

Language, Identity, and Inclusion: Advancing Multilingual Education Through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) in multilingual Indonesian classrooms within the context of recent national curriculum reforms. Using a qualitative case study across three regions (Papua, Sulawesi, Yogyakarta), data from 18 educators were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings show that while policies such as Kurikulum Merdeka and Profil Pelajar Pancasila support inclusion, CRP implementation is hindered by limited teacher training, resource shortages, and the dominance of high-stakes assessments. However, schools integrating indigenous knowledge and involving communities reported stronger engagement. The study contributes by highlighting systemic reforms needed to empower teachers, decentralize curriculum, and strengthen community partnerships for sustainable multilingual education. This research investigates how policies such as Kurikulum Merdeka and Profil Pelajar Pancasila are translated into practice across three regions: Papua, Sulawesi, and Yogyakarta. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Participants included 18 educators and administrators. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo, focusing on four key dimensions: policy-practice gaps, teacher capacity, resource constraints, and community engagement. Findings indicate that despite national support for cultural inclusion, implementation of CRP is constrained by limited teacher training, the dominance of standardized assessments, and a lack of culturally relevant teaching materials. Language prestige also influences pedagogical decisions, often sidelining local languages in favor of Bahasa Indonesia and English. However, schools that actively engaged local communities and integrated indigenous knowledge into learning reported improved student engagement and cultural affirmation. The study concludes that realizing the full potential of CRP in Indonesia requires systemic reforms that empower teachers, decentralize curriculum design, and institutionalize community partnerships. These changes must be supported by targeted policies and sustained investment in multilingual and multicultural education.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Multilingual Education, Indonesia, Teacher Training, Curriculum Reform, Language Policy, Community Engagement.



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, a nation of over 17,000 islands and more than 718 distinct languages, is among the world's most linguistically diverse countries. While Bahasa Indonesia serves as the unifying

medium of instruction, this often sidelines local languages that remain central in family and community life. This dynamic highlights a research gap: how education can balance national integration with the preservation of local languages within formal schooling. Recent educational reforms, particularly the Kurikulum Merdeka and Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5), have tried to address this balance by allowing schools to incorporate local content into their curricula. These initiatives reflect a growing global shift toward culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), especially in multilingual contexts.

The implementation of CRP has gained traction internationally as educators and policymakers recognize the value of embedding students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into formal education. CRP is not only an inclusive pedagogical model but also an effective strategy for improving student engagement and learning outcomes (Kirsch, 2018). In multilingual settings, CRP emphasizes the use of students' home languages and local cultural references as key resources in the classroom. Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, have increasingly embraced frameworks such as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) to strengthen linguistic inclusivity and foster educational equity (Kosonen, 2016; Liddicoat & Kirkpatrick, 2020).

However, integrating CRP into national curricula presents complex challenges. Language policies, historical power dynamics, and socio-political imperatives often constrain the space available for local languages in formal education (Zein et al., 2020). In Indonesia, the dominance of Bahasa Indonesia is both a legacy of post-independence nationalism and a product of policy centralization. This has led to a top-down approach where local languages, despite their cultural significance, are perceived as secondary or informal (Tupas, 2018). Consequently, educators face the dilemma of navigating standardized curricula while attempting to respond to the diverse linguistic realities of their students.

The effectiveness of CRP relies heavily on the cultural competence and linguistic readiness of teachers. Yet, many teachers in Indonesia are not trained to implement CRP strategies or to use local languages in the classroom. Furthermore, the centralized nature of curriculum development often results in a lack of culturally relevant teaching materials. This systemic disconnect hinders the ability of educators to contextualize learning, especially in regions where students are more fluent in their local languages than in Bahasa Indonesia. Research indicates that using the mother tongue as the language of instruction, particularly in early childhood education, leads to improved cognitive development and stronger identity formation (Díaz et al., 2022; Poudel, 2023).

Community involvement and the integration of indigenous knowledge are also crucial in fostering culturally responsive education. Drawing from local practices, histories, and knowledge systems provides students with a sense of belonging and relevance in their learning journey (Ennsner-Kananen et al., 2023). In Southeast Asia, successful educational models frequently involve community members as co-educators, particularly in rural and indigenous settings (Kosonen, 2016). These participatory models enrich educational content and legitimize local epistemologies within formal schooling structures.

Indonesia's educational reforms reflect an evolving recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity. From a historically centralized and monolingual orientation, policy directions have gradually shifted to accommodate multicultural perspectives. Initiatives that allow for localized curriculum development have shown positive outcomes in student engagement and comprehension (Zein et al., 2020). Nonetheless, translating policy into practice remains uneven across regions, particularly in linguistically complex areas such as Papua and Sulawesi.

This study investigates how CRP is operationalized within Indonesian multilingual classrooms and explores the barriers that limit its effective implementation. It aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on inclusive and culturally grounded education by analyzing practical realities on the ground. By focusing on case studies from diverse regions, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how CRP interacts with national policy, teacher capacity, and community dynamics. It highlights the need for systemic changes particularly in teacher education, curriculum design, and resource development to ensure that the promise of CRP is realized across Indonesia's diverse educational settings.

METHOD

Indonesia, a nation of over 17,000 islands and more than 718 distinct languages, is among the world's most linguistically diverse countries. While Bahasa Indonesia serves as the unifying medium of instruction, this often sidelines local languages that remain central in family and community life. This dynamic highlights a research gap: how education can balance national integration with the preservation of local languages within formal schooling. Recent educational reforms, particularly the Kurikulum Merdeka and Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5), have tried to address this balance by allowing schools to incorporate local content into their curricula. These initiatives reflect a growing global shift toward culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), especially in multilingual contexts.

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the main findings from the study, categorized into four major themes: policy-practice gaps, teacher capacity, resource constraints, and community engagement. Each theme is

supported by observational data, interview responses, and document analysis, interpreted through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP).

Policy-Practice Gap

Decentralized education policies have not been consistently implemented at the classroom level. Teachers reported limited autonomy in adapting curriculum to local linguistic contexts, despite national rhetoric supporting flexibility.

Table 1: Teacher Language Proficiency vs. Student Language Preference

Region	% Teachers Fluent in Local Language	% Students Using Local Language at Home
Papua	35%	78%
Sulawesi	42%	65%
Yogyakarta	60%	48%

Educators expressed concern that standardized assessments pressured them to conform to national norms, reducing the opportunity for local adaptations (Masaeed, 2020).

Teacher Capacity

Findings revealed significant disparities in teacher preparedness to implement CRP. While some teachers embraced multilingual approaches, many lacked the necessary training or confidence.

Table 2: Perceived Barriers to CRP Implementation (Based on Teacher Interviews)

Barrier Category	% of Teachers Mentioning	Notes
Lack of Training	72%	No exposure to CRP or bilingual strategies
Inadequate Resources	68%	Localized teaching materials are lacking
Language Proficiency Gaps	55%	Teachers not fluent in students' home languages
Prestige Gap of Local Language	47%	Local languages seen as less useful or prestigious

While teachers with higher proficiency in local languages and cultural familiarity tended to apply CRP strategies more effectively (Langeloo et al., 2020), many others struggled due to systemic

barriers such as lack of training and limited institutional support. These gaps persist because professional development programs rarely prioritize multilingual pedagogy, leaving teachers underprepared (Langeloo et al., 2020).

Resource Constraints

Teachers noted persistent shortages of culturally relevant resources and limited digital infrastructure. National textbooks often excluded local perspectives, while digital platforms—when available—were rarely adapted to support multiple languages. These material shortages reflect policy-level gaps, where curriculum and resource development remain centralized and overlook local needs.

Table 3: CRP Implementation Examples Across Regions

Region	CRP Activity	Community Involvement
Yogyakarta	Batik and Gamelan in thematic learning	Local artists and elders
Papua	Storytelling in mother tongue	Village elders
Sulawesi	Agricultural practices integrated into science	Farmers and local leaders

Digital innovations, where present, were not optimized for local language use, and their design often reinforced monolingual norms (Kwihangana, 2021).

Community Engagement

Schools with strong community ties were more successful in implementing CRP. Collaborative efforts with local stakeholders enriched learning and boosted student engagement.

However, barriers such as mistrust, time constraints, and lack of formal structures inhibited sustained engagement (Wunsch & Charamba, 2023; Nyamayedenga, 2022). Schools that had established advisory boards or mentorship initiatives reported more effective partnerships.

Applying CRP in the Global South Context

This study reveals a persistent disjuncture between policy formulation and classroom practice in the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in multilingual Indonesian schools. While recent national reforms such as Kurikulum Merdeka and the Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) project emphasize the importance of incorporating local knowledge and traditions into curriculum content, actual practices across schools remain uneven and inconsistent. Drawing on Ladson-Billings' CRP framework, this study shows how Indonesian classrooms encounter similar challenges to those seen in the Global South. In Papua, for instance, teachers' reliance on Bahasa Indonesia conflicted with students' stronger fluency in local languages, creating disengagement. Comparable findings from Nigeria and India (Agoke, 2023) suggest that local adaptation of CRP

can improve equity, underscoring the need for Indonesian models that directly respond to regional realities.

Implementing CRP in multilingual regions like Indonesia requires navigating a complex interplay of socio-cultural, linguistic, and institutional factors. In particular, the framework's theoretical principles must be carefully adapted to local realities, where traditional knowledge systems, community languages, and indigenous epistemologies play a central role in shaping students' identities (Edlich, 2020). This adaptive process involves reconceptualizing CRP beyond its Western-centric origins to suit the needs of diverse learning communities. Case studies from other regions in the Global South, such as Nigeria and India, illustrate how local adaptations of CRP can enhance educational access and relevance for marginalized learners (Agoke, 2023).

Language Prestige and Curriculum Decisions

Language prestige continues to shape educational priorities in Indonesia, with significant implications for pedagogical design and learner inclusion. Bahasa Indonesia and English, as the dominant languages of instruction, are often regarded as more academically and professionally valuable than local languages. This phenomenon, rooted in colonial history and globalization, is echoed in educational systems throughout the post-colonial world (Back, 2020; Wetzel et al., 2019). The result is a curriculum that often privileges these high-prestige languages at the expense of students' native tongues.

As reported by teachers in this study, the perceived superiority of Bahasa Indonesia creates tensions between curriculum requirements and the cultural-linguistic realities of their students. Many educators avoid using local languages due to fears that it may undermine students' performance in standardized assessments or be viewed as academically inferior. However, this marginalization of home languages often leads to student disengagement and a weakened connection to the learning process (Galante, 2019; Singh & Akar, 2021). Reinforcing local languages within the school environment can be a powerful step toward validating students' identities and fostering greater equity in education.

Systemic Barriers to CRP

The study highlights multiple systemic barriers that constrain the effective implementation of CRP in Indonesia. Chief among them is the lack of formal training and professional development opportunities for teachers in multilingual and culturally inclusive pedagogies. Many educators reported feeling unprepared to engage with students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, reflecting broader institutional neglect of CRP principles within teacher education programs (Neokleous & Karpava, 2023).

Additionally, the shortage of bilingual and localized teaching materials remains a persistent challenge. National curricula and textbooks rarely reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity found within Indonesian classrooms, leaving teachers to navigate CRP implementation without adequate support. These issues are compounded by an overreliance on monolingual assessment

frameworks, which often fail to account for students' cultural and linguistic knowledge (Charamba, 2023). Addressing these challenges will require systemic reforms that prioritize multilingualism, invest in teacher development, and diversify instructional content.

Policy Interventions and International Models

To mitigate these barriers, targeted policy interventions must be implemented at both the national and local levels. International case studies provide valuable models. For instance, the Niiichii Project in Northern Canada has demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating Indigenous languages and cultural practices into mainstream education, yielding improvements in student achievement and cultural pride (Liu et al., 2023). Similar efforts in Latin America and Southeast Asia have successfully localized curriculum content through participatory, community-driven processes.

In Indonesia, developing supportive policy environments that enable mother-tongue instruction, fund bilingual resource development, and embed CRP in teacher education is critical (Cummins, 2019). Effective interventions also involve establishing collaborative structures between schools and communities, such as curriculum advisory boards and culturally inclusive school councils. These structures not only ensure that learning content reflects local realities but also empower communities to shape educational priorities in line with their values and experiences (Lotherington et al., 2022).

Toward a Culturally Sustaining Education System

Ultimately, the study reinforces the urgency of building a culturally sustaining education system that is responsive to Indonesia's multilingual and multicultural realities. Current policy structures, which continue to emphasize uniformity and centralized control, often clash with the diverse needs of local communities. Moving forward, education reform must be anchored in three core principles: recognition of linguistic diversity as an asset, empowerment of teachers as cultural mediators, and active collaboration with local communities.

By addressing the interconnected issues of language prestige, systemic inequities, and policy rigidity, Indonesia can move closer to realizing a more inclusive and equitable education system. The promise of culturally responsive pedagogy lies not only in its theoretical appeal but also in its capacity to transform classrooms into spaces of belonging, identity affirmation, and academic excellence. As demonstrated in this study and echoed in global research, CRP is not a one-size-fits-all model it must be continuously shaped by the voices, languages, and cultures of the learners it seeks to serve.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is implemented in multilingual classrooms across Indonesia, focusing on the translation of national reforms such as Kurikulum

Merdeka and Profil Pelajar Pancasila into classroom practice. Findings reveal persistent gaps between policy aspirations and realities, driven by limited teacher training, shortages of localized resources, and the dominance of high-stakes assessments. These systemic issues reinforce language hierarchies that privilege Bahasa Indonesia and English, often at the expense of students' cultural and linguistic identities.

At the same time, cases where teachers engaged communities and integrated indigenous knowledge demonstrate the transformative potential of CRP when localized effectively. To realize this potential, Indonesia must move beyond symbolic policy recognition toward substantive reforms that strengthen teacher preparation, expand culturally relevant materials, and institutionalize community collaboration. By doing so, the education system can shift toward a culturally sustaining model that not only includes but affirms linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring equity and meaningful learning for students across the archipelago.

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