidates, or on non-Indigenous teachers assigned to Indigenous communities. Less is known, to the authors' knowledge, about how regular public junior high school teachers in multicultural, rural communities describe CRP as a means of building equitable and inclusive classrooms, and how those descriptions relate to DepEd's IPEd policy. These teachers face learners with different languages, beliefs, and practices, often with limited institutional guidance. Understanding their viewpoints can show where practice is already culturally responsive and where support is still needed.

Examining these viewpoints is timely for three reasons. First, the call for a "hard re-set" after the pandemic places culturally centered pedagogy on the agenda of schools that are now rebuilding routines (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Second, more than a decade of IPEd implementation invites a closer look at how the

policy reaches teachers outside designated IP schools, who may meet Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners in the same classroom (Department of Education, 2021). Third, teachers' own accounts remain a primary source of knowledge about what CRP looks like in practice, and they can show which parts of the framework are already visible in everyday teaching and which are not (Debnam et al., 2023).

This study therefore explored junior high school teachers' viewpoints on CRP in selected public schools in Makilala, Cotabato. It sought answers to four questions: (1) What are teachers' experiences in classrooms with culturally diverse learners? (2) What advantages do teachers see in culturally responsive teaching? (3) How do teachers observe cultural thinking skills among learners in their school communities? (4) How are strategies for facilitating culturally responsive teaching implemented in the participating schools?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on CRP, which holds that teaching is more effective when it draws on students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and ways of communicating (Gay, 2018), and on a sociocultural view of learning in which literacy and learning are situated in social and cultural practices (Gee, 2007). From CRP, the study borrows the three commitments described by Aronson and Laughter (2016), namely academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, as sensitizing concepts rather than fixed categories. Themes were generated inductively from teachers' accounts and were considered in relation to these commitments only afterward (Section 3.5). Consistent with the sociocultural view, teachers' practices are treated as shaped by local conditions, including the languages spoken in school communities and the presence of IPEd.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The findings can inform DepEd divisions and school heads who plan teacher development in multicultural public schools, teacher education institutions that prepare future teachers for such settings, and researchers who wish to extend CRP scholarship beyond designated IP schools.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

A descriptive qualitative design was used because the study aimed to understand how teachers themselves interpret and respond to cultural diversity in their classrooms. Qualitative description keeps the analysis close to participants' own words while still allowing patterns to be identified across accounts, and it is well suited to generating findings that inform practice and policy. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

2.2 Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The study was conducted in four public secondary schools in Makilala, Cotabato, namely: *Makilala National High School*, *Kisante National High School*, *Malasila Vocational-Technological High School*, *San Vicente National High School*, and *Bulakanon National High School*, a rural municipality where schools have limited teaching staff and serve learners from diverse cultural groups, including Indigenous learners. School names are withheld to protect participants' confidentiality.

Ten junior high school teachers participated. Purposive criterion sampling was used, in which participants are deliberately selected because they meet predefined criteria relevant to the research aims (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants had to (1) have at least five years of service in a public secondary school, (2) have taught Grade 10 using language translation or adjustments to the local dialect, and (3) be able to take part in a one-on-one in-depth interview. Empirical reviews report that saturation in interview studies is typically reached within roughly 9 to 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), and a sample of ten is consistent with that range for a study with a narrowly defined population and focused questions. Participants are referred to as Participant 1 to Participant 10.

2.3 Research Instruments

The main instrument was a researcher-made interview guide on teachers' viewpoints about promoting equitable and inclusive classrooms through CRP. Its questions were derived from the CRP framework and aligned with the four research questions. The guide was submitted to experts for face and content validation, pilot-tested in a dry run, and revised according to the corrections received. A voice recorder was used to capture participants' responses.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher first sought written permission from the dean of the graduate school, the schools division superintendent, the public schools district supervisor, and the school heads. Data were then gathered between December 2022 and April 2023 through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and gave consent before recording began.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, including filler words, false starts, and other verbal cues that preserve context. Analysis followed the phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019): the researcher became familiar with the data, assigned preliminary codes describing the content, searched for patterns across interviews, reviewed the candidate themes, and defined and named the final themes before writing the report. After redundant categories were removed, eleven themes were retained and grouped under the four research questions. Quotations are reproduced as spoken, with only minor corrections of spacing and spelling; local program names are

standardized, and identifying details are replaced with bracketed descriptions.

Several practices supported the trustworthiness of the study: expert validation of the interview guide, verbatim transcription, a clearly bounded sampling frame, confidentiality safeguards, and guidance from an adviser, a panel, and peers during analysis. The researcher's involvement and efforts to maintain objectivity in analyzing and presenting data were described transparently.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on written informed consent. Participants were told the purpose of the study and the methods used, and they were free to decline or withdraw at any time. Their identities were protected through participant codes, and records were secured in line with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic of the Philippines, 2012). Research assistants, documenters, and transcribers were oriented on privacy and confidentiality requirements. The study posed minimal risk, mainly the time taken from teachers' professional and personal obligations and the possibility that some experiences might be uncomfortable to recall; interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, and the researcher attended to their emotional state during data gathering. Participants were selected impartially according to the stated criteria, and tokens of appreciation were given to all participants to acknowledge their time. Permissions and consent documents were kept so that the research process could be audited.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eleven themes emerged from the interviews and focus group discussion. They are presented below under the four research questions, each followed by a discussion that relates the theme to prior research, and then synthesized in Section 3.5.

3.1 Teachers' Experiences in Classrooms with Culturally Diverse Learners

Table 1. Teachers' experiences in classrooms with culturally diverse learners

Theme	Core idea
Respect of boundaries	Teachers show respect and sensitivity in the classroom to honor learners' differences.
Implementing language translation in classrooms	Teachers translate and interpret learners' ideas to acknowledge inclusiveness.
Encouraging students to share differentiated cultural perspectives	Teachers value and listen to learners' ideas to learn about their different backgrounds.

3.1.1 Respect of boundaries

Teachers described respect as a deliberate classroom stance: being sensitive to learners' backgrounds, discouraging discrimination, and choosing examples that would not offend anyone.

"As teachers, we must be sensitive and should respect our students based on their different backgrounds and perspectives." (Participant 2)

"In my class, I am always reminding my students that we should not discriminate against someone's culture, instead we should practice giving respect to everyone." (Participant 5)

"Whenever I will conduct my class, I am very careful to give examples where I cannot offend someone or my student because showing respect will always be important." (Participant 6)

Respect here functions as both an ethical stance and a classroom-management strategy. By setting limits on what may be said, joked about, or used as an example, teachers protect learners' dignity and sense of safety, which fits work on culturally responsive classroom management (Gaias et al., 2019). The practice also reflects the view that culture shapes the roles teachers and students take in class (Sarı & Yüce, 2020) and that culturally responsive teachers must first examine their own assumptions (Karatas, 2020). In participants' accounts, however, respect was largely preventive, centered on avoiding offense, rather than generative. Avoiding harm is necessary, but CRP also expects teachers to build learners' cultural competence actively (Aronson & Laughter, 2016), which requires drawing on cultural knowledge as a classroom resource and not only protecting it.

3.1.2 Implementing language translation in classrooms

Translation and the use of learners' first languages were the most concrete tools teachers named for inclusion. They moved among English, Filipino, and local languages to make unfamiliar terms relatable and to invite participation.

"I always do interpretation in class if what language should be used that is intended on their own identity so that they will be encouraged to participate in class." (Participant 1)

"In our school, we are implementing the use of IPED. As I handle classes with my IP learners, I translate the English terms that are unfamiliar to them through the use of Filipino and Bagobo Tagabawa so that students can find my lesson relatable to them." (Participant 3)

"With the use of local community language or the first language used by our learners we can interact with them and they can express what they want and share their ideas in class." (Participant 7)

These accounts are consistent with evidence that translation can support comprehension among learners studying through another language (Alaboud, 2022). They also echo challenges documented in IP education, where the lack of written materials hinders teachers' efforts to preserve and transmit local languages (Mercado, 2021). Because Participant 3 described translating terms as they arise, the practice appears to rest on teachers' own language repertoires rather than on prepared materials. This raises the question of how

teachers who lack those repertoires cope, a concern also reflected in research on non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous learners (Linggan & Ducot, 2025; Sarmiento & Tudy, 2020).

3.1.3 Encouraging students to share differentiated cultural perspectives

Participants described inviting learners to share their ideas and perspectives so that teachers could understand where learners were coming from. Listening was framed as a way to discover learners' backgrounds rather than to assume them. This is consistent with the emphasis that syntheses of CRP place on recognizing students' cultural backgrounds and building positive relationships (Caingcoy, 2023). Participants' descriptions of how they listen appear more fully in Section 3.3.2.

3.2 Advantages of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Table 2. Advantages of culturally responsive teaching

Theme	Core idea
Promoting equality and diversity in classrooms	Teachers create a friendly environment that offers equal opportunity to all learners despite their differences.
Embracing one's cultural background	Teachers respond to learners' cultures by adopting and supporting the culture that exists in the locality.

3.2.1 Promoting equality and diversity in classrooms

Teachers presented fairness as the main benefit of CRP: every learner should have a comparable chance to take part, whatever their differences.

"Culture responsiveness is about valuing and understanding the learners on how they are going to take part in the classroom. As long as we as teachers, we incorporate our lessons to the different experiences like their beliefs, we can fully understand our students." (Participant 1)

"There should be equal opportunities in the classroom despite their differences because students will always need attention." (Participant 2)

"We should take part in putting in our lesson plan that has the moral good, in which they can have an equal participation. It can be in the valuing part of the lesson that connects with the culture, which they will value." (Participant 7)

Participant 1 links understanding learners to their participation, which resonates with the finding that positive teacher–student relationships foster belonging and well-being (Caingcoy, 2023). Participant 7 locates equal participation in a specific part of the lesson, the valuing phase, which shows how a general commitment to equity can be translated into lesson design. Participants largely equated fairness with equal attention and equal opportunity. Whether such treatment is sufficient, or whether equity also requires differentiated support for learners whose languages and experiences are less represented in school, is a distinction that deserves attention in future work.

3.2.2 Embracing one's cultural background

Teachers also described the advantages of CRP in terms of their own growth: reflecting on their attitudes, studying learners' cultures, and attending to learners' well-being.

"As a teacher, based on my experience I try to embrace the culture of others and give emphasis on the different culture-based experiences of my students." (Participant 1)

"I always reflect on my attitude and belief to address biases or assumptions to my learners' cultural backgrounds." (Participant 2)

"I keep in mind that knowing my learners better is by studying and familiarizing their culture." (Participant 3)

"I know how to embrace the culture of my students and see their well-being." (Participant 4)

Participant 2's reflection on biases illustrates the self-awareness that is regarded as a foundation of culturally responsive competence (Karatat, 2020). Studying learners' culture, as Participant 3 describes, parallels culture-based instruction models that are rooted in local practices (Inocian et al., 2020). It also supports the view that teachers' competence in culturally responsive teaching develops through exposure to and immersion in learners' contexts (Caingcoy et al., 2022). Taken together, participants framed CRP as something that benefits teachers as learners as well as the students they teach.

3.3 Observations of Cultural Thinking Skills

Table 3. Observations of cultural thinking skills

Theme	Core idea
Employing cultural appreciation in the classroom	Teachers honor and appreciate learners' cultural differences by conducting programs.
Response to intercultural communication	Teachers listen to learners' concerns and use a positive communication approach.
Emphasizing intercultural engagements	Teachers integrate lessons not only for IP learners but also for gender awareness and development.

3.3.1 Employing cultural appreciation in the classroom

Participants from schools implementing IPed described cultural appreciation as something that is built into school life through the program.

"We are really aware of accepting and respecting one's culture. Integrating to culture practice. Since we are an IPed implementing school, we make sure that IPed integration is always present in the classroom." (Participant 3)

"To fully understand the students, it is good that the IPed is present in the different schools in [the municipality] knowing that we encounter students with different practices and beliefs." (Participant 4)

"The more that IPed is practiced in the classroom, I am able to understand the views of the students." (Participant 5)

These accounts show how national policy reaches the classroom. IPed was designed to respond to the right of Indigenous learners to education that is relevant to their context (Department of Education, 2021), and policy analysis describes it as an interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems (Miole, 2024). For these teachers, the interface is experienced as a daily understanding of learners' views. The accounts also suggest that appreciation is strongest where IPed is institutionalized. Research on teachers in IPed schools who are not IPed specialists points to uneven preparation, with adaptive capacity on the one hand and systemic gaps that hinder sustainable implementation on the other (Tañon et al., 2026). Cultural appreciation in schools without a formal IPed program was not examined in this study and warrants separate inquiry.

3.3.2 Response to intercultural communication

Teachers described responding to cultural differences mainly through listening and through negotiating language.

"As a teacher, I always listen to them on their side and how they conclude things." (Participant 1)

"The way I deal with my learners in engaging cultural communication, I make an effort to listen actively to them and avoid taboos." (Participant 2)

"I just really use and make an agreement with my students if on what language can we use where we can understand each other, so that we can communicate as well." (Participant 4)

Two features stand out. First, Participant 2's attention to avoiding taboos implies knowledge of local norms about what may be said or done, knowledge that teachers appear to acquire informally rather than through training. Second, Participant 4's agreement with students on the language to be used turns communication into a shared decision, which gives learners some control over the terms of interaction. Communication has also been identified as central to residents' participation in local programs and policies in Cotabato, where its absence is a main barrier to engagement (Osumo et al., 2025b). The teachers' listening practices can be read as a classroom-level counterpart of that finding: when communication channels are open and negotiated, participation is more likely.

3.3.3 Emphasizing intercultural engagements

Teachers engaged learners with cultural differences through lessons, programs, group discussion, and real-life situations, and they extended this engagement beyond IP learners to include gender awareness.

"I make an effort to practice and emphasize learning the different backgrounds that the students have. Because on this way they will be open to learning." (Participant 1)

"To be engaged in different cultures is to incorporate lessons and programs that the teacher is conducting."

The best way to do that is also in real-life situations.”
(Participant 2)

“Teachers are able to discuss cultural differences by providing different activities and lectures with a group discussion for them to share their positive and negative opinions.” (Participant 3)

Participant 3’s mention of “positive and negative opinions” indicates that teachers allow disagreement to surface in discussion, which is a precondition for the critical engagement that CRP seeks to foster (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). The extension from Indigenous learners to gender awareness suggests that teachers see cultural responsiveness as a broader orientation toward difference and not as a program limited to a single group. This is consistent with studies of exemplary teachers, whose culturally responsive practices extend across multiple dimensions of classroom life (Debnam et al., 2023).

3.4 Strategies for Facilitating Culturally Responsive Teaching

Table 4. Strategies for facilitating culturally responsive teaching

Theme	Core idea
Awakening students’ perspectives from real-world experiences	Teachers help students use the content area to solve problems in their lives, communities, and the world.
Teacher’s planning, organizing, and directing lessons toward cultural influences	Teachers prepare lesson plans that involve or represent a culture connected to learners’ backgrounds.
Providing opportunities through cultural development	Teachers conduct cultural development programs that highlight learners’ culture, such as arts, dance, and customs.

3.4.1 Awakening students’ perspectives from real-world experiences

Teachers connected lessons to current events and to learners’ lived realities, including sensitive topics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

“Social justice and injustice are experienced by every individual, so students should be aware of the current events. Instructional materials like video clips and info graphics will be a big help because they can also share insights based on the videos or articles presented.” (Participant 1)

“I have discussed topics like the influence of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-status. In ESP, they were able to relate the past experiences of their families about finding a job rather than attending classes. So in that kind of mentality, it was then erased in their minds because education will make their life successful in time.” (Participant 4)

“I teach the students on how to be aware and not to judge others like with the third genders. It must be discussed in class so they will be open minded.” (Participant 5)

This theme provides the clearest evidence of the third CRP commitment, sociopolitical consciousness, because teachers invite learners to examine social

justice, bias, and the link between schooling and life chances (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Participant 4’s example is notable: by discussing how learners’ families had weighed work against schooling, the teacher treats learners’ family experience as legitimate content and reframes education as a route to a better future. Frameworks for describing culturally relevant pedagogy likewise stress connecting learning to students’ lives and communities (Lim et al., 2019). The use of videos and infographics suggests that teachers also draw on media to bring current events into classes.

3.4.2 Teacher’s planning, organizing, and directing lessons toward cultural influences

Teachers reported planning lessons and activities deliberately around learners’ cultural backgrounds.

“I always incorporate my lesson plan with the cultural background of my students, so that students can participate in my class.” (Participant 1)

“I am preparing a lesson plan that is culturally responsive to my students with different references and methods that will have mutual understanding.” (Participant 3)

“The activities must jive with the lesson plan and make it more relevant to the culture of the students.” (Participant 5)

“I ask permission from my students to let them show the real life events. Afterward, I ask them to have a reflection and avoid biases in class.” (Participant 6)

These accounts match the view that CRP means drawing on students’ cultural experiences when designing instruction (Gay, 2018) and that adapting instruction to learners’ needs is a core element of CRP (Caingcoy, 2023). Participant 6’s practice of asking permission before learners present real-life events, followed by reflection, is a useful example because it pairs student voice with an explicit step for examining bias. All four accounts, however, describe planning as an individual teacher’s task. None mentions shared planning time, school-level curriculum adaptation, or access to localized materials. The institutional dimension of CRP, in which schools and systems support teachers’ responsiveness, was therefore largely absent from teachers’ descriptions.

3.4.3 Providing opportunities through cultural development

Teachers described school and community events through which learners’ cultures are showcased, particularly for IP learners.

“We are conducting [a festival] yearly but it was stopped due to the pandemic. We include their parents who are known to be Datus, Bai, and the whole IP community.” (Participant 3)

“We have our IP day where students enjoy and are given the opportunity to showcase their culture not only to the students but also to the parents.” (Participant 4)

"We are establishing programs intended for the IPs because they have a big percentage of participation in our school." (Participant 6)

These events place the school at the center of cultural preservation and invite community leaders and parents into school life, which aligns with research stressing community engagement in Indigenous education in Mindanao (Magdadaro & Sacramento, 2022) and with culture-based education that draws on local practices and festivals (Inocian et al., 2020). They also reflect the practice of using the ancestral domain and local cultural practices as anchors for content (Mercado, 2021). Participant 3's remark that the festival stopped during the pandemic shows how dependent such opportunities are on special events and on conditions beyond the school's control. Studies in Cotabato suggest that community participation is sustained when communication is clear and inclusive (Osumo et al., 2025b), which implies that cultural programs may need regular channels for planning with the community and not only occasional celebrations. Related work in North Cotabato also points to the value of culturally responsive, supportive, and low-pressure learning environments, in which learners can build communicative competence gradually (Villaver et al., 2026).

3.5 Synthesis: Themes and the Commitments of CRP

To show how the themes relate to the CRP framework, the eleven themes were mapped interpretively to the three commitments described by Aronson and Laughter (2016). The mapping is the authors' interpretation and is not a statistical result.

Table 5. Interpretive mapping of themes to the commitments of culturally responsive pedagogy

CRP commitment	Related themes	Strength of evidence in this study
Cultural competence	Respect of boundaries; language translation; sharing of cultural perspectives; embracing one's cultural background; cultural appreciation; intercultural communication; intercultural engagement; cultural development opportunities	Strong and recurrent across participants
Sociopolitical consciousness	Promoting equality and diversity; real-world perspectives	Present, mainly in discussions of social justice, gender, and socioeconomic status
Academic success	Language translation (participation); culturally grounded lesson planning	Indirect; learner outcomes were not measured

The mapping shows that teachers' accounts are weighted toward cultural competence, with sociopolitical consciousness appearing in selected practices and academic success referenced only indirectly, through participation. This pattern is

plausible for a study based on teachers' self-reports, but it also suggests that CRP in the participating schools is understood mostly as a way of showing respect and maintaining cultural connection, and less as a way of raising achievement or challenging inequity. Because the pandemic-era call for a "hard re-set" treats culturally centered pedagogy as a route to more equitable learning (Ladson-Billings, 2021), teacher development in these settings may need to give greater attention to the academic and critical dimensions of CRP.

Table 5 can also serve as a practical planning aid. Schools that wish to strengthen CRP can read the rows from the bottom up: academic success is where evidence is thinnest, so it is the natural focus for collaborative lesson study and for gathering simple indicators of learner participation; sociopolitical consciousness appears in only two themes, so it is a candidate for structured discussion of equity issues in subjects such as Araling Panlipunan and Values Education; and cultural competence is already strong, so it is best sustained by keeping the local-language and community-program practices teachers described. These suggestions are offered as hypotheses for local trials, not as findings of this study.

3.6 Cross-Cutting Discussion

Language as the practical hinge. Read across the four tables, language emerges as the point on which teachers' culturally responsive work turns. Translation appeared as a way of widening participation, as a sign of respect for learners' identities, and as a bridge to lesson content, and it recurs in lesson planning and in community cultural programs. This resonates with Philippine studies that tie the competence of non-Indigenous teachers working with Indigenous learners to language and cultural knowledge (Linggan & Ducot, 2025; Sarmiento & Tudy, 2020), and with culture-based instruction models that use local knowledge as a vehicle for learning (Inocian et al., 2020). In the participating schools, however, translation was described as something individual teachers do on their own initiative rather than as a practice backed by localized or bilingual materials. Language-responsive teaching is therefore real but fragile, because it depends on who happens to teach a given class.

From respect to responsiveness. Respect for boundaries, listening, and appreciation of culture were the practices teachers described most readily. They are necessary foundations, yet Aronson and Laughter (2016) frame CRP as more than a positive classroom climate: it also asks teachers to connect culture to academic success and to critical analysis of inequity. Teachers' references to equal opportunity and to discussing real-world issues such as gender and socioeconomic status show the beginnings of that critical dimension. Moving from respect toward fuller responsiveness is likely to require sustained professional learning (Caingcoy, 2023) and structured

opportunities for teachers to examine their own assumptions about cultural difference (Karatat, 2020).

Policy articulation and daily support. Policy documents describe IPed as an interface between Indigenous and national knowledge systems that requires continuing dialogue between communities and the state (Department of Education, 2015; Mirole, 2024), and reported IPed practices include local-language instruction, elders serving as teachers, and contextualized lesson plans (Department of Education, 2021). Participants mentioned IPed integration and school cultural programs, but they said little about shared planning, common materials, or regular supervision of culturally responsive practice. From teachers' viewpoint, then, there may be a gap between how IPed is articulated and the support available day to day. Research on community engagement in Indigenous education in Mindanao points in the same direction by treating sustained, two-way relationships with communities as a condition of success rather than an occasional event (Magdadaro & Sacramento, 2022).

The critical edge of CRP. A caution applies to how these findings are read. Because the accounts are self-reports, the practices teachers described may represent their intentions as much as their classroom conduct, and because teachers emphasized harmony and respect, the data say little about how conflicts over culture, religion, or language were handled when they arose. The sociopolitical commitment of CRP, which asks learners to question inequitable arrangements (Aronson & Laughter, 2016), is exactly the part most likely to involve discomfort. Its thin presence here should therefore not be taken as absence of interest; it may reflect how teachers talk about their work to an outside researcher. Future work combining interviews with observation would be better placed to tell the difference.

Contribution and transferability. Taken together, the findings extend earlier work in three ways. They describe CRP as understood by regular public junior high school teachers in a rural, multicultural municipality, rather than by teachers in designated IP schools or by teacher candidates. They show that the three commitments of CRP are unevenly visible in teachers' accounts, which offers a practical guide for the content of professional development. And they identify language as a cross-cutting resource that links otherwise separate themes. Because the study is qualitative and context-bound, these contributions are offered for transferability to similar settings, namely rural municipalities where Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners share classrooms and where IPed is partly implemented, rather than as general claims about all Philippine schools.

4. CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE AND SDG ALIGNMENT

Practical implications. Four recommendations follow. First, DepEd divisions and school heads can strengthen CRP-focused professional development that addresses

not only respect and cultural awareness but also culturally grounded instruction, assessment, and critically consciousness. Second, schools can support teachers' use of local languages by developing and sharing localized, translated, or bilingual learning materials, drawing on cultural experts and community elders. Third, schools can establish regular, two-way channels with parents and community leaders so that cultural programs do not depend on occasional events alone. Fourth, teacher education institutions can include immersion and reflective activities that help prospective teachers examine their own assumptions before they teach in diverse classrooms.

Implications for policy and research. For policy, the findings suggest that guidance on IPed and CRP may reach more teachers if it is written for regular multicultural classrooms as well as for designated IP schools, and if it specifies what support schools can expect, such as time for collaborative planning, access to cultural experts, and localized materials. For research, the uneven visibility of CRP's commitments suggests questions that can be tested directly: whether culturally responsive practice is associated with learner participation and achievement, whether teachers who receive CRP-focused development describe more of the critical dimension, and how learners and community members themselves judge the responsiveness of their schools.

These directions align with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly Target 4.5, which calls for equal access to education for Indigenous peoples and other learners in vulnerable situations.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored how public junior high school teachers in Makilala, Cotabato, understand and enact CRP to promote equitable and inclusive classrooms. Eleven themes showed that teachers respond to cultural diversity through respect for boundaries, translation and use of local languages, listening, equal opportunity, engagement with learners' cultural backgrounds, IPed integration, culturally grounded lesson planning, real-world discussion of social issues, and school and community cultural programs. The accounts depict teachers who are committed and resourceful, yet whose practice rests largely on personal initiative, local language repertoires, and the presence of IPed, rather than on shared planning, localized materials, or sustained institutional support.

Theoretical implications. The findings support the usefulness of CRP as a lens for understanding teaching in rural multicultural public schools beyond designated IP schools, and they suggest that the three commitments of CRP are not equally visible in teachers' accounts. Cultural competence is the most developed, while academic success and the institutional dimension of CRP remain thinly described and deserve targeted study.

In sum, the teachers in this study already do much of the relational and linguistic work that culturally responsive pedagogy requires. What remains is to anchor that work in shared planning, localized materials, and professional learning, and to extend it toward the academic and critical commitments of CRP, so that responsiveness becomes a feature of schools and not only of individual teachers.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample was small and purposefully selected, with ten teachers from four public schools in one rural municipality, so the findings are offered for transferability rather than statistical generalization. The data are teachers' self-reports gathered through interviews and a focus group discussion; they were not triangulated with classroom observation, learners' perspectives, or document analysis, and teachers may have described their practice in socially desirable ways. Most examples came from teachers in IPed-implementing schools, which may have emphasized IPed-related practices. Learner outcomes were not measured, so claims about the benefits of CRP reflect teachers' perceptions. The data were gathered between December 2022 and April 2023, and conditions may have changed since then.

Finally, the interpretive mapping in Table 5 and the cross-cutting claims in Section 3.6 are the authors' readings of the themes. Other researchers might group the same accounts differently, and the mapping should be treated as a proposal open to challenge rather than as a validated model. The relatively small number of participants also means that a practice mentioned by one teacher may not be shared by colleagues in other schools, so no theme should be read as a frequency count.

Future studies could include learners, parents, and community leaders as participants; add classroom observation and analysis of lesson plans; compare IPed and non-IPed schools and several municipalities; examine specific ethnolinguistic groups in depth; and evaluate the effects of CRP-focused teacher development on teaching practice and learner outcomes.

DECLARATIONS

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Ethics: Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the graduate school, the schools division, the district office, and the participating schools.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Author contributions:

CRedit role	Author(s)	Notes
Conceptualization	F.C.F.O.	Research problem, questions, and framework

CRedit role	Author(s)	Notes
Methodology	F.C.F.O.	Design, sampling, instrument, and analysis plan
Investigation (data collection)	F.C.F.O.	Interviews and focus group discussion
Formal analysis	F.C.F.O.	Transcription, coding, and thematic analysis
Writing – original draft	F.C.F.O.	Thesis manuscript and journal draft
Writing – review & editing	F.C.F.O. + G.N.K	Revision for journal submission
Supervision	G.N.K	Thesis adviser; delete row if none
Project administration	F.C.F.O.	Permissions, scheduling, and coordination

Use of generative AI: Generative artificial intelligence (Claude, Anthropic) was used to assist with language editing, restructuring the original thesis into article format, and identifying literature for the background. The authors reviewed and validated all content and took full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the work.

Data availability: Interview transcripts contain information that could identify participants and are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts supporting the findings are included in the article, and further information may be requested from the corresponding author, subject to participants' consent.

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