

Embracing Diversity in the Classroom: Teachers' Perceptions on Culturally Responsive Classroom Practices in Türkiye

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Abstract

Creating culturally responsive learning environments stands as a pivotal objective for 21st-century classrooms to foster inclusive and equitable education. This phenomenological inquiry explores the perceptions and practices of classroom teachers regarding Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) within the educational context of Türkiye. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 teachers purposefully selected from public schools in Gaziantep, a city notable for its increased cultural diversity in the country. Content analysis was utilized for data analysis. The following themes emerged in the study: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Practices. The findings indicate that,

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although there are instances of culturally responsive practices being implemented and positive perceptions of CRP among educators, substantial challenges persist in integrating CRP effectively within classroom settings. The study highlights the need for effective professional development and teacher training focused on CRP.

Keywords

culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive teacher, cultural diversity, urban teachers, urban classroom

Introduction

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) emerges as a powerful framework for enriching education in today's diverse classrooms. Gay (2002) defines CRP as the integration of cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives of students from various backgrounds as vehicles for teaching. However, it is important to note that CRP extends beyond teaching; it represents a deliberate effort to achieve equity and justice in education for diverse learners (Sleeter, 2012). Grounded in democratic ideals, CRP mainly aims to cultivate inclusive classroom and school environments while establishing high academic expectations for all students through active engagement in the educational process (Vavrus, 2008). As Villegas and Lucas (2002) emphasize, to become culturally responsive, teachers should be conscious of the existence of multiple perspectives and understandings, endorse positive beliefs about students from diverse backgrounds rather than viewing differences as deficiencies, and facilitate the students' way of constructing knowledge.

Different conceptualizations of CRP exist in the literature. Gay's (2002) framework emphasizes five key aspects defining culturally relevant teaching, including (a) gaining an understanding of cultural diversity, (b) integrating content related to cultural diversity into the curriculum, (c) demonstrating empathy and fostering supportive learning environments for all learners, (d) engaging in effective communication with students from diverse backgrounds, and (e) adapting instructional methods to accommodate diversity. Ladson-Billings's (2014) model, on the other hand, highlights the broader goals of CRP, such as promoting students' academic success, fostering cultural competence, and nurturing sociopolitical consciousness. Both frameworks require teachers to possess awareness, certain beliefs, knowledge, and skills and engage in specific inclusive teaching practices to fulfill their roles

as culturally responsive teachers. The present qualitative inquiry, drawing primarily upon these frameworks, explores teachers' perceptions and practices related to CRP in the educational context of Türkiye.

Research indicates that teachers implement various strategies to promote the academic achievement of diverse students. These efforts include, but are not limited to, fostering collaboration among students (Stuart & Volk, 2002), setting clearly defined expectations (D. F. Brown, 2003; Hollie, 2001), and closely monitoring student learning (Gutiérrez, 2000; Jiménez & Gersten, 1999). Related studies suggest that even small efforts, such as being accessible after school (Gutiérrez, 2000; Lipman, 1995) and creating safe, nurturing classroom environments (D. F. Brown, 2003; Parsons, 2005), can lead to significant improvements in student learning. To illustrate, Sheets (1995) shared findings on how she helped her Latin students improve their AP Spanish test scores. She designed assignments that leveraged students' existing verbal abilities through oral evaluations until they became proficient in reading and writing assessments.

Regarding developing cultural competence, research highlights teachers' efforts to incorporate materials and subjects that are not included in the Eurocentric curriculum (Arce, 2004; Hastie et al., 2006), use cultural objects as math manipulatives (Cahnmann & Remillard, 2002), and provide opportunities for students to attend cultural events (Sheets, 1995). Feger's (2006) study offers an example of how cultural and ethnic identities are represented in a classroom with immigrant students from the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.

Previous research has also shown that teachers employ various strategies to foster students' critical consciousness, such as reading texts with critical perspectives (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003) and using alternative reading materials instead of relying solely on curricular texts to encourage students to question hegemonic perspectives (Arce, 2004). For example, Ensign (2003) documented the experiences of a teacher who used real-world mathematical applications to help students critically examine social justice issues, such as questioning price differences for the same products in different stores or why certain items are not sold individually.

Taking a holistic approach to CRP, the literature affirms its positive contributions to various processes at both the school and classroom levels. For example, a quantitative study on student perceptions of their teachers' CRP practices (Byrd, 2016) reported a positive relationship between students' academic achievement and culturally relevant classroom practices. Students reported that the use of CRP strategies increased their interest in school, ultimately leading to greater participation, enhanced peer interaction, and reduced prejudice in the classroom. Nonetheless, the limited availability and

effectiveness of multicultural professional development have hindered teachers' ability to view their students through a culturally diverse lens, thereby negatively affecting the academic achievement of students from different cultural backgrounds (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2018; Patel et al., 2016; Pierce, 2017).

Teachers' Perceptions and Challenges in Implementing CRP

A substantial body of literature examines teachers' perceptions and experiences of CRP. While the majority of teachers are familiar with the concept of CRP, many face challenges in applying it in practice due to a limited understanding of its pedagogical implications (B. A. Brown et al., 2019). Nevertheless, highlighting this theory-practice gap is essential (Hagenaars et al., 2025) to overcome the challenges teachers encounter in effectively implementing CRP.

A series of recent studies explored teachers' perceptions and classroom practices in diverse contexts, contributing valuable insights into the challenges associated with the implementation of CRP. In her study with 20 in-service teachers, Hernandez (2022) argues that although most teachers do not have an in-depth understanding of CRP, they connect some of their instructional practices to CRP. The teachers recognized the impact of CRP in addressing diverse student needs and fostering a sense of classroom community. Nonetheless, the author reports that the teachers expressed a need for support in effectively implementing CRP. Consistent with Hernandez's study, a growing body of literature highlights time and resource limitations, challenges within the school environment, the perspectives of school leadership, and personal biases as obstacles that hinder teachers from establishing culturally responsive classrooms (B. A. Brown et al., 2019; Roybal, 2018). Debnam et al. (2023) highlighted the impact of personal biases, noting that even teachers recognized for their exemplary implementation of CRP used inappropriate language or microaggressions and offensive comments toward students and their families. Nguyen and Huynh (2023) asserted that the lack of proper preparation in teacher training programs poses another challenge for teachers implementing CRP in their classrooms. They further argued that the adoption of CRP often depends on the individual efforts of teachers who learn to be culturally responsive through engaging with diverse student groups rather than through a national educational agenda.

Research examining teachers' self-efficacy and confidence levels to implement CRP yielded varied results. Studies conducted by Bonner et al. (2018) and Tanase (2022) presented compelling evidence that teachers exhibited dedication to CRP and displayed high confidence in instructing diverse

students and managing cultural diversity within their classrooms. However, both studies identified several constraints for CRP practices, such as time limitations, high-stakes and biased assessments, and adherence to standardized curricula. Other studies reported low self-efficacy of teachers for CRP. For instance, Malo-Juvera et al. (2018) figured out that teachers especially reported low confidence in incorporating cultural elements into teaching and in recognizing prejudices against culturally and linguistically diverse students in both curriculum and standardized assessments. In the study by Cruz et al. (2020), the confidence levels were lower regarding aspects requiring specialized cultural understanding, like validating students in their mother tongue and educating them about their culture's impact on educational subjects.

In Samuels's (2018) study, teachers expressed doubts about the practicality of implementing CRP despite recognizing its benefits. Specifically, teachers voiced concerns, fears, and discomfort related to addressing culturally sensitive and controversial topics. They also figured out the difficulty of effectively teaching diverse groups within large classrooms burdened by high curricular demands. Bonner et al. (2018) found that teachers were concerned about prioritizing the dominant culture to prepare students for success in the current cultural context. Sleeter (2012) revealed that educators often misinterpreted CRP and reduced it to simplistic notions, such as organizing cultural celebration fairs and teaching culture, without delving deeper into the nuanced relationship between cultural factors and academic achievement.

Similarly, Ebersole et al. (2016) concluded that teachers did not profoundly understand culturally responsive teaching but simply conducted activities to incorporate culture into their curriculum. They also noticed that some teachers found culturally responsive teaching to be challenging and perceived their students as all belonging to the same culture, thus deeming it unnecessary. Overall, these findings demonstrate that teachers face challenges and barriers in effectively implementing CRP in their classrooms. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive support, resources, and professional development opportunities for educators (Conway-Turner et al., 2020; Dusi & Steinbach, 2016; Glock, 2016; Wang et al., 2018).

CRP in Türkiye

Similar to international literature, studies conducted in Türkiye revealed challenges regarding CRP practices in schools, shedding light on teacher inadequacies and concerns, as well as positive teacher perceptions of the issue. In Karataş and Oral's (2015) study, teachers expressed a lack of confidence in delivering culturally responsive education due to constraints in the

teacher education system and the centralized curriculum, which lacks diversity sensitivity. Despite these challenges, teachers acknowledged the value of CRP for student development and social cohesion. Kotluk and Kocakaya (2019) found that the teachers expressed a moderate level of concern despite holding positive views on culturally responsive education. Teachers' concerns were related to the potential negative impact of CRP on social cohesion, the feasibility of incorporating diverse cultural values into the educational process, and the potential adverse effects of cultural differences between teachers and students on the teaching-learning process.

Kotluk and Aydin's (2021) study, moreover, showed that Turkish teachers lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to make adjustments or carry out instructional activities that catered to the specific needs of Syrian students. Additionally, they held low expectations regarding the academic achievements of these students. In a similar vein, Akin-Sabuncu et al. (2023) found that Turkish teachers encountered a significant language barrier when teaching immigrant and refugee students. They also faced challenges in effectively utilizing differentiated instruction and alternative assessment methods, as well as connecting with the parents of these students. Developing an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions and challenges regarding CRP in schools is required to better serve the needs of diverse student populations in the country. All these studies remark that certain challenges and barriers, including teachers' own biases and perceptions, prevent teachers from implementing CRP in classrooms. Therefore, developing an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions and challenges regarding CRP in schools is required to better serve the needs of diverse student populations in Türkiye.

The Present Study

There are several studies in the literature indicating the positive impact of CRP on student outcomes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Byrd, 2016; López, 2016). Specifically, CRP has been associated with enhancements such as increased test scores, improvements in both the frequency and quality of student engagement, and the development of cultural competence, personal efficacy, self-esteem, and student agency across various student populations in different contexts (Gay, 2014). Given these potential benefits of CRP, enhancing CRP research and practices stands to be crucial to better address diverse student needs and to create inclusive learning environments. Gay (2015) cautions that CRP is not a uniform concept and may need to be adapted to address the unique cultural and social dynamics of each setting. As such, understanding CRP comprehensively requires analyzing its implementation across diverse contexts and countries. This exploration can help educators recognize

the nuanced ways CRP can be adapted to address the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities present in different educational environments.

Türkiye, characterized by significant cultural, ethnic, economic, linguistic, and religious diversity (Çiftçi & Aydın, 2014; Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2018), where this study is conducted, offers a critical case for studying CRP. Notably, following the Syrian civil war, there has been a dramatic increase in the refugee population in the country. Since 2011, Türkiye has become home to approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees, in addition to Iraqi, Afghani, Iranian, and Somali refugees, which has compelled the country to reconsider how its education system can effectively cater to its diverse, multilingual student population in a more inclusive manner (Education Reform Initiative, 2018). Kahraman Vangölü and Şahin Sak (2022) argued that the exploration of CRP in Türkiye began as recently as 2015, and the volume of associated research has remained relatively limited despite the increased societal diversity.

The present research contributes to the broader scope of CRP studies by investigating the perceptions and implementations of Turkish educators. By revealing the current status of CRP through the lens of teachers, the present study can provide valuable insights for developing strategies and interventions to improve CRP practices in Türkiye and similar contexts worldwide.

Method

Design of the Study

This study employs a phenomenological design that aims to portray the essence of the subjective experiences of several individuals regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The study explicitly explores “Culturally Responsive Teaching” as a phenomenon based on the experiences of Turkish teachers in a city highly characterized by cultural diversity.

Participants

The participants were purposefully selected from classroom teachers employed in public schools in Gaziantep, a city located at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and Southeastern Anatolia regions of Türkiye. According to the data from the Directorate of Migration Management (2023), Türkiye hosts a considerable population of 3,288,755 Syrian immigrants, with Gaziantep emerging as the second-largest host city after İstanbul, accommodating 431,390 Syrians. Moreover, Gaziantep is characterized by the lowest household disposable income within the Southeastern Anatolia Region of

Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants.

Teacher #	Gender	Year of teaching experience	Educational degree	Class size	Having an immigrant student
1	Female	10	BA	45	Yes
2	Female	1	MA student	45	Yes
3	Female	2	BA	32	No
4	Female	8	BA	26	Yes
5	Female	16	BA	40	Yes
6	Female	7	BA	28	Yes
7	Male	36	Graduate of Vocational School of Higher Education	23	Yes
8	Female	6	BA	29	No
9	Female	25	BA	34	Yes
10	Male	1	BA	39	Yes
11	Male	26	BAs	45	Yes

Türkiye (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2021). The city, which ranks lowest in academic achievement within the region, as evidenced by the 2019 TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) results, faces significant educational disparities (Education Reform Initiative, 2021a, 2021b; Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2020).

In selecting Gaziantep as our research site, we employed maximum variation sampling to select teachers to represent diverse perspectives and experiences in the study. We considered variability in terms of gender and years of teaching experience. A total of 11 teachers volunteered to participate in the study. Their professional experience ranged from 1 year to 36 years. Except for two teachers, all participants had students with immigrant backgrounds enrolled in their classes. Table 1 displays the key characteristics of the sample.

The sample size in the study was determined based on qualitative research principles, precisely the notion of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Given the study's focus on a context shaped by immigration and socioeconomic disparities, we prioritized depth of understanding over broad generalizability. Moreover, data saturation was fulfilled, as no new codes and themes emerged after repeated analyses of participant responses.

Data Collection Procedure

The study underwent a review process by a University Ethics Committee and obtained approval before the data collection process. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed by the researchers, considering the conceptualizations of Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (2014) on CRP. The opinions of three experts were sought regarding the interview questions. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: What are your thoughts on implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in schools? What strategies do you employ in your classroom to address socio-economic and socio-cultural differences among students? How does culturally responsive pedagogy influence the educational process? The individual interviews were conducted online by the three researchers. The interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded after obtaining the permission of the participants.

Data Analysis

The content analysis method was used in data analysis. An inductive approach was employed, as the researchers did not use any predetermined codes (Creswell, 2014). Firstly, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and prepared for data analysis. Secondly, the two researchers independently read all the transcriptions to develop an initial understanding of the data. In the third phase, these researchers worked together to determine the initial codes for a sample of data. Initial themes included the following sample categories: designing culturally relevant instruction, measurement and evaluation for all, and building a strong connection among different cultures. In the fourth phase, the remaining data were coded independently by both researchers. The final categories and themes were generated through a process of negotiation between the researchers. They are listed under two main themes: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Practices. Finally, all the authors reviewed the themes and categories, and some changes were made, mainly in the wording of the themes. To exemplify, the category of systematic barriers was changed to systemic barriers. Further, the categories from deficient to deviant and challenging cultural hegemony were presented together under the former category.

Trustworthiness

Various methods were employed to ensure the quality and rigor of this qualitative inquiry, considering the suggestions in the literature (e.g., Krefting,

1991; Shenton, 2004). Peer debriefing sessions were conducted, involving ongoing discussions among researchers to deliberate on the study's design and findings. Expert opinions were solicited for the data collection tool as a form of external evaluation. The study was carried out by multiple researchers who have prior experience in conducting qualitative research. Additionally, at least two researchers were present during the interviews, allowing for the acquisition of in-depth information. To represent the participants' perspectives accurately, member checking was incorporated during the interviews. The study also provides a comprehensive description of the research context and detailed methodological information, enhancing transparency and facilitating replication. Furthermore, a double-coding process was implemented to ensure the consistency of the findings.

Findings

The findings are presented under two main themes: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Practices.

Barriers to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The theme reveals the barriers teachers encounter regarding CRP. It includes three key categories: Systemic Barriers, Cultural Awareness, and Professional Development. Each of these categories sheds light on different aspects of the challenges faced by teachers.

Systemic Barriers. Systemic barriers pertain to policies, practices, or procedures that lead to certain individuals receiving unequal access or being excluded. This category emerged from coding obstacles related to language barriers, overcrowded classes, standardized curricula, assessments, and educational materials. The teachers also emphasized that students' socioeconomic status can preclude their positive school experiences, particularly in meeting diverse student needs.

Language. Language was identified as a critical challenge in CRP implementation, impacting students' academic success. It is important to highlight that when referring to language as a barrier, most teachers ($n=9$) mentioned Syrian students. For example, T4 exclaimed that teachers faced challenges in engaging Syrian students in the classes due to the language barrier, stating:

We are struggling a lot. Language is the biggest obstacle. He [a Syrian student] cannot communicate with us or his friends. It [Turkish] is not spoken in the

family. Everyone they communicate with in daily life is Syrian. There is no place for the Turkish language in their daily lives.

Elaborating on the language barrier, T1 noted that not knowing Turkish negatively affects students' academic lives in many ways. She explained:

They [Syrian students] are experiencing learning difficulties. They struggle to understand what they read because different languages are used at home and at school.

She also emphasized that the language barrier complicates the adaptation and acceptance of refugee students into school:

If the language and adaptation issues are overcome, the problem of acceptance at school will be overcome as well. This is a factor that will increase academic success and self-confidence.

Similarly, T5 and T6 indicated that Syrian students were easily distracted during class participation due to their lack of proficiency in Turkish. More critically, it was underlined that refugee students exhibit behavioral problems in the classroom because the language barrier diminishes their interest in lessons. According to T4, students also faced difficulty in integrating into the school community due to language differences, which exacerbated feelings of inadequacy and failure. She added that the pressure to succeed academically while also grappling with language acquisition could lead to a sense of overwhelm and self-doubt.

Overcrowded classes. Overcrowded classes were identified as another significant barrier, making it difficult for teachers to provide individual attention and personalized instruction. T2 noted that crowded classrooms hinder the incorporation of diverse perspectives and limit meaningful interactions central to CRP: *"With limited space and resources, it can be challenging to incorporate diverse perspectives, experiences, and materials into the curriculum."* Additionally, the teachers claimed that increased noise levels and distractions in large classes impede student engagement, particularly for marginalized students.

Moreover, the teachers noted that engaging with each student individually, that engaging with each student individually, providing personalized feedback, or facilitating group activities that encourage collaboration and cultural exchange are almost impossible in crowded classrooms. T11 asserted that:

In overcrowded classes, it is not possible to deal with students individually. The students [Syrian students] do not understand what I am saying. I have to explain it to them one by one. But then, I feel I am being unfair to the other students. It is difficult to maintain a balance.

Standardized curriculum, assessment, and educational materials. Another salient finding of this study is that, according to all teachers, the standardized curriculum is a critical systemic barrier as it is designed for children with access to all curricular resources. T8, for instance, said that:

The standardized curriculum assumes a “one-size-fits-all” approach, which can marginalize students whose experiences and histories aren’t reflected in the material. The rigid standards and content limit our ability to meet the unique needs of our students.

T8 further contended that time constraints leave little room for in-depth exploration or additional culturally responsive content: *“I am unable to provide individual attention to students due to the rush of curricula.”* T6 added, *“We are in a hurry to cover topics, leaving little room for addressing language issues.”* Further, T5 mentioned that this leads to a disconnect between the curriculum and the cultural backgrounds of learners, making it difficult for them to see themselves reflected in the content being taught.

Regarding standardized assessments, the teachers noted that standardized assessments are culturally biased, favoring certain backgrounds and perpetuating inequities. For example, T6 stated:

Standard criteria don’t work for those who don’t know the language, like Syrian students. We can’t use different criteria, so we are forced to give low grades. Repeating the class doesn’t help; the same problems persist.

Three of the teachers remarked that they demonstrated flexibility when assessing Syrian students. T11 argued: *“Even if they [Syrian students] don’t get every question right, getting three out of five is awesome for them. I see it like my Turkish students getting all the answers right.”*

T1 further explained that students’ interactions with their peers, willingness to obey the classroom rules, and behavioral changes should be considered as part of the assessment.

Moreover, the teachers mentioned that educational materials rarely reflect diverse backgrounds, making it challenging to find culturally responsive resources. T7 noted:

Textbooks are printed uniformly and distributed to all 81 provinces. The curriculum could be tailored according to regions. You can't introduce hazelnuts in Adana. First, you have to teach the child about cotton.

Similarly, T5 emphasized the need for local curricula: "*Some concepts are beyond the grasp of children and are not connected to their daily lives.*" Reflecting on her first years in teaching, she remarked that those challenges are more critical for novice teachers. In this regard, T2 and T10 mentioned the need for revising textbooks and other educational materials to be updated to be more inclusive and to reflect changes in today's society. T4, on the other hand, explicated that:

The Gallipoli War. . .when I show a cartoon, it's either too detailed or superficial, there's nothing that satisfies me. . . The textbook doesn't reflect the culture, it just says to respect the culture. . . We need to keep the textbook detailed. We need to introduce the culture. We introduce it [Gallipoli War] using videos and other materials. With cartoons. . . But there's no content I can comfortably use in class without a video. I wish there was a video that captures all aspects of culture. Like, if they could see the folk dances there. It's a waste of time until I find good material. I wish they used the principle of "from the near to the far" in teaching.

Bearing on the difficulties they face, the majority of teachers ($n=8$) called for educational policies that prioritize culturally inclusive curriculum materials. T2 argued that policy-makers ignore refugee students' differences, negatively affecting their adaptation to school. Centralized curricula offer little flexibility for educators to adapt materials to their students' cultural contexts. T5 noted that this disconnect makes it difficult for students to see themselves reflected in the material.

In addressing problems stemming from the curriculum, the teachers suggested that overcoming these challenges requires systemic changes that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. Such an approach, the teachers argued, could only be achieved by advocating for curriculum reforms that incorporate diverse perspectives, providing professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their cultural competence, and fostering collaboration between schools, communities, and cultural organizations. T7 noted:

Even if we try to do something in the classroom, it is not enough. Teachers need to be aware of this issue and need examples of what can be done. On the other hand, even though we try to unite cultures at school, the student [a Syrian

student] does not see this in his/her family or social environment. Or he is ostracized in society because he is Syrian. There is a need for a joint movement involving parents and the community.

Cultural Awareness. This category emerged from the coding of participants' definitions of culture and awareness regarding CRP. Concerning sociopolitical consciousness, we sought the participants' definitions of culture and CRP. The teachers defined culture as part of their lives, including various aspects of daily practices and experiences. However, their definitions were limited to elements of culture such as food, drinks, folk dance, music, and clothing: "*Culture encompasses many things: Food and drink, clothing, attitude. . .*" (T3); "*Culture is a way of life. It includes games, culinary traditions, music. . .*" (T6); "*Lifestyle encompasses everything, from the way one eats to the way one walks.*" (T9)

Adding to those aspects, two of the teachers described culture as a phenomenon that is transmitted across generations: "*In general, everything that is transmitted to us, everything we see, everything we feel.*" (T4)

From the past to the present, the environment in which people live, education, values, historical artifacts, and written works—all these aspects are extensive. Everything in a person's life experience is considered culture. (T7)

In this context, two teachers emphasized customs and traditions as critical facets of culture: "Tradition, customs, environment. What people say." (T5); "The way of life of a society, its traditions, customs, and thought patterns, constitute a whole." (T10)

Most of the teachers stated that they had not heard of the concept of CRP and conflated it with their understanding of culture. They described CRP as a teaching approach that seeks to create learning environments where diverse cultures and individual differences are represented.

In our country, cultural diversity is increasing every day. I believe that awareness of this kind needs to be created in schools and among teachers. We can consider respect for differences as respect for different cultures. (T1)

Each student has a different background and lifestyle. It's important to incorporate these differences into classes. In my classes, I try to create opportunities for each student to find an aspect of their own culture. That's when I became a sensitive teacher. (T2)

A critical finding of the study was that most teachers underlined Syrian refugee students when referring to different cultures. T3, for instance, uttered:

We live in a very diverse society. We tend to overlook the cultures of different groups in our classrooms and rely mainly on Turkish culture. We do not respond to other cultures. However, if we cannot integrate cultural values, it can be dangerous. It may lead to alienation. The high influx of migrants has made this issue even more critical.

Only three teachers mentioned cultural differences within our society. T1, in this context, asserted that there are different cultures within Türkiye. T7 explained that her students know only the culture in their region (south-east of Türkiye) and are not aware of cultural differences in Türkiye. Her students, she exemplified, only knew “Halay” (a local folk dance) but did not know “Zeybek” (another local folk dance). Adding to different cultural practices, T5 suggested that not only do differences in mundane practices matter for CRP, but also children with single parents, disabilities, and any kind of difference that places the child in a disadvantaged position should be accepted as part of CRP.

Professional Development. The teachers stated that pre-service and in-service teacher training programs are insufficient in equipping teacher candidates and teachers with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Regarding pre-service teacher education programs, almost all teachers ($n=10$) claimed that the courses focused predominantly on theoretical concepts with limited attention to practical applications or real-world experiences. T8, in this context, depicted that the content covered in the classes was often abstract or conceptual, lacking emphasis on practical examples, hands-on activities, or real-life scenarios. T1, on the other hand, uttered: “*We only addressed differences [any type of cultural differences among students] in the courses of life skills and social studies. We didn’t even learn it in children’s literature. The courses we took in college had no impact or benefit.*” Similarly, T5 noted that the courses she had taken did not focus on cultural differences; rather, they learned how to deal with the different needs of students within the profession. In contrast, T2 and T3 contended that they learned about CRP, albeit superficially, during their graduate education. T3 noted that although she did not take any course specifically covering these issues, some of her instructors mentioned the critical role of respecting students’ individual differences, such as religion and language, in education.

Regarding in-service teacher training, all the participating teachers stated that the in-service training programs they attended did not include CRP as a core component. They expressed that the inclusive education and training sessions provided by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), particularly for refugee students, were ineffective due to the limited time allocated

and the lack of applied knowledge in the training. T11, for instance, claimed that he attended a 3-day in-service training session, but due to the large number of participants, he didn't have the opportunity to engage in hands-on activities. In contrast, T6 argued that:

The content fell short of its intended purpose, except for a drama activity. *A drama* was performed about a teacher experiencing problems with a parent. I benefited from it by seeing different solutions and ideas.

Unlike other teachers, only T2 asserted that the in-service training she attended helped her raise awareness and develop knowledge of CRP. She explained that:

I participated in a training that integrated both theory and practice. We did dramas, we did classroom design work. We watched a film, for example, a film about a teacher working with disadvantaged students. . . The training I received helped me a lot. I was already doing some of them, but I became more sensitive. I refined my practices.

As a result, most of the teachers expressed a need for in-service training to help them create more inclusive classrooms. They also had various suggestions regarding the content and design of these trainings. The majority argued that the training should have a project-based professional development approach that engages teachers in hands-on, collaborative projects to enhance their skills, knowledge, and instructional practices. T1 remarked that, in addition to reading books on CRP to raise awareness, project-based in-service training would allow for long-term activities where they could work on real-life problems. Similarly, T2 asserted that:

Unlike traditional professional development methods that often involve passive learning through workshops or lectures, project-based training actively involves teachers in real-world tasks and problem-solving scenarios relevant to their teaching context.

She added that these trainings should include activities where trainees could engage in curriculum and material adaptation. She also underlined that besides theoretical knowledge, they needed practical guidance. T3, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of localizing the content and processes of the training to address the needs of teachers working in diverse socio-cultural environments. She further highlighted that the teachers were reluctant to attend training led by experts who lacked real-world experience and were unfamiliar with the actual challenges in the field.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Practices

This theme is generated by teachers' perceptions of their culturally responsive classroom practices to acknowledge and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the learning experience, ensuring that instruction is both meaningful and accessible to create more equitable and engaging educational experiences that promote both academic success and social consciousness. The theme is composed of two categories: From Deficient and Deviant to Thriving and Establishing School-Parent Collaboration.

From Deficient and Deviant to Thriving. The teachers depicted that culturally diverse students are mainly labeled as deficient and deviant by teachers. They argued that such an understanding hinders those students' academic success. In the present study, teachers, acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of their students, reported using a range of strategies to challenge deficit-based views and foster inclusive learning environments, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed academically.

A positive classroom atmosphere. The teachers advocated for fair treatment of all students, emphasizing the necessity of giving all students equal opportunities and representation in the classroom. As an instance, T11 mentioned the importance of seating arrangements to make the classroom experience equitable for all, citing the unfair treatment of Syrian students:

They [Other teachers] placed the Syrian student at the back of the line because he couldn't deal with it. Okay, it is difficult, the classrooms are crowded, but it is necessary to give a chance to those students. Throwing them to the back is not humanitarian. It is not true.

Similarly, T2 emphasized the importance of cultural representation in promoting a sense of belonging, advocating for the inclusion of diverse cultural elements in both the curriculum and instruction:

A child should feel a sense of belonging, know that they are valued, and feel cared for. In an environment where they feel excluded, a child closes themselves off from learning. They should feel like a member of the class. . . . A student who feels a sense of belonging learns more comfortably. Bringing aspects of their own culture to the class might prevent them from being excluded. Respect for differences develops in the classroom.

Overcoming language barriers. Overcoming the language barriers was considered an important step in challenging deficient viewpoints (T6, T2, T4).

T6 asserted that many teachers have false perceptions about the academic abilities of students whose native language is not Turkish, stating, *"Once they overcome the language barrier, some of these students adapt to the classroom culture and perform much better than their peers."* T6 also highlighted the effectiveness of interactive instructional methods, such as card games and role-playing, supplemented by visual aids, to enhance comprehension for non-Turkish-speaking students.

Participating teachers mentioned that peer support mechanisms in their classes, along with the assistance of Syrian support teachers assigned to help with communication issues involving Syrian students and parents, were highly beneficial in overcoming language barriers. T2 emphasized the crucial role of Syrian support teachers in addressing language obstacles. Similarly, T4 noted that bilingual Syrian students acted as intermediaries in the classroom, assisting by translating the teachers' instructions and expectations for their fellow Syrian classmates.

Culturally responsive content. Moreover, teachers stressed the role of engaging content in promoting academic success among culturally diverse students. They argued that by integrating examples from different cultures into their teaching, educators can effectively represent diversity in the classroom. For instance, T2 encourages discussions about students' traditions, music, and food during relevant topics. T6 also mentioned that incorporating elements from students' cultural backgrounds adds relevance and meaning to the learning process. T3 suggested that integrating culturally responsive content into the curriculum not only captures students' interest but also validates their cultural identities, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting academic success. T1 also pointed out that using cultural elements helps to establish positive relationships among students and fosters respect for cultural differences by engaging with the richness of other cultures. As an example, T1 shared that she used storytelling to promote respect for diversity, citing instances of conflicts among students.

When there is food, when there is a study about different cultures, I ask: Where did you live before? What was your home like? Children born here do not remember, but others do. Or I make use of fairy tales, tales that include differences. Instead of consciously telling them, I include such activities when I sense that they do not accept each other, especially when there are problems between them. A little more through play. The activities I plan and do during a year do not exceed three.

Similarly, T9 emphasized the importance of engagement opportunities for students from different cultures to create an inclusive atmosphere.

Additionally, T5 highlighted the significance of connecting classroom activities to students' daily lives to enhance cultural awareness. T4 adopted a life-based contextual learning approach, incorporating students' diverse experiences into classroom discussions:

For instance, when discussing medications from the pharmacy, a student [A Syrian student] shares his experiences: "In our culture, we have a certain herb; we gather it and make medicine with it." The class also learns from the Syrian students; they learn from each other. As they engage in discussions, question-answer sessions, and drama activities, diversity emerges. During drama activities, adopting a different identity proved effective. I encouraged [A Syrian student] him to sing a song. I asked him to sing an Arabic song, and singing in his language makes him happy. I find activities where they can express themselves and engage in them.

Establishing School-Parent Collaboration. The data revealed that school-parent collaboration is a critical aspect of CRP. Teachers emphasized that such collaboration not only supports students' personal and academic growth but also fosters an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their needs. T10 stressed that informing parents about CRP can redefine parent-teacher relationships, benefiting both parties by empowering teachers and securing the rights of disadvantaged groups.

T3 and T11 emphasized how the school's acceptance of cultural values positively influences parental involvement. They shared examples of cultural events that brought previously disengaged families into the school community. T3 shared her personal experiences as:

Folk dances from our region were performed, and even Uzbek families in my neighborhood, who never come to school, came to the school and watched the performance. This made them visible in the school.

T11 highlighted the importance of building trust with parents and suggested strategies to make them feel valued and understood:

It's also necessary to give parents that trust. I try to do this, and they see it [Syrian parents]. For example, when I ask for something [educational material], they buy it immediately. But the first thing I tell them at the parents' meeting is that they [Syrians] are part of this society, and I cannot make a distinction in the classroom. Some parents are against their child sitting with a Syrian student. I cannot accept it. Seeing this, Syrian parents feel more comfortable and are more willing to be part of the solution. I give them homework at home. I tell them to watch Turkish TV channels.

The analysis further yielded that the implementation of CRP practices brings about numerous benefits for parents, as well. T1 emphasized the importance of having an “assets-oriented view” about the student, which is considered one of the fundamental principles of CRP:

Parents need to hear affirming comments about their children. Children often live in large families, experiencing neglect and trauma. CRP also contributes to the child’s acceptance within the family.

Discussion

The increasing diversity within 21st-century classrooms underscores the heightened necessity for pedagogical methodologies that exhibit cultural sensitivity and responsiveness (Richards et al., 2007). Addressing this need, this phenomenological study sheds light on how a sample of primary classroom teachers in Türkiye perceive CRP and enact it within their unique educational landscape. As part of CRP, the present study indicates that the teachers prioritize fairness and actively cultivate a sense of belonging, ensuring that all students feel respected and valued, which enhances their motivation, participation, and academic achievement. Additionally, similar to the findings of Tanase (2022), the teachers mention incorporating students’ experiences into lessons, using relatable examples, and connecting content to real-life contexts, thereby affirming students’ backgrounds and enhancing relevance, comprehension, and retention. However, despite acknowledging the benefits of CRP, the findings reveal persistent barriers and critical needs related to its effective implementation.

CRP fundamentally advocates supporting the learning of all students (Gay, 2002) and promoting academic success for everyone (Ladson-Billings, 2014). However, this research indicates that students from linguistically diverse backgrounds are at a heightened risk of underachievement in Türkiye, similar to the findings of previous studies conducted by Akin-Sabuncu et al. (2023) and Mercan Küçükakın and Gökmenoğlu (2023). The results especially highlight that language barriers not only negatively impact students’ understanding of course content but also affect communication and relationships among students, as well as parental involvement in education. Without effective communication, teachers are likely to miss the opportunity to connect with students and their families and to gain insights into their cultures, essential aspects of CRP. It is important to recognize that the emphasis placed by teachers in this study on immigrant students learning Turkish while simultaneously discouraging the use of their native languages at home perpetuates a deficient perspective toward linguistically

diverse students. This perspective notably marginalized students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, despite the fact that bilingualism constitutes a valuable asset. Students should be encouraged to preserve and further develop their proficiency in their native languages. Similarly, in a study conducted in the Flemish context (Hagenaars et al., 2025), the authors report that most teachers highlighted the challenges of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. They specifically identified language as a barrier to effective teacher-student communication, as these students were more outspoken, operated within a different cultural frame of reference, placed greater importance on teacher-student relationships, and exhibited heightened sensitivity. While discussing the concept of cultural competence, Ladson-Billings (1995) posits that CRP allows students to preserve their cultural identities and leverage their backgrounds as resources for learning. For linguistic diversity to be recognized as an educational advantage rather than a barrier, it is crucial to equip teachers with effective strategies and critical consciousness to subvert hegemonic values reproduced through discourses and discriminatory practices, both within educational institutions and in the broader socio-cultural context. Such efforts are essential to counter deficit-based perspectives that marginalize linguistically diverse students. Akin-Sabuncu and Kasapoglu (2023) emphasized the importance of challenging deficit-oriented perspectives among teachers and fostering an awareness of the socio-political context that jeopardizes the academic development of students from diverse backgrounds. Curran (2003) advocates for teachers to understand the natural responses of students in second language acquisition, implement pedagogical strategies that facilitate this process, and foster a supportive classroom environment that values linguistic diversity. Furthermore, Larson et al. (2020) emphasize that effective language interventions initiated at an early age, which recognize and honor children's home languages and cultures, can significantly bridge the word gap for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

It is evident that several essential qualifications are required for teachers to create culturally responsive classrooms (Gay, 2002; Richards et al., 2007; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). For instance, Jackson (1993) emphasizes that culturally responsive educators build trust, employ a diverse range of instructional methods, and analyze, adapt, and develop culturally sensitive instructional materials. However, the results reveal that teachers face significant challenges in implementing culturally responsive practices effectively due to the uncondusive learning conditions, which aligns with findings from other studies (e.g., B. A. Brown et al., 2019; Roybal, 2018). Specifically, the teachers in this study claim that overcrowded classrooms and the standardized curriculum, assessments, and educational

materials impede their ability to effectively differentiate and personalize instruction. It can be argued that large class sizes limit teachers' capacity to connect with each student on a personal level, making it more difficult to understand their cultural perspectives and needs. Additionally, students in such environments may have fewer opportunities to engage in classroom discussions and collaborative learning activities, which can result in missed opportunities for personal growth and diminish the richness of the overall classroom experience for all learners. Furthermore, the content of the standardized curriculum, assessments, and textbooks, which are evaluated as insufficiently sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds by the participating teachers, seems to minimize teachers' efforts to tailor their lessons to reflect the unique cultural backgrounds, experiences, and needs of their students. Because of the strict curriculum guidelines and standardized assessments, teachers may focus on covering standardized content rather than ensuring the cultural relevance of their teaching. The study conducted by Ramsay-Jordan (2020) similarly criticized the current educational standardization practices, arguing that these standards significantly diminish teachers' opportunities to integrate culturally responsive practices into their classrooms. The standardization not only restricts teachers from engaging with challenging and diverse content that reflects the rich cultural backgrounds of their students but also leads to a homogenized approach to lesson planning. In an era marked by heightened standardization, a crucial step toward transformation may involve fostering dialog regarding the narratives of successful pedagogical practices of CRP (Baker & Digiovanni, 2005).

Similar to this study, a U.S. study by Debnam et al. (2023) explored the specific culturally responsive practices of 13 in-service teachers. In their study, the teachers' culturally responsive practices were categorized into three main areas: (1) personal traits such as humility, awareness, self-reflection, and empathy; (2) actions and behaviors, including actively listening to students, maintaining an open-minded and flexible approach; and (3) integrating students' interests into the curriculum. However, many of these practices also align with general teaching strategies, such as getting to know students, building relationships, adapting communication, and incorporating discussions on culture in the classroom. The present study as well provided evidence for teachers' efforts for implementing CRP. As Hagenars et al. (2025) argue, the research focused exclusively on exemplary culturally responsive teachers, leaving a gap in understanding the difficulties faced by less experienced or less confident teachers in diverse classrooms. This is particularly significant, as many teachers report feeling unprepared to teach in multicultural settings (Romijn et al., 2021). The current study in this

respect is valuable for showing the practices who do not have adequate training on CRP.

According to Kieran and Anderson (2019), teachers must cultivate awareness about culture, develop cultural competence, and foster critical consciousness among themselves and their students. Notably, the results reveal that teachers hold a narrow view of culture and lack sufficient knowledge of CRP. Surprisingly, some participating teachers have not even heard the concept of CRP despite having at least one immigrant child in their classrooms. Additionally, in this sample, cultural differences are primarily explained through students' ethnicity and language. Consistent with these findings, there exist previous studies that note teachers' misinterpretations (e.g., Sleeter, 2012) and misunderstandings (e.g., Ebersole et al., 2016) regarding CRP in the literature. These findings support the idea that teachers require effective preparation in teacher education programs and continuous professional development opportunities regarding CRP. These efforts should prioritize enhancing teachers' understanding that cultural differences encompass a diverse array of differences shaping student identities, including but not limited to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, language, and social class (Heinz et al., 2021; Mercan Küçükakin, 2024). As the teachers in the present study suggest, in-service training programs are likely to be more effective if they are project-based and specifically designed to address real-life challenges faced in the classroom.

As a final point, it is crucial to note that teachers' perceived understanding of managing challenges may not necessarily align with the needs of students in intercultural classrooms (Crushner & Mahon, 2009; Fantini, 2009). This misalignment could stem from a gap between the strategies teachers consider effective and those that students find beneficial (Schwarzenenthal et al., 2023). As a result, teachers risk overlooking key intercultural challenges, potentially creating a false sense of confidence in their culturally relevant practices (Hagenaars et al., 2025). Furthermore, teachers may conflate general teaching skills with culturally relevant practices, as their perceptions are shaped by the diverse educational environments in which they work. This can lead them to interpret standard teaching competencies through an intercultural lens (Wubbels et al., 2006). An example of this dilemma is reported in a study by van Tartwijk et al. (2009). Focusing on classroom management, the authors examined culturally relevant classroom management practices employed by teachers. The participants in their study notably stated that they did not consider students' background characteristics, such as ethnicity, as they believed doing so might reinforce prejudice. This suggests that teachers favored a colorblind

approach, believing they treated all students equally without explicitly recognizing ethnic differences.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of culturally responsive practices in Türkiye, policy changes beyond professional development must be considered. This includes systemic policy reform, continuous professional development, and improvements in teacher education programs (Debnam et al., 2023). For example, the MoNE could implement policies prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. Such policies can include curriculum reforms that incorporate diverse perspectives, provide professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their cultural competence and foster collaboration between schools, communities, and cultural organizations (Gay, 2015). Additionally, it is crucial to address systemic barriers, such as overcrowded classrooms, standardized curricula, assessments, and educational materials, to ensure the effective implementation of CRP policies (B. A. Brown et al., 2019).

Limitations and Implications

While offering valuable insights into the perceptions and challenges teachers face in implementing CRP in Türkiye, this study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the sample size of 11 teachers from public schools in Gaziantep restricts the generalizability of the findings to the wider educational context in Türkiye. Additionally, while the study aimed to explore culturally diverse classrooms, the diversity observed was predominantly related to refugee students with language barriers, gender, and socio-economic differences, without representation of other forms of diversity, such as students with disabilities. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews may introduce biases, such as social desirability or misinterpretation. Finally, while the study highlights the barriers to implementing CRP, it does not account for how they may have evolved over time. Longitudinal studies could provide more robust insights into how teachers' perceptions and practices related to CRP develop and change in response to ongoing professional development and evolving classroom dynamics.

Future research could address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, and incorporating methods like classroom observations to triangulate and enrich the findings. The implications of this study emphasize the need for schools to cultivate inclusive environments, particularly for minority students who are at greater risk of marginalization. Educators must respect and build upon the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and their families, fostering a classroom atmosphere where every

student feels a strong sense of belonging, which in turn can enhance motivation and autonomy. Professional development initiatives should prioritize culturally responsive leadership and the integration of culturally responsive pedagogies. Furthermore, teacher education programs must consider the broader political and social implications of global migration and rising cultural diversity, equipping educators with the tools to challenge hegemonic discourses and the structural mechanisms that perpetuate marginalization in educational settings.

As Baker and Digiovanni (2005) assert, CRP remains a meaningless concept without concrete action, and policy changes are needed to support its effective implementation. We hope that the current study contributes to the transformation of the practices by portraying the narratives of practitioners in the context of Türkiye.

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Not applicable

Consent to Participate

Written consent was obtained from respondents after review and signature, prior to the start of the interviews.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the inclusion of video recordings, which could raise conflicts of interest or controversial issues. However, they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Considerations

The Aksaray University Ethics Review Committee at Aksaray University approved our interviews (Approval: 2023/06-43) on October 23, 2023.)

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