

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Tribal Education: A Review

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Abstract

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) emerged as a response to deep-rooted inequities and limitations within mainstream education systems that historically failed to serve diverse, especially Indigenous and marginalised, learners effectively. Traditional schooling was largely based on Eurocentric knowledge, standardised curricula, and assimilationist policies that ignored or devalued students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and lived experiences, which led to disengagement, poor academic performance, identity conflict, and high dropout rates. Reviewing the research that demonstrates how Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) improves learning outcomes for students from tribal backgrounds was the aim of the study. Findings suggested that incorporating the CRT approach in classrooms of indigenous and tribal students enhances academic outcomes and strengthens cultural identity among students.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching, Tribal Education, Cultural Diversity

Introduction:

India is the home to over 2,000 communities and thousands of ethnic groups. With more than 705 tribal communities, the tribal population constitutes approximately 8.6% of the Indian population (Census of India, 2011; Press Information Bureau, 2024). India has the largest and most varied tribal population in the world due to their own language, traditions, physical characteristics, and social systems. All these contribute to India's diverse cultural background, which is also reflected in Indian classrooms. Education is the fundamental right of every individual (United Nations, 1948), that possess a transformative power to shape people, communities, and societies (Adhikari & Mohapatra, 2024). Therefore, to uplift the situation of the tribal society, providing education is very important. Even though the Indian Constitution made special provisions of Article 46 and Article 350A to promote education among tribal communities. However, as per the NSO survey 2021, the tribal literacy rate is 59 %, which is significantly lower than the nation's literacy rate of 77.7%. Even a high dropout rate is noticeable among tribal students, especially before completing high school, which is around 70%, and only 4% pursue higher education (ASER, 2022). Although the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is improving at the primary level, it drops significantly after secondary education levels. Economic constraints, child labour, seasonal migration, and a lack of mother-tongue-based educational atmosphere and cultural barriers contribute to discontinuing their studies. Culture is essential to education since it is the foundation of all learning (Gay, 2010; Samuels, 2018). The collective behaviours and practices displayed by a certain social group, with a focus on particular external aspects like language, religion, cuisine, arts, traditions, and festivals, can be defined as culture. Tylor (1871) famously defined culture as a complex whole of knowledge, belief, art, and habits acquired through

social life.

Culture and education have a reciprocal relation that makes it impossible to keep them apart due to their mutual influence. The cultural pattern of a society determines its educational system. This supports the claim of Howard (1999), “We can’t teach what we don’t know”, focused on culturally responsive teaching and the importance of teachers exploring their own racial and cultural identities to better serve diverse student populations. Because culture has a significant impact on cognitive processes, behavioural patterns, and communicative dynamics, there has been an increasing understanding of the importance of incorporating cultural perspectives into educational practice. (Gay, 2000). Therefore, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is recognised as a pivotal framework for addressing the educational needs of marginalised and indigenous communities globally, as it includes community involvement, cultural practice, and prior experiences in education to make learning more effective and relevant. The framework holds profound potential for transforming tribal education by bridging the gap between the cultural worlds of tribal learners and the formal school environment.

Objectives:

To review the literature that supports Culturally Responsive Teaching enhances learning outcomes of students of tribal background.

Methodology:

The review was conducted by comprehensive screening using the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar to locate pertinent literature published in English. The search was completed on 20th February 2026. In the section of Culturally Responsive Teaching, inclusion search term combinations included - CRT and Indigenous student , CRT approach, CRT method in classroom, Culturally Responsive Schooling, Culturally relevant pedagogy. All empirical studies that support that Culturally Responsive Teaching enhances academic outcomes are included.

Result:

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) bridges educational gaps by recognising the critical function of culture in education. CRT emphasises the necessity of relating education to culture in order to obtain both cultural relevance and educational equity. Additionally, it focuses on civil rights movements and multiculturalism in order to combat cultural marginalisation in education. The review included 15 studies that applied the CRT approach in schools serving the Indigenous population, as shown in Table 1 with their outcomes.

Table 1: Incorporation of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Student Outcomes:

Authors & Year	Methodology	Setting & Sample	CRT Approach Used	Findings
Howard & Terry (2011)	3-year longitudinal study; mixed methods	African American high school students in USA	Systematic implementation integrated with academic rigor; CRP with	The rates of college enrollment and graduation improved dramatically and

Authors & Year	Methodology	Setting & Sample	CRT Used	Approach	Findings
			focus on college-going and graduation outcomes		overall academic outcome also increased.
Savage et al. (2011)	Mixed-method	Over 400 classrooms across 32 mainstream schools and 214 Māori students surveyed in New Zealand	CRT emphasizing caring relationships, cultural identity recognition, and use of Māori culture in daily classroom activities		Majority of teachers demonstrated CRT practices. Students described teachers as caring for them as culturally located individuals. Improved cultural connectedness and engagement.
Byrd (2016)	Survey-based correlational study	N = 315 sixth- to 12th-grade students in the USA	Cultural socialization; learning about racism; culturally relevant instruction aligned to students' lived experiences		CRT practices significantly associated with improved academic outcomes and stronger ethnic-racial identity development.
Dee & Penner (2017)	Quasi-experimental fuzzy regression discontinuity design	N = 1,405 9 th grade students in San Francisco	Ethnic studies curriculum embedding CRP; identity affirmation; critical social engagement; service-learning connected to students' communities		Attendance +21 percentage points; GPA +1.4 grade points; credits earned +23. Gains were strong across subjects. CRP in high-fidelity context can effectively support at-risk students.
Larson et al. (2018)	Observational and correlational study	African American and White K–12 students across K–12 classrooms in the USA	Proactive classroom management combined with culturally responsive teaching practices		CRT linked to reduced behavioral disparities. African American students showed improved on-task

Authors & Year	Methodology	Setting & Sample	CRT Approach Used	Findings
				behavior. Implications for narrowing the discipline gap.
Bonilla, Dee & Penner (2021)	Longitudinal regression discontinuity design; follow-up of Dee & Penner (2017) SFUSD cohort	San Francisco Unified School District; longitudinal follow-up sample from the original 2010–2014 ethnic studies pilot cohort	Ethnic studies with CRP; longitudinal follow-up measuring attendance, high school graduation, and college matriculation	Sustained academic gains into later high school years. Increased high school graduation rates and college-going behaviors confirmed. Effects persisted years after the original intervention.
Flint & Jagers (2021)	Qualitative; classroom observations and reflective practitioner accounts over one academic year	N = 9 teachers of Grade 1 and Grade 4 in USA	Asset-based (culturally sustaining) pedagogy; affirming nondominant cultural capital; deficit-reduction approach	Asset-based pedagogy promoted student well-being, agency, and sense of belonging. Students demonstrated greater ownership of learning and higher engagement with writing tasks. Culturally sustaining practices reduced deficit-based assumptions.
Blazar (2021)	Randomized experiment; 4th and 5th grade teachers randomly assigned to class rosters within schools across four East Coast U.S. school districts (2010–2019)	N=1,283 Upper-elementary students and 71 teachers in U.S.	CRT enacted by teachers of color: growth mindset beliefs, interpersonal relationships with students and families, differentiated instruction, and	Effects of up to 0.45 SD on social-emotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes for students of color. Positive effects on test scores (0.2 SD) and chronic absenteeism persisted up to six years

Authors & Year	Methodology	Setting & Sample	CRT Approach Used	Findings
			well-organized classroom management	later in high school.
Saelua (2021)	Conceptual/framework analysis with case examples	Students from Hawaii	Indigenous principles: collectivist learning, demonstration-based assessment, place-based knowledge; Hawaii's KA'EO framework	Students applied learning to real-life situations. Deeper understanding of academic concepts. Stronger cultural identity and community connection reported.
Hernandez (2022)	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews with in-service teachers and thematic analysis	N = 20 in-service teachers in 8 states across the USA	CRP strategies aligned to students' lived experiences; paradigm shift in instructional practice	CRP strategies created more equitable classroom environments. Teachers who aligned instruction with students' lived experiences reported narrowing of achievement gaps for ELL and minority students.
DiIorio (2022)	Convergent mixed-methods (Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice); observational walkthroughs (pre/post), focus groups, surveys, one-on-one coaching, professional development over a	N = 15 observed staff; 5 coached teachers; 1 small elementary school, New England, USA	Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) professional development; CLR learning environment strategies	CLR professional development significantly increased teachers' CLR strategy use. CLR learning environment improvement associated with a 4.89-point increase in student engagement. Teachers reported enhanced knowledge,

Authors & Year	Methodology	Setting & Sample	CRT Used	Approach	Findings
	6-week cycle				skills, and attitudes toward CRT.
Chen (2023)	Qualitative interview and observation study	Preschool classrooms in Indigenous areas of Taiwan	Non-Indigenous teachers incorporating Indigenous language and culture; cooperation with parents and tribal communities; linking students' background to curriculum		Increased academic achievement. Stronger cultural identity. Greater parental and community involvement. Improved teacher-student relationships.
Clark (2023)	Mixed-methods program evaluation	Title I urban high school; majority African American; >70% economically disadvantaged	School-wide CRT initiative; teacher professional development; parent and administrator involvement		Improved academic performance in CRT-trained classrooms. Reduced discipline infractions. Increased parent engagement.
Virtusio (2024)	Action research; teacher-led CRT intervention, pre/post assessments, classroom observations over one semester	Racially and ethnically diverse K–8 students of urban public school, southwestern USA	Culturally anchored instruction; culturally responsive strategies embedded in regular classroom practice		Pre/post data showed statistically significant gains in reading comprehension and math fluency in CRT intervention classrooms vs. control. Students demonstrated higher intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy following culturally anchored instruction.
Steele et al. (2024)	Qualitative multi-site case study	14 schools; 25 students, 15	Lecturers modified assessment tasks for		Improved two-way learning opportunities.

Authors & Year	Methodology	Setting & Sample	CRT Approach Used	Findings
		lecturers, 14 principals in First Nations communities, Australia	cultural responsiveness; two-way learning frameworks; culturally fair assessment design	Enhanced culturally fair assessment design. Stronger student engagement and academic outcomes in higher education.
Hernandez et al. (2025)	Latent profile analysis (person-centered approach); survey-based cross-sectional study	N = 717 students ages 10–18 in U.S. Southwest	Cultural competency promotion, critical consciousness socialization, and general teacher support as culturally relevant school support programs	Four profiles ranging from low to high culturally relevant support were identified. Youth with high support profiles displayed higher emotional and behavioral engagement. Higher culturally relevant support was linked to improved academic performance.

Discussion:

Implementation of CRT for the indigenous and tribal communities has provided positive outcomes across academic, social, and cultural domains. Research indicates that integrating tribal knowledge and culturally relevant content into curricula significantly improves students’ academic achievement, particularly in mathematics and reading (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Lipka et al., 2005). At the same time, such approaches strengthen cultural identity by fostering a deeper sense of self, belonging, and ethnic pride among Indigenous learners (Brayboy, 2005). Student engagement also increases, as culturally grounded instruction enhances motivation, participation, and attendance (Chen, 2023). Importantly, the benefits extend beyond Indigenous students, as culturally diverse content promotes inclusivity in classrooms (Savage et al., 2011). Teacher effectiveness is also enhanced through professional development in culturally responsive teaching, leading to more inclusive and context-sensitive pedagogical practices (Savage et al., 2011; Steele et al., 2024). Additionally, the bond between Indigenous communities and educational systems is strengthened when schools involve the community and respect and reflect indigenous cultures (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Chen, 2023). In the end, placing education in the framework of tribal sovereignty promotes institutional accountability and self-determination, emphasizing education as a vital instrument for cultural sustainability and empowerment. (Brayboy, 2005; McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Conclusion:

The indigenous population, especially those with a tribal background, has a different learning environment than the non-indigenous population. However, the curriculum is primarily based on the mass population, which differs from tribal culture. Therefore, curricula and teaching approaches should be based on students' experiences, cultural background, and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) supports the claim by redefining the education of Indigenous and tribal students by incorporating culture, identity, and community knowledge in the education. The idea behind CRT was that the curriculum should be based on students' needs. Research evidence from the empirical studies demonstrates that by incorporating the CRT approach in classrooms of indigenous and tribal students, it enhances academic outcomes, strengthens cultural identity, and improves student engagement in the classroom. Therefore, to enhance tribal education in India, incorporating the CRT approach will reduce the dropout rate as it mainly promotes mother-tongue-based educational atmosphere and reduces cultural barriers in education.

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