

# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING: IMPACT ON STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

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## Introduction

One of the issues faced by educators in multicultural classrooms is making sure every student feels visible, represented, respected and engaged in their learning. Research indicates that schools still deliver content that adequately represents the cultural background or life experiences of their pupils. (Banks, 2001; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This gap can lead to lower levels of engagement and participation, particularly among students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Research suggests that students' motivation and sense of belonging can be affected if they do not see themselves represented or their identities recognised in the curriculum (Nieto, 2010; Moll et al., 1992). Educators can make learning relevant, personalised and reflective of their students' cultural identity and experience by using a pedagogical approach known as culturally responsive teaching (CRT). This approach integrates students' viewpoints and life experiences into the classroom (Gay, 2010).

A common misconception is that CRT focuses solely on students' national identity or ethnicity. However, this is not the case; in practice, CRT looks at a child holistically. This includes not only their cultural background, but their interests, their mode of communication, preferred way of learning values, experiences and perspectives developed from home life that students bring into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mehta, 2024). When applied intentionally and thoughtfully, CRT can contribute to the creation of a more equitable and responsive learning environment where students are encouraged to actively participate, share their experiences and feel confident in their identity to do so.

### Background of the Problem

I teach in a Year 3 class in a multicultural British International school, with pupils from over 100 different nationalities. Over time, I observed a persistent lack of participation and engagement among some students during teacher-led activities, class discussions and tasks where they did not particularly connect with their interests or personal experiences. I was keen to address the issue as I began to see a decline in their confidence, levels of enjoyment in lessons and writing attainment. By exploring CRT strategies through this research, I aim to develop and create a learning environment that will increase pupil participation and engagement and give students more ownership of their learning.

## Literature Review

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) is an approach that intentionally integrates students' lived experiences into the curriculum and lessons, as well as valuing their cultural background (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory highlights the important role autonomy plays in improving students' motivation. Similarly, Gay (2000) argues that culturally responsive teaching promotes students' voice and choice within a context relevant to their culture, making learning meaningful and purposeful. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), when students' cultural knowledge and experience are connected to their learning, it fosters intrinsic motivation and engagement in their learning.

According to Banks (2001), a multicultural curriculum fosters fairness by showcasing a range of viewpoints, which helps give students the tools they require to succeed academically. Nieto (2010) emphasises the importance of community and family involvement in fostering a culturally sensitive approach and how it improves home-school relationships while enhancing the

educational experience for kids. Even with these established theories, further study is still necessary to fully understand how CRT can be practically implemented in a multicultural classroom, with a focus on how it affects the engagement and participation of younger students. This study aims to explore how CRT strategies can be successfully applied in a Year 3 multicultural classroom to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

## Methods

This study uses an action research method to find out how culturally responsive teaching strategies can impact student engagement and participation in a Year 3 multicultural classroom. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2011), action research allows for a hands-on, reflective and interactive approach, allowing the researcher to study a problem and make necessary adjustments to improve the outcome.

This research is underpinned by two research questions:

- RQ1: How does connecting learning to students' cultural backgrounds influence their engagement in lessons?
- RQ2: How does offering students choice and ownership over learning tasks impact their participation?

## Methodology

To begin my research project, I surveyed the students to find out what their interests were and how they preferred to learn. The results suggested that the students preferred learning collaboratively with their peers. With this in mind, I designed a six-week geography unit around rivers. The challenge I faced was how I would plan a project-based unit that would give the students the opportunity to work in groups while incorporating their cultural identity and personal interests.

Taking the diverse cultures in my class, I decided to choose a river from different continents that reflected the demographics of my class. I then put the students in mixed ability groups and asked them to choose a continent from a 'feely bag'. The continent they chose would determine the river they would research. This meant that the students were either researching a river that was connected to their cultural background, or they were broadening their global perspective by learning about a river connected to their peers.

To further extend their learning, present them with more autonomy and promote family engagement, I introduce the 'Challenge by Choice' grid (see **Figure 6**) as an optional home learning task. Through this, the children were able to choose a river of their choice and select from an array of activities across different areas of the curriculum, allowing them to showcase their learning in a variety of ways. At the end of the unit, the students were invited to share both their class-based and optional home learning projects with parents and the wider school community.

In addition to the geography unit on rivers, the children participated in a personal writing project, where they had the freedom and choice to write about a topic of interest to them. This task was designed to further promote autonomy and engagement.

Throughout the study, my learning assistant and I worked collaboratively to support the students with the group projects, make observations, monitor progress and reflect on the pupils' responses. Through informal observations, discussions with the students and ongoing feedback, I was able to modify and adapt the tasks and provide appropriate scaffolding.

## Participants

The participants in this study were 22 students from 13 different nationalities in my Year 3 class. Although all students in my class engaged in the study, I decided to focus on four students referred to as Student A, B, C and D to gain deeper insight into the impact of the intervention. I chose these four students because their lack of participation and engagement was an ongoing concern.

## Data Collection

A mixed method approach through quantitative and qualitative data was used for this study. The data was collected through student surveys, observations and writing attainment grades. The survey highlighted the students' interests and preferred ways of learning (see **Figure 1**). The observational data measured the students' level of engagement, participation and reference to their cultures during both the river and the personal writing project. Writing attainment data was included at a later stage due to the progress the students made in their writing over the 6 weeks.

## Data Analysis

To determine the implications of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) on student participation, autonomy, and references made to their culture, I created a simple 5-point rating scale based on observations. Each focal student was evaluated before and after implementing CRT techniques in terms of participation, autonomy, and cultural reference. The points scale ranged from 1 (low) to 5 (high). **Table 1** shows the scores for each of the focus students before and after the integration of CRT.

These quantitative scores were supported by qualitative data gathered from observations and writing samples. Below are examples illustrating each student's progress:

- Student A (see **Figure 2**): Initially avoided writing and showed low confidence with limited group participation. After CRT, they actively contributed to group discussions, wrote a paragraph explaining the water cycle with diagrams, and shared personal cultural connections.
- Student B (see **Figure 3**): Previously silent during discussions and reluctant to write despite capability. After implementing CRT, they engaged fully with the project, completed multiple written sections, created a model of a river from their home country, and presented their work to parents.
- Student C (see **Figure 4**): Initially off-task and hesitant to write, with usually unfinished work. After the implementation, they took on a group researcher role, completed a home activity on the Amazon River, and wrote an information text about a personal interest (Roblox).
- Student D (see **Figure 5**): Although artistic, struggled with creativity and verbal contributions initially. Later, became the project illustrator, actively contributed ideas, researched, wrote information, and showed strong engagement in the personal writing project.

## Results

The action research results indicate the following:

- RQ1: How does connecting learning to students' cultural backgrounds influence their engagement in lessons?:
  - Quantitative data (see **Table 1** and **Figures 2–5**) show an increase in all four focus students' scores for participation, autonomy, cultural reference and writing attainment grades after the implementation of CRT strategies.

- Qualitative data (see Table 2) further supported these findings. The students mentioned feeling proud to learn about rivers from their own countries or from their classmates' cultures. For example, one pupil stated:  
  
*"I liked the river project because I could research the Murray River. This is a river from my country. I was proud to share my project with my parents and my class."*
- Observational data also indicated increased participation and confidence during both the river project and the personal writing project, where pupils shared knowledge related to their own experiences or cultures.
- RQ2: How does offering students choice and ownership over learning tasks impact their participation?
  - Observation data showed that all four focus students demonstrated higher levels of participation and independence when working on the river project and personal writing task, compared to previous writing and topic lessons.
  - Student comments reflected this shift in motivation and ownership. For instance, one pupil said, *"The personal writing project is fun. I can plan and write about whatever I like"* (see **Table 2**).
  - Additionally, while academic attainment was not a focus of this study, it is worth noting that all four students made observable progress in writing, moving up one assessment band during the six-week period (see **Figures 2–5**).

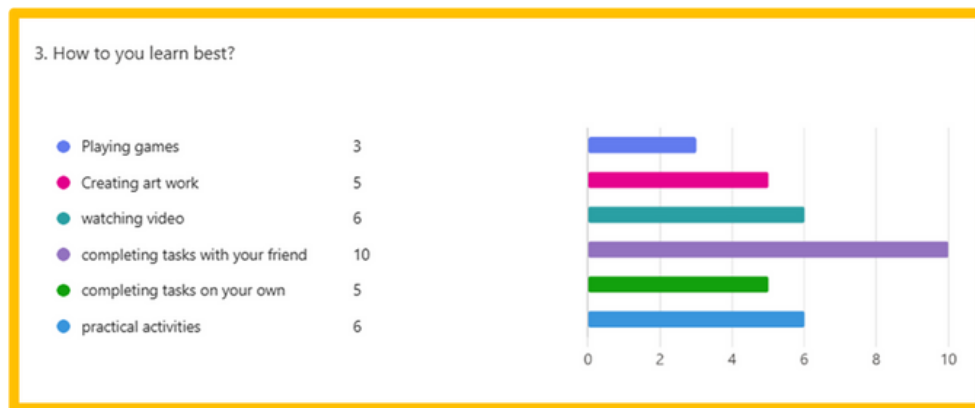
**Table 1**  
**Observation Scores**

Student	Observation	Participation (1–5)	Autonomy (1–5)	Cultural Reference (1–5)
A	Before CRT	2	2	1
	After CRT	4	4	4
B	Before CRT	3	2	2
	After CRT	5	4	5
C	Before CRT	2	1	1
	After CRT	4	3	4
D	Before CRT	3	2	2
	After CRT	5	5	5

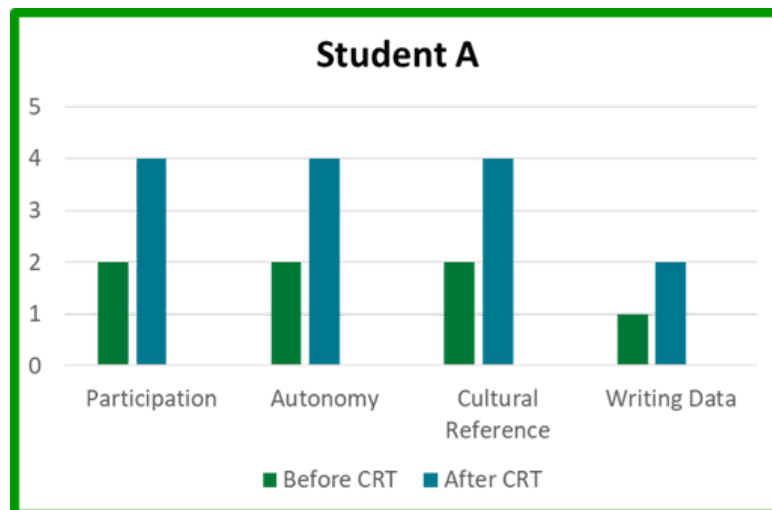
**Figure 1a**  
**Student Survey**



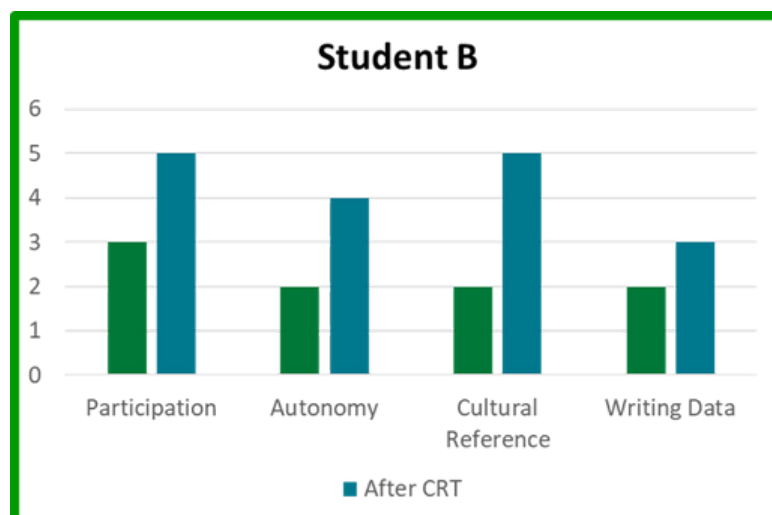
**Figure 1b**  
**Student survey to determine interest and preferred learning style**



**Figure 2**  
**Student A: Engagement, Autonomy and Cultural Reference Before and After CRT**

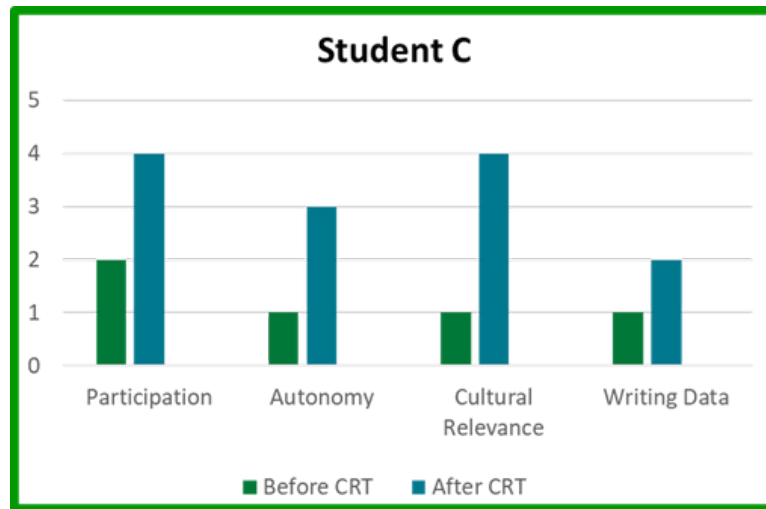


**Figure 3**  
**Student B: Engagement, Autonomy and Cultural Reference Before and After CRT**

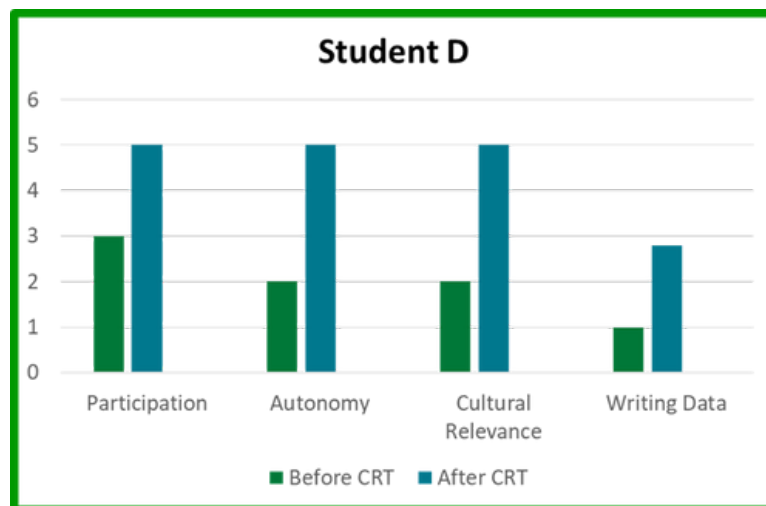




**Figure 4**  
**Student C: Engagement, Autonomy and Cultural Reference Before and After CRT**



**Figure 5**  
**Student D: Engagement, Autonomy and Cultural Reference Before and After CRT**



**Figure 6**  
**Optional Home Learning Task Flyer and Challenge by Choice Grid**

**RIVER OF LIFE**

Our Topic this term is focused on Rivers. To further challenge the children during this topic, choose one or more activities on the **Challenge and Choice Activity Grid** to complete at home. They can do it on their own or team up with a classmate and create a project on Rivers!

The deadline to submit their wonderful work will be Monday 17th, February. Get creative, have fun, and show us what you've learned!

#GeographyChallenge #Teamwork #HomeLearning

**SUBMIT BY: MONDAY 17TH, FEBRUARY**

**Year 3 Rivers Topic - Challenge and Choice Grid**

<b>VOCABULARY</b> Create a game based on rivers vocabulary. It could be a matching game where you match the name to the definition or something trickier like a tarsia puzzle.	<b>*IS A FLOOD GOOD?</b> Every year, rivers around the world flood. Homes, cars and sometimes are lost lives yet people still choose to live by them. Why? Let's explore why a flood can be good.	<b>GEOGRAPHY</b> Find the world's longest rivers on each continent and mark them on a world map. Write 3 facts about each river.	<b>MUSIC</b> Think about the different parts of a river and how it changes as it travels. Can you create a piece of music to symbolise part or all of a river's journey.	<b>*DEBATE</b> Who owns a river? Let's look at different political problems around the world caused by rivers running through different countries and some of the issues concerning dams.
<b>USING A RIVER</b> Many people use rivers for leisure and sporting activities. Choose three activities (eg rafting, fishing, kayaking) and find out what equipment people need to do these activities safely.	<b>DESIGN TECHNOLOGY</b> Design and make a bridge to cross a river. What will you make it out of? How will you make it a strong structure?	<b>DIGITAL PRESENTATION</b> Rivers are beautiful places but they can also be dangerous. Make a poster about being safe in or around a river? You could use PicCollage on an iPad	<b>ECO-SCIENCE</b> Find out about how we can use hydro power to generate electricity. Create a diagram, infographic or model showing/explaining how a hydroelectric plant or dam works.	<b>ART</b> Nico Klapp is an artist who painted lots of rivers. Can you have a go at painting your own river in the same style?
<b>DATA HANDLING</b> Make a bar chart showing the lengths of different rivers. Pick between 5-7. You could use rivers from your home country, a country you would like to visit or any rivers you like. <small>Remember to label your chart clearly and think about the number increments that you will use on your y axis.</small>	<b>STORY TELLING</b> Write an adventure story featuring a river. Make sure it has exciting events and language to keep the reader engaged throughout.	<b>*POETRY</b> Read some poems about rivers or the journey of a river and then create your own. It could be cinquain, haiku, acrostic, shape or narrative. <a href="https://resources.book-scholastic.co.uk/resources/8165">https://resources.book-scholastic.co.uk/resources/8165</a>	<b>NON-FICTION WRITING</b> Research one river in detail and present the information in a nonchronological report.	<b>ECO-SCIENCE</b> Make a list of ways that rivers are essential to people, plants and animals. How are they used by them and what problems might they face if the rivers dry up?

**Table 2**  
**Student Voice: Reflection on River Project and Personal Writing Project**

Student Quote	Emerging Theme
"I liked picking the Nile because it's from my country."	<b>Cultural Connection</b>
"The personal writing project is fun. I can plan and write about whatever I like."	<b>Autonomy / Motivation</b>
"I loved working in a group because we shared ideas about rivers. We all had jobs in the group, and I learned a lot about rivers from my friends."	<b>Identity / Emotional engagement</b>
"I loved working in a group because we shared ideas about rivers. We all had jobs in the group, and I learned a lot about rivers from my friends."	<b>Collaboration / Peer learning</b>
"I liked the river project because I could research the Murray River. This is a river from my country. I was proud to share my project with my parents and my class."	<b>Cultural pride / Family engagement</b>

## Discussion and Reflections

The study revealed that culturally responsive teaching positively influences students' engagement and participation through strategies such as collaboration, autonomy and cultural relevance. The findings support Gay's (2010) and Ladson-Billings' (1995) research, which suggests integrating students' cultural background to their learning increases motivation. As an educator, I now intentionally look for opportunities to include cultural connections and student choice in my planning. This shift has helped me create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment where pupils feel represented and involved.

Through this project, I learned that action research is a powerful tool for improving classroom practice. It helped me see how valuable and relevant this approach can be in a real classroom setting. It gave me a way to focus on a specific issue and make small, purposeful changes based on my daily observations. I found the process practical and flexible, especially as it allowed me to respond directly to what the pupils needed. For other educators, this approach offers a structured yet practical method to explore and refine inclusive strategies that directly respond to the needs of their learners.



## Conclusion

In conclusions, making teachings more relevant and meaningful by relating them to students' cultural backgrounds can positively impact students' participation and engagement. Encouraging students to take ownership of their learning increases their motivation and autonomy, enabling them to express their interests and develop confidence. Peer interaction is further supported, and understanding is deepened in a diverse classroom through collaborative learning practices. This small-scale action research showed how important it is to use student feedback and observation to identify and address challenges involving participation and engagement. However, more studies with a larger sample size, longer timeframe, and academic attainment data could give greater insight into how culturally responsive teaching affects students' outcomes over time.

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