The Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching within the *Merdeka* Curriculum through the *Kampus Mengajar* Program

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Abstract. Culturally Responsive Teaching emphasizes the importance of recognizing and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process to promote more effective and meaningful learning experiences. As Indonesia is a nation characterized by immense cultural diversity, the application of CRT is particularly relevant, ensuring that education is tailored to its students' unique needs and contexts. This research investigates the integration of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, focusing on how it can enhance student engagement and foster a more inclusive educational environment. The research employs qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, and classroom observations, to evaluate how CRT impacts student engagement, participation, and inclusivity. The study highlights how CRT fosters active learning by creating environments where students feel recognized and valued. The findings indicate that incorporating CRT into the Merdeka Curriculum through initiatives like Kampus Mengajar 7 can enhance learning outcomes. Students from underserved communities show increased engagement, motivation, and participation when their cultural identities are acknowledged and respected in the learning. Ultimately, the research advocates for the broader application of CRT within the Indonesian education system, arguing that it is a key strategy for promoting inclusivity, equity, and meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Keywords: Culturally responsive teaching, Merdeka curriculum, *kampus mengajar*

1   INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape has shifted dramatically in recent years, spurred by the need to create more inclusive, autonomous, and culturally responsive learning settings. Education plays a critical role in shaping the future of a nation, and ensuring that it meets the needs of all learners is an ongoing challenge, especially in culturally diverse countries like Indonesia [1][2]. With such a vast range of ethnic groups, languages, and cultural traditions, Indonesia demands an educational system that represents and respects its pupils' different backgrounds. Traditional, standardized teaching techniques frequently fail to address pupils' individual cultural and contextual demands, resulting in disengagement and discrepancies in learning outcomes. This recognition has driven the

push for educational reform, including implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, which stresses increased flexibility, inclusivity, and student-centered learning practices. The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum was introduced as a response to the need for a more flexible and adaptive curriculum [3]. As educators become more aware of the different backgrounds and experiences that children bring to the classroom, the desire for teaching techniques that address and honor this diversity has grown. Educators are essential in demonstrating cultural competence and fostering inclusive environments within the classroom [4][5].

1.1 Culturally Responsive Teaching

One such pedagogical approach is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), which aims to bridge cultural gaps in the classroom, facilitating more equitable and engaging educational experiences[6]. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts like Indonesia, where classrooms often consist of students from various ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. The culturally responsive education concept (responsive/relevant pedagogy) is one new approach to bridging education to its socio-cultural milieu. *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (CRP) is founded on the assumption that cultural foundations play a role in model learning patterns and that adequate teaching with that cultural lens is required for music (Villegas, 1991). As Gay defines (2015), Culturally responsive teaching allows students to explore their own cultures and those of others, fostering cultural sensitivity and appreciation as they become global citizens. The necessity for teaching practices that recognize and respect this diversity is crucial for fostering academic achievement and a sense of belonging and cultural identity among students.

CRT practices are being implemented in Indonesian schools. Specifically, it explores how these practices contribute to students' academic performance, cultural identity, and sense of inclusion[8]. CRT is a pedagogical framework that acknowledges the importance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives into the learning process [9]. Doing so seeks to create a more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environment where all students can succeed. Instead of expecting students to adapt to a uniform teaching style, CRT encourages educators to adapt their methods to align with the cultural contexts of their learners, thereby fostering a deeper connection to the material and greater engagement. This approach is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where the student population reflects a broad spectrum of cultural identities, from urban centers to remote rural communities. Gay [10] and other researchers have proposed culturally responsive teaching models. They have emphasized the significance of fostering equitable classroom interactions, the necessity of developing curriculum materials that are appropriate for the students' cultural background, and the importance of understanding the cultural roots of the students. As recommended by these frameworks, educators should constantly evaluate their own practices, consider any biases they may have, and modify their methods to suit their students' diverse requirements.

Gay [9] addresses critical transformation as well, but under the name of Culturally Responsive Teaching. She proposes that CRT have revolutionary effects at all levels, including the teacher, classroom, curriculum, school, institution/district, and educational culture. Gay describes CRT as holistic, reciprocal, and informed by the lived experiences of communities of color. CRT seeks to free everyone from the repercussions of unfair resource distribution through transformation. She underlines that CRT

is a joint effort requiring both personal and institutional resources. This institutional emphasis is why, in this dissertation, I focus on the implications of CRT for writing programs rather than individual instructors' skills. Gay is quoted extensively in practically all CRT studies. However, other researchers' interpretations of her work and summaries vary widely. Some scholars, for example, use her model's principles to implement CRT in the classroom but do not highlight the institutional transformation parts; essentially, these researchers transmit the conduit-to-learning aspects but not the complete critical transformation strategy. CRT is defined by eight characteristics [9]:
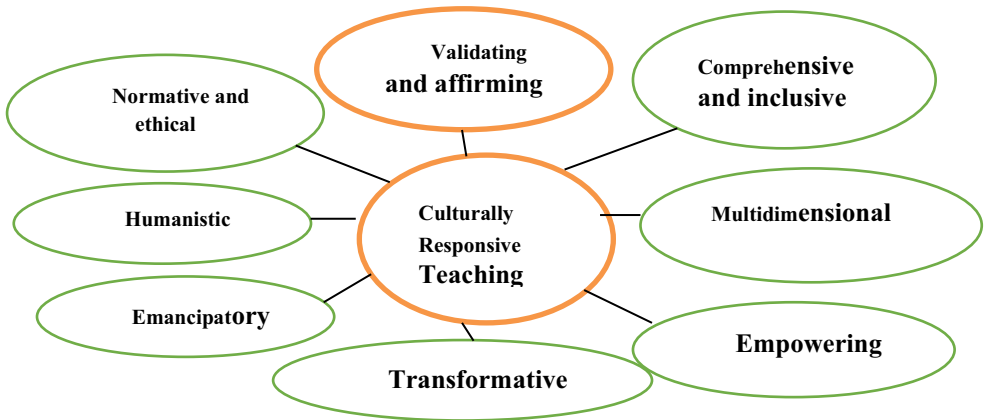

Figure 1. Eight Characteristics of CRT

The Eight Characteristics above incorporate students' cultural heritages into lessons, building a link between their school and real-life experiences while encouraging cultural pride and identity. It focuses on the entire child's intellectual, emotional, social, and political development, aiming for excellent academic accomplishment while upholding cultural values. CRT is multifaceted, incorporating curriculum, relationships, and varied perspectives to help students gain confidence and become agents of social change. It addresses educational disparities, encourages open-mindedness, respects cultural variety, and argues for ethically incorporating diverse perspectives into education, particularly to challenge Eurocentric standards.

1.2   Merdeka Curriculum

The Indonesian government has responded to these challenges by introducing the Merdeka Curriculum, an initiative that promotes autonomy, critical thinking, and personalized learning experiences [11]. The Merdeka Curriculum is a new educational framework developed by Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture that aims to provide schools, instructors, and students more flexibility and autonomy. It is part of the Indonesian government's Merdeka Belajar "*Freedom to Learn*" strategy, which aims to improve the education system by making it more dynamic, inclusive, and learner-centered. The Merdeka Curriculum is a significant movement in Indonesian education, stressing comprehensive and adaptable learning methodologies [12].

For example, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum and the 2013 Curriculum demonstrate the government's commitment to updating education to better equip students for future challenges [13]. The Merdeka curriculum is implemented in accordance with the Minister of Education and Culture's Decree No. 56 of 2022, which establishes standards for learning recovery, referred to as 'Kurikulum Merdeka.' This regulation complements the existing educational framework [12]. This curriculum, a crucial component of Indonesia's educational reform, intends to prepare students for 21st-century skills and competencies [14]. The Merdeka curriculum is adaptable and prioritizes vital themes and student growth. According to Barlian et al. [15], the Merdeka curriculum is a flexible framework emphasizing fundamental topics, learner competencies, and character development. The Merdeka curriculum has the following characteristics: (1) project-based learning is used to develop soft skills with characters tailored to the profile of Pancasila students, and (2) the focus is on essential material intending to provide enough time to study the material in depth in order to improve literacy and numeracy skills [16].

The curriculum encourages educators to take a more flexible approach, shifting from rigid, standardized instruction to a model that prioritizes local relevance and student engagement. These reforms aim to improve academic attainment and foster competencies for an interconnected world.

1.3   The Kampus Mangajar Program

One key initiative supporting this curriculum is the Kampus Mengajar Program, currently in its seventh iteration, which mobilizes university students to teach in underserved schools across the country[17]. The Kampus 7 Program is part of the Merdeka Learning Programme, Merdeka Campus (MBKM), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Kemendikbudristek). MBKM aims to promote independent, flexible, and high-quality learning in universities, fostering an innovative, non-restrictive learning culture that meets student demands limits and in accordance with the needs of students [18].

The primary goal of Kampus Mengajar 7 is to address the challenges faced by primary schools, especially in underserved areas, such as *improving literacy and numeracy skills among young students, assisting teachers in integrating technology into the learning process, supporting schools in recovering from the learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.* At the same time, it offers university students an opportunity to contribute to society while developing their soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and leadership.

The Kampus Mengajar program is strongly associated with the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka concept, which emphasizes the value of experiential learning and bridging the gap between academia and real-world problems. The program supports the following main objectives: 1) Empowering students to learn via experience and make a tangible contribution to society, 2) Promoting inclusivity by resolving educational disparities, particularly in underprivileged populations, 3) Developing holistic student competencies, such as critical thinking, leadership, and social responsibility, in accordance with the Pancasila Student Profile. Kampus Mengajar is an internship program at MBKM that students are really enthusiastic about. The Kampus Mengajar Program is

a school internship program involving student engagement. The Kampus Mengajar program aligns with Merdeka Belajar's goal of increasing student involvement in learning [19]. Students taking part in Kampus Mengajar are expected to assist, support, and do school tasks that still need improvement. Students' participation is anticipated to contribute to raising the standard of instruction in classrooms, particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and technology adaptation. In contrast, the MBKM program is supposed to help students develop both their hard and soft talents, enabling them to become exceptional, moral, and ethical graduates[20].

These student-teachers bring fresh perspectives and innovative teaching strategies crucial for implementing CRT in real-world settings. The curriculum fosters critical and creative thinking by allowing students to investigate and resolve real-world issues. Students are encouraged to take part in a more individualized learning experience with this method, which supports taking responsibility for their education and creating solutions according to their skills and interests [3]

This study seeks to explore the ways in which CRT is implemented within the Merdeka Curriculum through the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program and how it contributes to fostering a more inclusive and culturally aware learning environment. Specifically, the study aims to analyze how student-teachers involved in the program adapt their teaching methods to meet the cultural and contextual needs of the students they work with. By focusing on the role of cultural awareness, student-centered teaching, and the adaptation of instructional strategies, the research investigates how CRT can address the educational needs of diverse student populations, particularly in underserved areas.

Moreover, the research analyzes the broader impact of CRT on student engagement and inclusivity. It explores how acknowledging students' cultural identities in the classroom affects their participation, motivation, and overall learning experience. By creating an educational environment where students feel seen, heard, and valued, CRT has the potential to transform disengaged learners into active participants in their own education.

2   METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Creswell and Clark [21] asserted that qualitative research typically involves aggregating diverse data and encompassing several factors within a natural context. This method explored the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) within the Merdeka Curriculum through the program of Kampus Mengajar 7. The current research focused on understanding how university student-teachers incorporated CRT strategies in their teaching and how these practices affected student engagement and inclusivity in underserved schools. The research methodology was designed to capture in-depth insights into the experiences of both the student-teachers and the students they work with, as well as to analyze the effectiveness of CRT in fostering a culturally inclusive educational environment.

2.1   Research Design

This study adopted a case study design. A methodical study methodology was used to thoroughly grasp a current topic or occurrence in a bounded system [22]. It examined

the real-world application of Culturally Responsive Teaching within the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program context. The case study method was selected due to its effectiveness in capturing complex phenomena within specific contexts, such as how CRT is adapted and implemented in diverse, underserved school environments across Indonesia. Focusing on multiple school sites where Kampus Mengajar 7 is operational gives the study a holistic understanding of CRT's impact on educational outcomes.

2.2   Participant

The participants of this study were nine students who participated in Kampus Mengajar 7 program. The participants were chosen to ensure a variety of cultural contexts and allow for a more comprehensive analysis of CRT practices.

2.3   Data Collection

A combination of qualitative data collection methods was employed to gather in-depth insights into the application and effectiveness of CRT in the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program.
1. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the student to explore their understanding of CRT, how they apply it in the classroom, and the challenges they face in adapting to diverse cultural contexts.
2. Classroom Observations: Non-participant classroom observations have been conducted to document how CRT is applied in practice. Observers will note the interactions between student-teachers and students, the use of culturally relevant materials, and the strategies employed to accommodate diverse learning needs.

2.4   Data Analysis

   Data from interviews and classroom observations were initially transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach allowed for identifying recurring themes related to the implementation of CRT, including strategies, challenges, and the perceived impact on student engagement and inclusivity. The analysis focused on identifying patterns that reflected successful implementation of CRT within different cultural contexts and areas where further support or development needed.

3   FINDING

Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) within the Merdeka Curriculum through the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program significantly impacted student engagement and inclusivity in underserved communities. This section outlines the key findings from interviews, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The results are categorized into three main themes: enhanced student engagement, improved inclusivity, and student-teachers' role in adapting CRT to diverse contexts.

1.   Enhanced Student Engagement

One of the main conclusions was that when teaching examples and instructional materials reflected the students' cultural backgrounds, the students responded more actively. For example, when student teachers incorporated local traditions, mythology, and cultural icons into their lessons, students paid more attention and participated more actively. This improved the relatability of the material and made it easier for students to draw connections between what they were learning in class and their personal experiences.

Further boosting engagement was the student-teachers' regular application of student-centered practices in the curriculum. Students felt more empowered to participate when active learning was promoted through peer cooperation, group discussions, and practical activities that respected their cultural preferences. Findings showed that students showed greater levels of curiosity, motivation, and engagement in the learning process when they were allowed to communicate their thoughts in ways that were true to their cultural identities.

2.   Improved Inclusivity in the Classroom

The results show that CRT considerably positively influenced the building of an inclusive classroom atmosphere. The study found that when student-teachers adapted their teaching methods to accommodate the diverse learning styles of students—whether visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—students felt more included. This approach was particularly effective in classrooms with students from different cultural backgrounds who may have different ways of processing and interacting with information. Tailoring instructional strategies to the cultural preferences of students helped reduce feelings of isolation among marginalized groups and created a sense of belonging.

Student-teachers implemented CRT strategies such as culturally relevant group projects, discussions about local community issues, and collaborative learning activities that allowed students to take ownership of their learning. This inclusivity extended beyond the curriculum to classroom interactions, where student-teachers ensured that every student had an opportunity to contribute. As a result, the program demonstrated success in reducing the marginalization of students who might otherwise feel excluded due to cultural or socioeconomic differences.

Another key finding was that the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program acted as a bridge between student teachers and the local communities they served. By actively engaging with the community and learning about the cultural context in which they were teaching, student-teachers were able to build trust with students and their families. This community engagement helped make the school environment more welcoming and inclusive for students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. Improved Inclusivity in the Classroom

The findings demonstrate that CRT has a major beneficial impact on creating a welcoming environment in the classroom. According to the study, students felt more included when student teachers modified their lesson plans to suit their varied learning preferences, whether they were kinesthetic, auditory, or visual. This strategy worked especially well in classrooms with kids from diverse cultural backgrounds, who may have distinct information processing and interaction styles. Adapting teaching methods to students' cultural preferences promoted a sense of belonging and lessened marginalized groups' feelings of isolation.

Student-teachers used CRT techniques such as culturally appropriate group projects, conversations about issues facing the community, and cooperative learning exercises that gave students a sense of ownership over their education. Beyond the curriculum, this inclusivity ensured that each student could participate in the interactions between students and teachers. Consequently, the initiative effectively reduced the isolation of students who might otherwise experience exclusion because of cultural or financial disparities.

The Kampus Mengajar 7 Program served as a link between student teachers and the communities they were teaching in, which was another important discovery. Student-teachers established trust with students and their families by actively participating in the community and learning about the cultural context in which they were teaching. Through community involvement, the school was able to better serve students from underprivileged backgrounds by creating a more inclusive and friendly atmosphere.

4. Adaptation of CRT by Student-Teachers

A critical aspect of the program's success was how student-teachers were able to apply CRT ideas to a variety of local circumstances effectively. Advancement of Professionalism and Cultural Intelligence: The importance of professional development in improving student-teachers' capacity to apply CRT successfully was one of the main conclusions. Pre-service training in cultural awareness was part of the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program, which allowed the participants to better comprehend and interact with the cultural contexts of the schools they were assigned to. It was discovered that this training was crucial for equipping student-teachers to handle the challenges of putting CRT into practice in a variety of educational contexts.

Student-teachers had difficulties when putting CRT into practice. Among these were a lack of knowledge about some regional traditions and trouble locating culturally appropriate materials that complemented the Merdeka Curriculum. A few student instructors voiced uncertainty about how to strike a balance between the demands of the national curriculum and the obligation to modify lessons to fit the local culture. Nonetheless, these difficulties were lessened by the program's collaborative structure and the assistance of nearby educators, allowing student-teachers to gradually improve their methods.

One of the main conclusions was the importance of professional development in improving student-teachers' capacity to apply CRT successfully. Pre-service training in cultural awareness was part of the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program, which allowed the participants to better comprehend and interact with the cultural contexts of the schools they were assigned to. It was discovered that this training was crucial for equipping

student-teachers to handle the challenges of putting CRT into practice in a variety of educational contexts.

4   DISCUSSION

The study's findings underscore the importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in increasing student participation and inclusivity within the framework of Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, namely through the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program. This debate delves into the ramifications of these findings, the challenges experienced during implementation, and the overall impact on Indonesia's educational system.

1. **The Importance of Cultural Relevance in Education**
The enhanced student involvement shown in classes when CRT was implemented highlights the vital relevance of matching education with students' cultural backgrounds. Students who were taught using culturally relevant materials and approaches demonstrated increased interest and participation in the learning process. This supports the premise that when students see their culture and experiences mirrored in the curriculum, they are more likely to engage with the material, resulting in better educational outcomes. This finding is consistent with previous CRT research, which highlights that students from marginalized or underrepresented cultural origins benefit considerably from pedagogical approaches that recognize and include their cultural identities.

In the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program, student-teachers successfully used culturally relevant resources by incorporating local traditions, dialects, and examples into their lessons. For example, in rural regions, incorporating traditional folklore or local history into lesson plans enhanced student attention while also bridging the gap between their daily lives and academic content. This method is consistent with the ideas of CRT, which advocate for incorporating students' cultural references to make learning more accessible and meaningful.

In other words, it is necessary to expand the integration of CRT within the Merdeka Curriculum throughout Indonesia. The country's vast cultural diversity necessitates an educational system that is adaptable enough to accommodate students from various ethnic backgrounds[23]. Dawson et.al[24] said that by incorporating CRT into the curriculum, schools can create a more inclusive and engaging environment, hence reducing educational disparities for kids from marginalized populations.

2. Inclusivity and Equity in Underserved Schools
The results also suggest that implementing CRT through the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program greatly increased classroom inclusion. By tailoring their teaching methods to students' different learning styles and cultural settings, the student-teachers established a learning environment in which all students felt recognized and respected. This inclusive approach reduced sentiments of marginalization among kids from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging and equal opportunity in the classroom [25].

This study has implications for educational equity in Indonesia. Students in under-privileged neighborhoods may confront various challenges to educational success, such as limited resources, a lack of culturally relevant instructional materials, and a curriculum that fails to reflect their realities. The success of CRT in addressing these challenges within the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program implies that taking a more culturally sensitive approach, in general, could help lessen these gaps, paving the door for a more egalitarian education system. Furthermore, this approach aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals of providing a flexible and student-centered educational experience that can adjust to Indonesian learners' different requirements.

3. Challenges in Implementing CRT

While the adoption of CRT through the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program had favorable results, the study also found some problems that student-teachers faced while adapting CRT to the local environment. One of the most significant challenges was unfamiliarity with some local customs and cultural standards. Some student-teachers had difficulty comprehending their pupils' cultural backgrounds, especially in rural or distant locations where traditions and beliefs differ significantly.

Another problem was the scarcity of culturally relevant teaching resources that aligned with the national curriculum. Student-teachers frequently had to create their own materials or change existing ones to make them culturally appropriate for the kids they were teaching. This difficulty emphasizes the need for more institutional assistance, particularly the creation of instructional tools that reflect Indonesia's cultural variety and are easily adaptable to various local contexts [26].

Furthermore, several student-teachers struggled to balance national curriculum standards and the need for cultural adaptation. While the Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility, student-teachers must ensure that they achieve national educational standards while adjusting their teaching methods to be culturally sensitive. This balancing act necessitates meticulous planning and a thorough comprehension of both the curriculum and the local culture, which can be challenging for untrained teachers.

4. The Role of Professional Development

The findings indicate that pre-service training in cultural awareness and CRT principles was beneficial in assisting student-teachers in successfully implementing CRT in the classroom. The Kampus Mengajar 7 Program offered crucial professional development, providing participants with the skills and information required to handle the complexity of teaching in varied cultural situations. This instruction benefited student teachers with no prior experience with CRT or the communities they served.

This underlines the importance of comprehensive professional development programs for all teachers, especially those working in culturally diverse or underserved areas. By providing continuing CRT training, schools can better support educators in adjusting their teaching techniques to meet the needs of their students[27]. The teacher support group should provide a space outside the classroom for instructors to study, practice, and learn new skills[28]. This training is valuable to student teachers and is also necessary for in-service teachers who may not have had exposure to CRT throughout their formal education.

5. Implications for Indonesia's Educational Reform

The results of integrating CRT inside the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program offered essential insights into Indonesia's ongoing educational reforms. The success of this program in increasing student involvement and inclusivity highlights CRT's ability to alter classrooms across the country. As the Merdeka Curriculum evolves, there is a chance to integrate CRT concepts into the national education system, ensuring that all students, regardless of cultural background, receive an inclusive and responsive education[29].

Expanding the use of CRT can also contribute to the broader goal of educational equity in Indonesia. By addressing the diverse needs of students from different cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, CRT can help close the achievement gap between urban and rural schools and students from different ethnic and cultural groups[30]. This aligns with the vision of the Merdeka Curriculum, which seeks to empower all students to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

5   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching within the Merdeka Curriculum through the Kampus Mengajar 7 Program has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting student engagement and inclusivity. While challenges remain regarding resource availability and cultural adaptation, the program's success highlights the potential of CRT to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable education system in Indonesia. To fully realize this potential, it is essential to provide ongoing support and professional development for educators and develop culturally relevant teaching materials that align with the national curriculum. By doing so, Indonesia can ensure that its education system reflects the rich diversity of its student population and allows all learners to succeed. Despite its success, the study highlights issues with resource availability, combining curriculum requirements with cultural adaptation, and the need for ongoing teacher training. Based on these insights.

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