

EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS ON CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING SUPPORT STRATEGY

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Abstract: Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has emerged as a critical approach for promoting equity and inclusion. This article explores teachers' perspectives on implementing CRT within early childhood centres. Using participatory action research, data were collected through informative group discussions among co-researchers to explore their perspectives on culturally responsive teaching as a teaching and learning support strategy for supporting diverse learners. Eight (8) early childhood practitioners were purposely selected to be co-researchers in this study. Data were analysed through Braun and Clarke's thematic data analysis method. Findings reveal that practitioners have knowledge of what CRT entails. The findings further revealed that Early childhood practitioners value the involvement and collaboration of parents and grandparents which fosters home-school collaboration. In addition, Early childhood practitioners value the inputs of grandparents whom they regarded as knowledge holders. Finally, the findings showed the strength of CRT as a teaching and learning support strategy by indicating that it allows them to be creative in their teaching practice. The study concludes that CRT is a powerful teaching and learning strategy that value cultural diversity, family involvement and it enhances learning support and inclusivity. Recommendations of this study include ensuring that CRT principles continue to be used in early childhood centres as it promotes creativity, collaboration, learner engagement and success. This study contributes to the discourse on inclusive education by highlighting the significance of CRT as an inclusive teaching and learning support strategy in the early childhood centres.

Keywords: *culturally responsive teaching, early childhood practitioner, inclusion, learning support strategy*

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a critical phase in the children's foundation for learning and socialisation. ECE is broadly recognised as a foundational phase for children's social, linguistic, emotional and cognitive development (Kumar, 2025). Murray (2023) maintains that quality ECE has the potential to set a good foundation for learning success, social development, emotional development, and good health. Nharara and Ndlovu (2025) pointed out that children's awareness of physical and cultural differences begins

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as early as six months which makes them competent to learn. This means that children at early learning centres can be able to learn through Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) teaching approach. As an inclusive teaching approach, Murray (2023) emphasises that this teaching approach is critical for equity, inclusion and support purposes.

CRT emerged as an inclusive pedagogical practice that promotes equity and inclusion of learners all over the world. Developed by Gay (2000), CRT emphasises using learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and learning styles to shape teaching and learning. According to Gay (2002), CRT is developed with a key assumption that learning is most effective when learners see their own cultural experiences reflected in the curriculum. This approach to teaching is focused on adapting teaching methods to be culturally inclusive and effective. This means that CRT involves teaching through the learners' cultural strengths to promote academic success (Gay,2018). Therefore, one key necessity for implementing CRT effectively is teacher preparation in terms of cultural awareness and competence (Ali, 2024).

CRT is about valuing the experiences and perspectives of learners and their families which is instrumental tool to support learners more effectively (Gay 2002). According to Ford and Kea (2009), this teaching approach is child and family centered, and it fosters critical relationship building. Families and communities' involvement is crucial for the success of teaching through CRT (Ashrafova,2024). For example, Early childhood practitioners' can partner with families by inviting them to visit the classroom and participate in activities with their child (Jacobs, 2024). According to National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYCE] (2016) while using CRT, teachers can also arrange to visit children at home, where they may engage in informal discussions with family members about what children enjoy doing for fun and learn about children's favorite food, toy, or song. In his study, Bhatia (2025) indicated that grandparents play an important role in instilling cultural values, respect and identities in their grandchildren. Dennis and Brewer (2017) consider grandparents as the traditional wisdom carriers and keepers of traditional beliefs, values, and cultural practices. These scholars further believe that children are socialised into cultural practices through observing the behaviours of parents and other elders in the community including their grandparents (Dennis & Brewer, 2017).

Culturally responsive teaching strengthens children's sense of identity and belonging while building trusting relationships with care givers (Masterson, 2025). In addition, the study conducted in South Africa by Mahadew (2025) reported that CRT practices improve children's participation and engagement by acknowledging their diverse identities. Davis and Subramaniam (2026) challenge those who align with CRT principles to be reflective about their identity and be open minded in their teaching. CRT requires continuous reflections for improved teaching practices. Therefore, Early childhood teachers should

continuously examine their own unconscious beliefs and attitudes that shape classroom practices. Ladson-Billings (2021) highlights the need for teachers to examine their lives and those of learners that they teach (Phasha, Mahlo & Dei 2017).

I argue that CRT is about having interest in the learners and presenting the lesson in such a way that it aligns with their culture. In essence, every pedagogical practitioner should have knowledge about varied cultures. Gay (2002) advocates for learning techniques such as cooperative problem-solving techniques which may present Early childhood teachers with an opportunity to be facilitators of learning. To be effective in using CRT, Gay (2002) maintained that essential qualities such as being caring are essential. Gay (2002) defined a caring teacher as the individual who "care so much" about the culturally diverse learners and holding them to the same standards as other learners. In addition, Abdalla and Moussa (2024) posits that it is critical for pedagogical practitioners to have effective cultural competence and awareness. The awareness will make the practitioner offer lessons that are culture sensitive. Additionally, Ashrafova (2024) postulates that the use of CRT fosters support and inclusivity inside the classrooms.

CRT as an inclusive pedagogical practice requires Early childhood practitioners to rely on children's home languages, cultural experiences and practices for teaching and learning (Melzi, Schick & Scarola, 2018). Therefore, this inclusive pedagogical teaching practice has the great potential to be a learning support service strategy. A learning support service strategy in South Africa is part of the education support services that are expected to be available in all school settings. Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) maintained that all learners have the potential to learn, therefore they need support. In essence, learning support service is one of the expectations that should be achieved within schools to support teaching and learning within the inclusive education system.

As a learning support strategy, CRT recognises, respects, and uses learners' cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives as valuable assets in the learning process (Gay, 2000). It aims to make the teaching to be more engaging and inclusive for learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Mahadew, 2025). According to Ali (2024) CRT as a learning support strategy believes that teaching and learning should occur in a culturally supported, learner-centered context, where the strengths learners bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilised to promote academic achievement. In CRT classrooms, students feel seen, heard, and understood and they are likely to continue engaging in the learning process and achieve success (Hammond, 2015). For example, the study by Rincón (2024) which explored challenges and benefits teachers face in implementing culturally responsive teaching revealed that teachers taught language concepts in creative ways to support student comprehension and confidence.

In utilising CRT as teaching and learning support strategy, various diverse materials and resources are critical. Due to CRT valuing cultural diversity, textbooks, multimedia resources, and reading materials should reflect a variety of cultures and perspectives (Kuwari, 2024). This is critical also in accordance with the views of Gay (2015) who highlighted that CRT driven classroom environment should encourage open dialogue during lesson delivery. Thus, in CRT driven classrooms, learners should feel safe to express their cultural identities and share their experiences. For example, during lesson delivery, teachers can facilitate discussions on cultural differences, current events, and social justice issues, helping students develop critical thinking skills and cultural awareness (Kuwari, 2024). Therefore, CRT encourages a flexible, inclusive approach that tailor learning experiences of diverse learners to reflect the diverse cultural contexts of learners.

However, there are challenges in implementing CRT (Morrison, Thompson & Glazier, 2022) especially in the ECE phase, where teacher training is not yet fully achieved (van der Westhuizen & Hannaway 2024). Other challenges highlighted in the literature is the lack of relevant cultural resources (Grant, 2023; Kuwari, 2024) and lack of professional development (Grant, 2023). According to Abdulrahim and Orosco (2020), these challenges of using CRT within diverse classrooms make it difficult for teachers to ensure, quality inclusive learning environment. Despite these challenges, CRT proves to be one of the inclusive teaching and learning support strategy in highly culturally and linguistically classroom environments (Mahadew, 2025). Therefore, this study aims to explore the practitioners' views on Culturally Responsive Teaching as a teaching and learning support strategy. To achieve this purpose the below question was asked: "How do Early childhood practitioners view Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) as teaching and learning support strategy?"

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) framework as its theoretical framework. CRP was conceptualised by Ladson-Billings (1995), who emphasised the significance of academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. The approach is for promoting engagement and achievement of all students by embracing a wealth of diversity, identifying and nurturing students' cultural strengths, and confirming students' lived experiences (Villegas & Lucas, 2007) as important in teaching and learning. CRP framework considers the rich and different cultural knowledge the learners bring into the classroom (Howard (2021). This framework is learner-centred; thus, it promotes learner engagement and achievement by embracing their diversity (Ladson-Billings (1995). The main assumption of CRP framework is that cultural diversity is an asset that enriches the learning of all the learners (Howard, 2021), therefore is should not be seen as deficit (Stairs, 2007). In addition, Wlodkowski

and Ginsberg (1995) is of a view that CRP framework is instrumental in assisting learners to relate the lesson content to their cultural experiences. Therefore, the Early childhood practitioner should be knowledgeable about the cultural customs and practices of the children they teach at their centres. In this way learners will relate better with the content that they are being taught, and thus they can achieve better educational outcomes.

Research Methodology

This study is framed within the Action Research (AR) methodology, which is one of the genres of qualitative research. According to Mills (2013) AR in educational settings serve as a blueprint for teachers to understand the process of teaching and leadership. In this study AR was preferred because it allowed the participants, commonly known as co-researchers to take up an active role rather than a passive role during the data generation process. This is because AR allows the co-researchers to reflect about their perspectives, actions, thoughts and feelings (Areljung, Leden & Wiblom (2021). To align with AR, Transformative paradigm, which also encourages inclusion, participation and removal of social injustices (Romm, 2015) was used in this study. This implies that the Early childhood practitioners were given an opportunity to participate and reflect about the practices of using CRT within their classrooms. Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a research design, Early childhood practitioners were allowed to drive the data generation process through their involvement in informative group discussions (Mahadew & Hlalele, 2022). Eight (8) Early childhood practitioners working at different early childhood centres within the Kenneth Kaunda district were recruited to be co-researchers in this study. Six (6) of participants were managers of the early learning centres in the Kenneth Kaunda district municipality who have been managing their centres for more than five years. Two (2) are working as practitioners in the early learning centres.

Data were analysed through Braun and Clarke's (2019) six steps of inductive thematic data analysis. This meant that familiarization with the data was instrumental, coding took place, searching for themes was carried out, reviewing themes was done, themes definition was done and eventually, reporting was done (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In reporting the findings, codes were created to protect the identity of the participants. This study was approved by the Education Research Ethics committee and was allocated ethics number NWU-00330-22-A2. Before data were generated, all the eight participants signed the informed consent forms.

Findings and discussion of the study

Through data analysis, five themes emerged, namely: conceptualisation of Culturally Responsive Teaching, lack of culturally relevant teaching resources, grandparents as cultural knowledge holders, promotion of home - school partnership and creative pedagogical practice. Codes were allocated to participants so that they are not identifiable.

Theme 1: Conceptualisation of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Early childhood practitioners demonstrated a good understanding of Culturally Responsive teaching. They mentioned that CRT is about recognising and valuing children's diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom. This is evident in the following quotation:

"CRT is about acknowledging child's home language, traditions and family customs and values in the delivery of lesson". [CR1]

"For me it is about allowing learners to express themselves in their home language. This gives them confidence and sense of belonging." [CR4]

"I see CRT as powerful tool in teaching. This is because I have realised that when children "see themselves" in classroom content, they participate more confidently and experience a sense of belonging". [CR7]

It is evident from these narratives from the participants that Early childhood practitioners know what CRT entails. They view it as a good tool for teaching their children in the early learning centres because it allows them to be confident and feel seen during lesson delivery. This finding is corresponding with the views of Hammond (2015) who reported that using CRT makes students feel seen, heard, and understood and this make them to be more likely to actively engage in the learning process and achieve success. This finding is further supported by the views Mahadew (2025) reported that CRT practices improve children's participation and engagement. Furthermore, this finding corroborates with the assumptions of the CRP framework which entails promoting learner engagement and achievement by embracing learner diversity (Ladson-Billings (1995).

Theme 2: Lack of culturally relevant teaching resources

Early childhood practitioners highlighted that it is challenging to use CRT in their early learning centres, but they use it irrespective. This is evident in the following quotations:

"Okay...at my centre we try to use CRT in our early learning centre, but we struggle with the resources. So, we ended up creating our own resources using the internet." (CR3)

“We have story books at the Early learning centre, but these story books do not reflect our learners’ backgrounds. At my centre we register many learners who speak Setswana.” [CR6]

The views and perspectives from the Early childhood practitioners indicates that they are finding it challenging to use CRT fully because there are no relevant resources to use in the classrooms. However, the practitioners are making an effort to use CRT despite the challenges they mentioned. This finding indicates that the practitioners use CRT and value it as a teaching and learning support strategy. This finding further depicts that practitioners improvise by creating their own resources through the internet. Grant’s (2023) finding corroborates the findings in this study indicating that there is lack of relevant cultural resources the teachers use in the lesson delivery. It is interesting to note that this finding is contradictory to the principle of CRT which indicates that curriculum should reflect the learners’ experiences and backgrounds (Gay, 2002).

Theme 3: Grandparents as cultural knowledge holders

Early childhood practitioners narrated that they value grandparents’ involvement in the early learning centres as one of the strategies of CRT. This is because they regard grandparents as people who value cultural practices, possessing wisdom and cultural knowledge, interest in the cultural practices. The below narrative confirms their perspective:

“We invite grandparents to cultural day event to share traditional stories and practices; they attend in numbers”. [CR1]

“We invite grandparents to grandparents evening. Grandparents are the primary caregivers. When we engage with them, we gain valuable insights about the child’s upbringing, cultural practices, and learning needs” [CR3]

It is apparent from the participants perspectives that grandparents are resourceful within classrooms that value the use of CRT as a teaching and learning support strategy. This finding corroborates the views of Dennis and Brewer (2017) who consider grandparents as the traditional wisdom carriers and keepers of the traditional beliefs, values, and cultural practices. Furthermore, this finding align with the views Bhatia (2025) reported that grandparents play a crucial role by acting as cultural and environmental guides in their grandchildren’s learning.

Theme 4: Home - school collaboration

Early Childhood practitioners highlighted that they engage and collaborate with parents and grandparents in all affairs of the early learning centres. They mentioned that this assists them to understand learners' backgrounds, experiences, and learning needs. This is evident in the below narrative:

“Working with parents and grandparents helps us understand the cultural values and experiences that learners bring to the classroom. This makes it easier for us to teach in ways that are meaningful to our learners.” [CR2]

“Parents and grandparents in our centre are active. So, we do our best to develop trusting relationships with them. What I like most is that they prioritise the attendance of scheduled activities.” [CR5]

“In my centre we know that grandparents share consistent indigenous stories, that is why we communicate with them continuously so that we can develop trusting relationships that are also beneficial for the children” [CR6]

The above perspective from the participants confirms that the Early childhood practitioners collaborate with the parents and the grandparents of the learners attending school at their early learning centres. This finding further confirms the importance of building trusting relationships with parents and grandparents, which is a key principle of CRT as a teaching and learning support approach. This finding is congruent to the views of Gay (2002) who reported that CRT is an instrumental support tool which values the experiences and perspectives of learners and their families within the learning environment. Furthermore, the views of Ford and Kea (2009) align directly with this finding as they regard CRT as a teaching approach which is child and family centered enabling critical relationship building.

Theme 5: Creative teaching strategy

Co-researchers narrated that they incorporate storytelling, music, and visual activities in their teaching. This is evident in the below narratives.

“I use traditional stories and music to teach children at the centre. My learners understand better by learning through music” [CR1]

“In my case, I once asked children to develop posters as part of their learning. The posters are about everything in their culture, which includes language, identity, songs, games, clothing. You will see creativity as its best, which I think is good” [CR8]

The perspectives and narratives from the Early childhood practitioners confirms that the use of CRT allows and enhance creativity. The use of creativity can encourage learners with varied abilities to participate fully

in the classrooms. This finding shows that creativity can also be fostered through valuing culture, identities and context of the learners. This finding further confirms the ability of teachers to create inclusive classrooms which is key in learning support. This finding corresponds with the views of Ashrafova (2024) who postulated that allowing and valuing cultural diversity into everyday classroom activities can reinforce support and inclusivity. This finding corresponds with the main assumptions of CRP framework which views cultural diversity as an asset that enriches the learning of all the learners (Howard, 2021). In addition, this finding corroborates the findings by Rincón (2024) who revealed that teachers taught language concepts in creative ways to support student comprehension and confidence.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In this study, I explored the perspectives of Early childhood practitioners on Culturally Responsive Teaching as a teaching and learning support strategy. As a result of data analysis, five themes emerged including the conceptualization of Culturally Responsive Teaching, lack of culturally relevant teaching resources, grandparents as cultural knowledge holders, school - family collaboration and CRT as a creative teaching and learning support strategy. This study confirmed CRT to be a powerful teaching and learning support strategy that value cultural diversity, family involvement, and creativity. Using CRT strategies, learner engagement, academic success and inclusivity are achieved and enhanced. Therefore, this study recommends the continued use of CRT in early childhood centres as it promotes creativity, collaboration between teachers and families, learner engagement and academic success. This study contributes to the discourse on inclusive education by highlighting the significance of CRT as an inclusive teaching and learning support strategy in the early childhood centres.

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