

Teacher Cultural Awareness, Sensitivity, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Shaping Equitable and Meaningful Learning Environment for Indigenous Learners

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ABSTRACT

A poor, equitable, and meaningful learning environment remains a concern among Indigenous learners. I explored the teachers' cultural awareness, sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy in shaping an equitable and meaningful learning environment. I used a qualitative descriptive research design, purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis. I found that students perceived learning as engaging, meaningful, and effective when teachers integrated indigenous culture, used respectful and inclusive practices, and applied varied instructional strategies that improved understanding, participation, and trust. They also expressed that these practices create a supportive classroom environment where respect and confidence in expressing indigenous identity are present. Education practitioners and Indigenous leaders may collaborate to improve the integration of Indigenous knowledge, creating an equitable and meaningful learning environment for Indigenous learners. Future research may explore factors of confidence in Indigenous identity.

Keywords: Teacher cultural awareness, sensitivity, culturally responsive pedagogy, equitable, meaningful learning environment, indigenous learners

Introduction

Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners continue to face poor, inequitable, and meaningful learning environments in many educational settings. Equitable and meaningful learning environments are inclusive, respectful, and culturally affirming spaces that enable learners to participate in educational processes fully. However, school environments remain disconnected from the identities, backgrounds, and educational needs of Indigenous learners. Existing literature shows limited inclusivity and meaningful participation in many educational contexts, raising concerns about the quality and equity of learning opportunities available to them (Oclarit et al., 2023; Aikman, 2023).

Similar issues have been reported in other countries. In Canada, Indigenous students face limited equitable and culturally responsive learning opportunities in mainstream schooling, affecting meaningful participation (Taj, 2023). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners also encounter gaps in inclusion and engagement within school environments (Burgess et al., 2023). Likewise, in Indonesia, Indigenous learners face challenges in achieving meaningful participation in formal education systems, highlighting ongoing concerns about educational equity (Alamsyah & Fathurrohman, 2023).

In the Philippine context, Indigenous Peoples learners likewise face gaps in equitable and meaningful learning environments despite the implementation of Indigenous Peoples Education programs. Studies showed that IP learners continue to encounter limitations in inclusive and culturally responsive classroom practices in mainstream schools (Oclarit et al., 2023; Verdida et al., 2024; Balaba, 2023).

These challenges have important implications. Literature suggests that inequities in learning environments may contribute to lower participation, reduced engagement, weakened sense of belonging, and decreased motivation among Indigenous learners. Furthermore, sustained limitations in inclusivity may negatively affect learners' confidence in school systems and hinder meaningful academic development and achievement (Oclarit et al., 2023; Li & Shein, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

In this study, I explored the teachers' cultural awareness, sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy in shaping an equitable and meaningful learning environment. I asked, What are the Indigenous learners' perceptions of teachers' cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy in relation to equitable and meaningful learning environments?

Theoretical Lens

In doing this study, was guided by Gloria Ladson-Billings's Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (1995), which emphasizes integrating learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and perspectives into classroom instruction to promote equitable and meaningful learning environments. I recognized the importance of teachers' cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity in supporting inclusive and responsive education. Anchored in this theory, I focused on Indigenous learners' perceptions of teachers' cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy in relation to equitable and meaningful learning environments.

Conceptual Framework

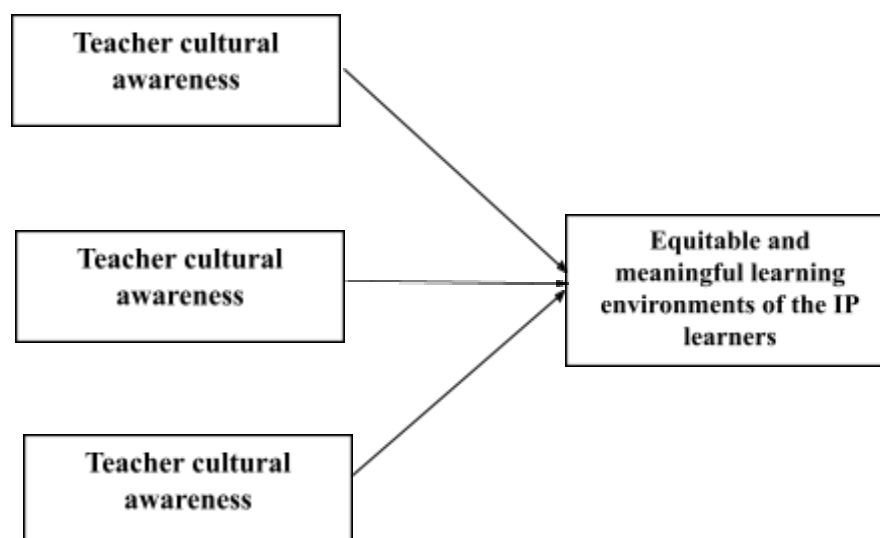


Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm

Methods

In this study, I employed a qualitative descriptive research design to describe Indigenous students' perceptions of teachers' cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy. I considered this approach appropriate because it allowed participants to express their perceptions in their own words with minimal interpretation, thereby staying close to their actual classroom realities, as discussed by Sandelowski (2000) and Creswell and Creswell (2018). 10 Grade 10 Indigenous students enrolled during the school year 2025–2026, participated in the study. The participants of this study were Indigenous learners enrolled in selected public secondary schools in the Island Garden City of Samal. Purposive sampling was utilized to identify participants who could provide rich, relevant information about their perceptions of teachers' cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy, in line with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) guidance.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using open-ended questions that allowed participants to freely share their experiences. The gathered data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2023). Thematic analysis framework, which involved familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement. Follow-up interviews were also conducted to validate interpretations and enhance the credibility of the findings.

Results

In this section of the study, I presented the actual conversations of my study participants.

Teacher Cultural Awareness

Teacher cultural awareness emerged as a significant factor shaping Indigenous students' perceptions of classroom learning. Students described that teachers' recognition, understanding, and integration of their cultural background contributed to more meaningful and relatable learning.

Regarding students' cultural background. The finding revealed that when teachers intentionally connect lessons to students' culture, learning becomes more than academic understanding; it becomes personal, meaningful, and identity-affirming. Students not only remembered the lesson itself but also recognized how their culture was acknowledged inside the classroom. This subtheme highlights the importance of teachers' knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds in shaping meaningful learning experiences.

One of the participants said:

There are times when our teacher connects the lesson in history to our culture... I feel happy because the teacher knows something about our culture. (IDI-4)

This was supported by another participant who said:

Sometimes the teacher includes our culture in the discussion, which makes the lesson easier for me to understand. (IDI-2)

Another participant stated:

When the lesson relates to our culture, we enjoy it more and become more interested in listening. (IDI-6)

Another participant expressed:

The way the teacher explains our culture is very good... the teacher knows a lot about it. (IDI-1)

Another participant stated:

The teacher studied our culture because the examples are accurate. (IDI-3)

Similarly, another participant expressed:

I trust the teacher more when they are knowledgeable about our culture. (IDI-8)

One more participant shared:

Not all teachers know about our culture. (IDI-5)

Another one mentioned:

Some teachers explain our culture incorrectly. (IDI-7)

One more participant added:

Sometimes we are the ones who correct the teacher when they are wrong. (IDI-9)

The finding revealed that students perceived lessons as more meaningful, engaging, and identity-affirming when teachers intentionally connected classroom discussions to their cultural background. As the researcher, I found that participants viewed the integration of culture into instruction as helpful in improving their understanding of lessons while also making them feel that their culture was acknowledged and valued within the classroom. My second participant from the in-depth interview shared, "Sometimes the teacher includes our culture in the discussion, which makes the lesson easier for me to understand". In contrast, my sixth participant from the in-depth interview explained, "When the lesson is related to our culture, we enjoy more and become more interested in listening." These responses indicated that culturally connected instruction increased students' interest and participation in learning. I also found that students appreciated teachers who demonstrated an accurate and informed understanding of their culture. Participants viewed teachers more positively when cultural examples and explanations reflected genuine knowledge and preparation. This was reflected in the statement of my third participant during the in-depth interview, "It is very clear that the teacher studied our culture because the examples are accurate." My first participant shared the same experience, saying, "The way the teacher explains our culture is very good... the teacher knows a lot." Such experiences also contributed to the development of trust between students and teachers, as one of my participants expressed, "I trust the teacher more when they are knowledgeable about our culture." However, I also found that students encountered instances in which teachers had a limited or inaccurate understanding of their culture. Some participants observed that not all teachers were culturally knowledgeable, as reflected in my fifth participant's statement: "Not all teachers know about our culture." Others pointed out inaccuracies in cultural discussions, with my seventh participant stating, "Some teachers explain our culture incorrectly." In certain situations, students even found themselves correcting their teachers, as my ninth participant expressed: "Sometimes we are the ones who correct the teacher when they are wrong." These findings suggested that while integrating culture into instruction positively influenced students' learning experiences, teachers' insufficient cultural knowledge might also affect the accuracy and quality of culturally

responsive classroom practices.

On the linguistic backgrounds of applied students. Students also emphasized the importance of teachers recognizing and applying their linguistic backgrounds during instruction.

The teacher speaks our language and translates into English and Bisaya, so our classmates understand the meaning. (IDI-5)

Another participant shared:

The teacher knows our language and traditions, so it is easier for us to understand each other. (IDI-9)

Supporting this statement, another participant stated:

The teacher used our Sama language during events like Buwan ng Wika. (IDI-7)

Taking students' linguistic backgrounds into account contributes to a more inclusive and comfortable learning environment. Participants perceived that acknowledging their language improved communication, strengthened understanding, and reinforced cultural recognition. Overall, teacher cultural awareness is reflected in students' accounts of how teachers recognize, understand, and integrate their cultural background in classroom instruction. Students consistently emphasized that culturally aware practices, such as connecting lessons to culture, demonstrating knowledge of cultural practices, and recognizing students' languages, contribute to more meaningful and understandable learning experiences. However, the findings also show that limited cultural knowledge among some teachers remains evident, affecting the accuracy of cultural representation in instruction. Collectively, these responses indicate that teacher cultural awareness plays an important role in making learning more relevant, inclusive, and culturally responsive for Indigenous students.

Teacher Cultural Sensitivity

Teacher cultural sensitivity emerged as a significant aspect shaping Indigenous students' perceptions of the classroom learning environment. Students described that sensitivity was reflected in how teachers responded to cultural differences through their words, actions, and attitudes, which influenced whether they perceived the learning environment as safe, respectful, and valued.

On demonstrating respect for cultural diversity. The findings revealed that teacher cultural sensitivity is demonstrated through respectful behavior, non-discriminatory actions, and inclusive classroom practices. Students perceived that sensitivity is reflected in how teachers treat cultural differences in everyday interactions.

A participant stated:

The teacher does not make fun... my culture is respected. (IDI-6)

Supporting this, another participant shared:

The teacher never discriminated against us, even though our culture is different. (IDI-3)

Likewise, a participant further expressed:

The teacher does not make our culture a joke. (IDI-5)

A participant also stated:

My teacher respects me because they understand my culture and do not speak negatively about my beliefs. (IDI-8)

Another participant shared:

The way the teacher talks shows that we are respected. (IDI-2)

One more participant expressed:

The teacher treats us with respect and understanding. (IDI-9)

Also, a participant stated:

The teacher treats everyone equally, whether Indigenous or not. (IDI-7)

Another participant expressed:

The teacher does not choose favorites; we are all treated the same. (IDI-1)

A participant further shared:

We are treated equally, even if we have different cultures. (IDI-4)

The finding revealed to me that teacher cultural sensitivity is demonstrated through respectful behavior, non-discriminatory actions, inclusive communication, and equal treatment of learners. Based on my participants' perceptions, consistently told me that their culture is respected and never ridiculed (IDI-6, IDI-5), that they are not discriminated against despite cultural differences (IDI-3), that their beliefs are understood and not spoken against negatively (IDI-8), that the way teachers speak shows respect (IDI-2), and that teachers treat all learners equally without favoritism regardless of cultural background (IDI-1, IDI-4, IDI-7, IDI-9).

On teachers' receptiveness to cultural perspectives. Students also perceived teachers who are open and willing to listen to their cultural experiences as highly valuable.

A participant stated:

We feel respected because the teacher is interested in listening to our culture. (IDI-1)

In line with this response, another participant shared:

When the teacher listens to us, we are more willing to share our culture. (IDI-6)

A participant further expressed:

The teacher is interested in knowing our culture, so we open up to them. (IDI-8)

The finding revealed that the participants highly value teachers' receptiveness to cultural perspectives, as they perceived that teachers who show openness and a willingness to listen to their cultural experiences make them feel respected and more comfortable sharing their

culture. This is reflected in their statements that they feel respected when teachers show interest in listening to their culture (IDI-1), that they become more willing to share their culture when teachers listen to them (IDI-6), and that they open up more because teachers are genuinely interested in knowing their culture (IDI-8).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy emerged as a significant aspect shaping Indigenous students' perceptions of learning experiences. Students described that learning became more meaningful when teachers adapted instruction, integrated cultural experiences, and used varied strategies that connected lessons to their lived realities.

On adapting instruction to diverse cultural contexts. The findings revealed that culturally responsive pedagogy is reflected in how teachers modify their instruction to align with students' cultural backgrounds. Students emphasized that learning becomes more engaging and understandable when lessons are connected to their culture.

A participant stated:

We were allowed to share our traditions, such as dancing during harvest season. (IDI-1)

Another participant supported this statement, saying:

We were tasked with providing examples of our traditions. (IDI-6)

A participant further expressed:

The teacher connects the lesson to our culture, making it easier for us to understand. (IDI-4)

Similarly, a participant stated:

The teacher showed a video and then explained what we did not understand. (IDI-10)

Also, a participant shared:

The teacher uses PowerPoint presentations that include cultural content and explanations. (IDI-1)

Another participant stated:

Some pictures and examples help us understand the lesson. (IDI-7)

A participant stated:

We are asked to share our experiences about our culture. (IDI-3)

Another participant shared:

There are group activities where we can apply our culture. (IDI-8)

A participant further expressed:

We are more willing to participate when our culture is included in the discussion. (IDI-5)

The finding revealed that participants perceived culturally responsive pedagogy as being reflected in how teachers adapt instruction to align with their cultural backgrounds, making learning more engaging, meaningful, and easier to understand. As the researcher, I found that participants viewed lessons as more effective when teachers integrated their culture by providing opportunities to share traditions, such as harvest-season dances (IDI-1), and by incorporating examples of cultural practices (IDI-6). Participants also perceived that learning becomes more meaningful when teachers connect lessons to their lived experiences, as expressed by the fourth participant: "The teacher connects the lesson to our culture, so we understand it more easily." Furthermore, I observed that participants identified various instructional strategies used by teachers to support culturally responsive learning. These include the use of videos with explanations (IDI-10), PowerPoint presentations containing cultural content (IDI-1), and pictures and contextual examples that enhance understanding (IDI-7). Participants also highlighted experiential and collaborative learning approaches, such as sharing personal cultural experiences (IDI-3) and engaging in group activities that apply cultural knowledge (IDI-8), which they perceived as contributing to deeper engagement and understanding. Overall, I found that participants were more willing to participate in class when their culture was integrated into instruction (IDI-5), emphasizing the importance of adapting teaching strategies to diverse cultural contexts to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

On building pride and confidence in indigenous Identity. The emergent theme highlights a deeper outcome of culturally responsive teaching practices beyond classroom instruction. Students described that when their culture is acknowledged, respected, and integrated into teaching, it contributes to the development of pride and confidence in their Indigenous Identity.

A participant stated:

I feel very respected and proud the way our teacher included our culture. (IDI-7)

Supporting this, another participant shared:

I am no longer ashamed to show who I am as an Indigenous person. (IDI-3)

A participant further expressed:

I feel proud of my culture because it is already included in our lesson. (IDI-6)

A participant stated:

I like to participate in class because they respect our culture. (IDI-3)

Also, another participant shared:

I participate more in class now and I am more attentive. (IDI-2)

A participant further expressed:

I am no longer afraid to join discussions because I already feel comfortable. (IDI-4)

The findings revealed that when students' culture is acknowledged, respected, and integrated into classroom instruction, it fosters a stronger sense of pride and confidence in their Indigenous Identity. As the researcher, I found that participants perceived culturally responsive teaching as helping them feel valued and respected, as reflected in my seventh participant's statement: "I feel very respected and proud the way our teacher included our culture." Participants also expressed that such practices reduce feelings of shame and strengthen cultural Identity. My third participant shared, "I am no longer ashamed to show who I am as an Indigenous person." In contrast, my sixth participant stated, "I feel proud of my culture because it is already included in our lesson." Furthermore, I observed that participants perceived classroom cultural recognition as increasing their willingness to engage and participate. My third participant noted, "I like to participate in class because they respect our culture." Others added that they become more attentive and involved, as expressed by my second participant, "I participate more in class now, and I am more attentive," and that they feel more comfortable joining discussions, as reflected in the statement of my fourth participant, saying, "I am no longer afraid to join discussions because I already feel comfortable." Overall, the findings suggest that culturally responsive teaching strengthens students' pride, confidence, and active participation in learning.

Summary of findings

The following are my summary findings.

Students perceived that lessons become more engaging when teachers connect instruction to their cultural background, use cultural references, and demonstrate knowledge of their traditions and language. Such practices improved understanding, interest, and trust in teachers. However, some students also noted that not all teachers have sufficient cultural knowledge, which sometimes leads to inaccurate explanations of their culture.

Students perceived teacher sensitivity through non-discriminatory behavior, respectful communication, fairness, and openness to cultural perspectives. They appreciated teachers who avoided ridicule, treated all learners equally, and showed genuine interest in their culture. These practices contributed to students feeling safe, respected, and valued in the classroom.

Students reported that learning becomes more meaningful when teachers contextualize lessons based on their culture, use varied teaching strategies, and integrate visual and interactive materials. Participation also increased when students' cultural Identity was included in classroom activities. These practices improved comprehension, engagement, and confidence in learning.

Students reported that when their culture is acknowledged and respected in the classroom, they feel valued and more confident in expressing themselves. This led to increased participation, reduced hesitation, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Discussion

In this section, I discussed the findings of my study. Likewise, I established the implication for practice and future direction.

Teacher Cultural Awareness

I found that teachers' cultural awareness plays a significant role in shaping Indigenous students' learning experiences. When teachers demonstrate knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds and integrate these into instruction, students feel recognized and valued. This supports the idea that learning becomes more meaningful when it is connected to students' perceptions and experiences. I found support in Gay (2010), who emphasized that culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to actively use students' cultural knowledge, experiences, and frames of reference in instruction. Similarly, Hammond (2015) highlighted that culture shapes how students process information, and teachers who acknowledge this can improve comprehension and engagement. Furthermore, I found that the findings support Ladson-Billings (1995), who argued that effective teaching must affirm students' cultural identity while promoting academic success. When teachers demonstrate cultural awareness, they validate students' identities, which strengthens motivation and participation.

However, I also found that limited cultural knowledge among some teachers reflects the challenge identified by Villegas and Lucas (2002), who noted that many educators are not adequately prepared to teach culturally diverse learners. This suggests that cultural awareness is not automatic but requires continuous learning and professional development.

Teacher Cultural Sensitivity

I found that teachers' cultural sensitivity is reflected in how they treat students' cultural differences through respect, fairness, and openness. Based on students' perceptions, respectful behavior, nondiscriminatory actions, and inclusive practices, a safe and supportive learning environment is created. This finding is consistent with Banks (2006), who emphasized that equity pedagogy requires teachers to create inclusive environments that respect cultural diversity. Similarly, Nieto (2010) argued that affirming students' identities through respectful interactions promotes a sense of belonging and improves learning outcomes. I also found that the importance of fairness and equal treatment supports the principles of social justice in education, as highlighted by Sleeter (2012), who emphasized that equitable practices reduce marginalization among minority students. Moreover, I found that students value teachers who listen and are open to their cultural perspectives, which aligns with Gay (2010), who stressed that cultural sensitivity involves genuine care, respect, and responsiveness to students' voices. Overall, I found that teacher cultural sensitivity fosters emotional safety, trust, and inclusion, which are essential for effective learning.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy is where awareness and sensitivity are translated into actual teaching practices. Based on students' perceptions, teachers who adapt instruction, contextualize lessons, and use varied strategies create more engaging and meaningful learning experiences. This supports the framework of Ladson-Billings (1995), who defined culturally responsive pedagogy as teaching that promotes academic success, cultural

competence, and critical consciousness. Similarly, I found that Gay (2010) emphasized that instructional practices should reflect students' cultural experiences to enhance understanding. I also found that the use of contextualized lessons aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) argument that learning is socially constructed and influenced by cultural context. When teachers connect lessons to students' backgrounds, learning becomes more meaningful and easier to understand. Additionally, I found that the use of varied and interactive teaching strategies supports Tomlinson (2014), who emphasized that instruction must be adapted to meet diverse learners' needs. However, I also found that the findings reflect the challenge noted by Paris (2012), who argued that culturally responsive teaching must go beyond inclusion and actively sustain students' cultural identities.

Building Pride and Confidence in Indigenous Identity

I found that the most significant outcome of the study, based on students' perceptions, was the development of pride and confidence in their Indigenous identity. When teachers practiced culturally aware, sensitive, and responsive teaching, students became more confident, participative, and proud of their culture. This finding strongly aligns with Ladson-Billings (1995), who emphasized that culturally responsive teaching should empower students and affirm their cultural identity. Similarly, I found that Paris (2012) argued that education should sustain and promote students' cultural identities rather than diminish them. The increased participation observed in the study supports Fredricks et al. (2004), who found that emotional and psychological engagement influences active participation in learning. Moreover, the development of confidence aligns with Bandura's (1997) emphasis on self-efficacy's role in influencing students' willingness to participate and succeed. This theme highlights that culturally responsive teaching not only improves academic outcomes but also transforms students' self-perception and identity.

Implications for Practice

As I move forward with my research, teachers may strengthen their cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and culturally responsive pedagogy by integrating Indigenous knowledge, culture, traditions, and language into classroom instruction. In contrast, school administrators, teacher education programs, government officials, and Indigenous elders may collaborate to support the implementation of culturally responsive education initiatives and programs that promote equitable and meaningful learning environments for Indigenous learners.

Future Directions

Future research may examine teacher cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the development of pride and confidence in Indigenous identity as predictors of equitable and meaningful learning environments. It may use multiple linear regression and exploratory factor analysis to determine their influence and to develop and validate related research instruments based on the identified sub themes.

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