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Exploration of pedagogic competence of teacher professional education students towards the culturally responsive teaching

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Abstract: This study seeks to systematically evaluate the cognitive academic competence of pre-service teachers within professional education programmes concerning the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) framework. Employing a quantitative survey methodology, the research involved a cohort of 140 students enrolled in the Indonesian Language and Literature teacher professional education programme across four higher education institutions (Yogyakarta State University, Ahmad Dahlan University, Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa University, and Sanata Dharma University) during the 2023–2024 academic year. Data were gathered utilising a structured four-option multiple-choice instrument. The findings reveal a disparate spectrum of cognitive comprehension amongst the participants regarding the CRT approach. Specifically, the pre-service teachers demonstrated commendable proficiency in understanding the definition, benefits, and underlying principles of CRT. Furthermore, their understanding of the framework's purpose, core components, and distinct characteristics was deemed adequate. However, a significant deficiency was identified in their foundational knowledge; their understanding of both the philosophical underpinnings and the historical background of the CRT approach was categorised as poor. Ultimately, these results delineate specific areas requiring pedagogical intervention to ensure comprehensive mastery of CRT amongst future educators.

Keywords: cognitive competence; culturally responsive teaching; pre-service teachers

Introduction

The teaching profession is regarded as highly skilled, on a par with other professions such as medicine and law. Therefore, the Indonesian government has codified specific competencies that teachers must possess. Law No. 14 of 2005 stipulates that teachers must have four competencies: professional competence, personality competence, pedagogical competence, and social competence. A person's competence is positively correlated with the quality of professional performance (Rahmadi, 2020). Ownership of these competencies will serve as a primary indicator of the quality of learning processes implemented by teachers. Learning designed and executed according to these competencies will yield more meaningful and effective outcomes for students.

In an increasingly competitive era, communities continually evaluate school quality based on inputs, processes, and outcomes. Therefore, prospective teachers must be comprehensively prepared from the earliest stages of their education. Among the four competencies, pedagogical competence is particularly distinctive, as it encompasses the teacher's capacity to manage student learning, understand developmental characteristics, design instruction, and develop student potential optimally. Pedagogical competence is a unique competency that distinguishes the teaching profession from other professions, as it is exercised only by teachers directly interacting with students in classroom settings. Wahyudin et al. (2021) explained that each teacher education institution in Indonesia formulates competencies for prospective teachers into two categories: general competencies and specialised competencies. These formulations reflect the national commitment to preparing teachers who are capable of meeting the increasingly complex demands of contemporary education.

The pedagogical competencies codified in Law No. 14 of 2005 encompass: 1) understanding educational foundations and learning approaches, 2) understanding students, 3) curriculum and syllabus development, 4) learning design, 5) implementation of educational and dialogical learning, 6) utilisation of learning technology, 7) learning evaluation, and 8) developing students' diverse potentials. The mastery of these competencies is particularly important in Indonesia's increasingly diverse classrooms, where students bring varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that profoundly influence their learning (Gay, 2010). The persistent challenge of serving culturally diverse student populations has led to growing recognition that teacher preparation programs must equip prospective teachers not only with technical instructional skills but also with the cultural awareness and responsiveness necessary to teach all students effectively (Civitillo et al., 2019).

In the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum), several learning

approaches are established as alternatives that teachers may choose. One such approach is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), also known as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students who are prospective teachers receive instruction in a variety of learning approaches, including CRT. As part of an evaluation of students' understanding of this approach, this study explores students' cognitive competence in CRT. The significance of this exploration is underscored by Nguyen & Huynh (2023) research, which demonstrates that teachers' agency in developing culturally responsive practices is central to addressing the educational needs of ethnically and linguistically diverse students, and that such agency must be cultivated during Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teacher preparation rather than left to post-service professional development.

Among the four competencies mandated by Law No. 14 of 2005, pedagogical competence occupies a central position in teacher quality, as it directly encompasses the ability to manage learning processes and develop students' potential. The competence that a person possesses is positively correlated with the quality of work, and ownership of teacher competence serves as an indicator of the quality of learning (Rahmadi, 2020). Seven core aspects of pedagogical competence that teachers must master include: 1) understanding the characteristics of students, 2) learning theories and educational principles, 3) curriculum development, 4) educational learning practices, 5) development of student potential, 6) communicative competence, and 7) assessment and evaluation.

In addition to pedagogical competence, teachers must possess professional competence. Professional competence is defined as the technical skills and subject-matter knowledge that teachers must have to fulfil their teaching tasks effectively. The indicators of teachers' professional competence include: 1) mastery of subject matter, including content structure, concepts, and scientific mindset; 2) understanding learning outcomes and objectives; 3) creative development of subject matter for broader and deeper knowledge; 4) reflective practice for continuous professional development; and 5) utilization of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the learning process and self-development. Franco et al. (2024) confirm that both pedagogical and professional competencies must be developed in an integrated manner, with teacher cultural diversity beliefs and self-reflection serving as essential mediating variables between knowledge of CRT and actual classroom implementation.

The Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach serves as the basis for educational development, providing equitable educational services for all students by prioritising the recognition of cultural diversity, customs, languages, and religions. Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three core propositions of culturally responsive education: 1) students achieve academic success; 2) students develop and maintain

cultural competence; and 3) students build critical consciousness to participate in transforming an unjust social order. These three propositions reflect a commitment to constructing equality of human dignity by nature.

Gay (2010) explained that the CRT approach is integrated to the extent that teachers' cultural knowledge of students' diversity in cultures, languages, customs, and socioeconomic conditions informs the design of teaching modules and materials. This approach recognises that students' diverse learning styles and experiences provide rich resources for meaningful learning. Gay (2010) identified five interdependent characteristics of CRT: 1) placing different cultures as curricular resources; 2) creating meaningful relationships between teachers and students; 3) using diverse learning strategies responsive to students' cultural backgrounds; 4) teaching students to understand and appreciate their own and others' cultural heritage; and 5) utilising multicultural information, resources, and skills in teaching. Civitillo et al.'s (2019) case study confirmed that teachers whose beliefs aligned with CRT principles demonstrated significantly more culturally responsive practices than those with colour-evasive orientations, underscoring the importance of developing CRT-aligned beliefs and engaging in self-reflection during Pre-service Teacher Professional Education training.

Method

Research Population and Sample

This study is a quantitative descriptive research employing a survey method. The data collection instrument is a multiple-choice test with four answer options. The survey was conducted on Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students from four universities implementing the Pre-service Teacher Professional Education, Yogyakarta State University (UNY), Ahmad Dahlan University (UAD), Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa University (UST), and Sanata Dharma University (USD), all of which have Indonesian Language and Literature study programs.

The research sample is drawn from the entire population of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students from these four universities. The sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Research Samples

Number	Origin of University	Total Population	Total Sample
1.	Yogyakarta State University	56	31
2.	Ahmad Dahlan University	61	61
3.	Sarjana Wiyata University	52	29
4.	Sanata Dharma University	52	30
Total	4 universities	221	140

The sample determination was carried out using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample table.

Research Design

This research is a survey study of the first batch of 2023 Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students who received the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach course from four universities as described in the research sample above. The study focuses on students' cognitive understanding of the CRT approach. The research flow proceeds from: (1) Pre-service Teacher Professional Education student learning in 2023; (2) CRT approach learning materials; (3) a population of 221 students from four universities; (4) survey exploration of cognitive competencies regarding the CRT approach; (5) a sample of 140 students; (6) 40-item cognitive instruments on the CRT approach; and (7) competency analysis using descriptive quantitative methods.

The instrument used to collect data on the cognitive aspects of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students is a multiple-choice test with four answer options. To obtain a valid assessment instrument, item validity was assessed in SPSS 26 using Pearson correlation coefficients. Based on validity test results, 35 questions were initially deemed valid at the 5% significance level. Following further review, 37 items were declared valid and suitable for use, while 3 items were invalid and excluded from the research instrument. Table 2 presents the item validity test results.

Table 2. Item Validity Test Results

Item	Conclusion	Number	Percentage
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 38, 40	Valid	37	92.5%
13, 37, 39	Not Valid	3	7.5%
Total		40	100%

Based on the reliability test using the Kuder-Richardson 20 (KR-20) formula, the instrument is considered reliable, with a coefficient of 0.86. The reliability criterion is a coefficient value greater than 0.60 (Sugiyono, 2019). The instrument trial was conducted on PPG In-Service students from 2022 who had been declared graduates. Based on the validity and reliability analysis, the instrument was deemed suitable for collecting research data.

The competency survey covers material from the Culturally Responsive Teaching approach course, specifically the cognitive dimension, with the following outline: a) the philosophical foundation of the CRT approach, b) the definition of the CRT approach, c) the purpose of the CRT approach, d) the components of CRT, e) the background of CRT, f) the benefits of the CRT approach, and g) the characteristics of the

CRT approach.

The development of this competency survey is crucial for evaluating how well pre-service and in-service teachers grasp the core cognitive frameworks required to implement culturally inclusive pedagogy. By focusing on these seven distinct dimensions, the instrument allows researchers to pinpoint specific areas where educators excel or face conceptual gaps. Understanding these nuances is essential because a teacher's solid theoretical grasp of the philosophical foundations and characteristics of the Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) approach directly influences their ability to design lesson plans that respect and reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of their future classrooms.

Consequently, the gathered data will serve as a foundational metric for improving teacher professional education (PPG) curricula and instructional modules. The insights gained from the survey can help teacher educators refine how the CRT course is delivered, ensuring that upcoming cohorts do not just memorize definitions but deeply understand the components and benefits of the approach. Ultimately, this rigorous validation process ensures that any subsequent intervention or policy recommendation based on this study is anchored in reliable, empirical evidence that genuinely reflects the cognitive readiness of contemporary educators.

Quantitative data obtained from multiple-choice test instruments were analysed using quantitative percentage analysis, with competency conversion criteria as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Competency Conversion Guidelines

Score Percentage	Categories Assessment
81 to 100	Excellent
61 to 80	Good
41 to 60	Pretty Good
21 to 40	Bad
00 to 20	Very Bad

Finding and Discussion

Understanding the Philosophical Foundations of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

The Culturally Responsive Teaching approach recognises students' diverse backgrounds and experiences and seeks to create an inclusive and engaging learning environment for all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The main focus of providing prospective teachers with an understanding of this approach is to prepare them to develop pedagogical competence, including an understanding of students' identities and cultural perspectives during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning (Irvine, 2003).

Based on the analysed data, only 19.28% of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students correctly understood the philosophical foundation of the CRT approach. This figure represents a very poor level of understanding. The philosophical foundation correctly understood is expressed as: "The essence of students is a creature of God who has the same rights and position and is therefore obliged to receive equal treatment in the learning process, without distinction based on culture, race, religion, or social status." A very poor understanding of the philosophical foundation is concerning because it may lead Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers to perpetuate differential treatment of students based on cultural differences, race, or social status in their future classrooms. Among incorrect responses, 23.3% of students identified the philosophical foundation as based on sorting students' potential according to race and culture, 9.5% attributed it to reformist educators and the civil rights movement, and 23.8% described it only as a prohibition against distinguishing students by race and culture.

Goe et al. (2008) explained that learning with the CRT approach is not merely about conveying subject knowledge or focusing on one measure of academic achievement, but about affective achievement that humanises people of different religions, races, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses. This means that culturally responsive learning is fundamentally oriented toward: (1) helping students of different races, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses develop the value of tolerance; (2) creating engaging learning experiences that draw on diverse cultural materials; and (3) demonstrating that engaging learning experiences are grounded in accurate cultural sources. As Lucas et al. (2008) assert, prospective teachers need to develop a linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds. They emphasise that teachers must understand students' cultural backgrounds, linguistic experiences, and social contexts before successfully implementing CRT practices. These findings reinforce the results of this study, indicating that Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers' understanding of the philosophical foundations of CRT still needs substantial strengthening.

Nguyen & Huynh (2023) found in their study of Vietnamese ethnic minority education that teachers' agency in enacting culturally responsive practices is significantly shaped by their understanding of the philosophical and ethical foundations of CRT. Teachers who lack clarity about these foundations tend to limit their responsiveness to surface-level cultural adaptations, rather than engaging with the deeper structural dimensions of cultural inequity that CRT is designed to address. This finding directly parallels the current study's results, in which a majority of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education PPG students demonstrated confusion about the fundamental philosophical premise of CRT as grounded in equal human dignity.

Understanding the Definition of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students demonstrated a strong understanding of the CRT approach, with 97.6% answering questions correctly. These students correctly identified CRT as "an approach that integrates cultural values, social values, and socioeconomic values in learning while rejecting behaviours that differentiate students based on race, culture, and social values." This understanding aligns with Ladson-Billings (1995) characterisation of CRT as requiring teachers to understand students' cultural frames of reference to empower all learners. Harmon (2012) similarly notes that culturally responsive teachers must strive to position themselves as facilitators in eliminating inequalities arising from cultural diversity, backgrounds, and traditions.

The high level of definitional understanding (97.6% in the excellent category, 2.4% in the good category) suggests that cognitive exposure to CRT through coursework has effectively established basic conceptual knowledge. Hammond (2014) states that a sound definition of the CRT approach enables teachers to recognise students' learning behaviours and to construct instructional materials that use culture as a scaffold to connect students' cultural knowledge with the content to be taught. However, the present study's finding that definitional understanding does not translate equivalently to understanding of philosophical foundations or principles highlights the gap between surface-level conceptual knowledge and deeper normative understanding noted by Civitillo et al. (2019), who found that cultural diversity beliefs deeply mediate the translation of CRT knowledge into classroom practice.

Understanding the Purpose of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

Students' understanding of the objectives of the CRT approach was distributed as follows: 10.5% in the excellent category, 67.5% in the good category, and 22.0% in the sufficient category. This pattern indicates that Pre-service Teacher Professional Education PPG students have a reasonable grasp of the purposes of CRT. A sound understanding of CRT objectives supports prospective teachers in working to improve academic achievement, encourage positive cultural identity, and foster critical thinking among students from culturally, socioeconomically, and racially diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The study by Marzano et al. (2000) on culturally responsive learning strategies found that teachers with a clear understanding of CRT purposes demonstrated greater student understanding of the learning materials. Collier & Thomas (2001) and Thomas & Collier (1997) similarly found that teachers who understood CRT objectives learned to incorporate cultural contexts into instruction, thereby positively affecting students' language acquisition.

Understanding the Components of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

As many as 92.9% of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students could correctly identify all components of the CRT approach. Only 5.1% identified three components, and 2.0% identified two components correctly. This high level of component recognition reflects strong analytical skills among PPG participants. The components include: 1) the ability to know and understand student culture; 2) the ability to integrate culture into curriculum planning; 3) the ability to build an inclusive learning environment; and 4) the ability to adopt teaching strategies responsive to cultural diversity.

Understanding the components of the CRT approach is essential because, as Hsiao (2015) explained, the instructional component with the highest predictive variance for evaluating the success of CRT implementation is teachers' understanding of its components. Hollins (1993) similarly found that teachers who understand CRT components are better positioned to: (a) know their subject matter and students well, (b) conduct reflective teaching, (c) identify appropriate resources, and (d) promote student performance. Aronson & Laughter (2016) synthesise three core components of CRT as academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, noting that effective implementation requires teachers to ensure academic success for all students, utilise students' cultural identities as learning resources, and encourage students to develop critical awareness of social inequities. The cognitive understanding of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers regarding the philosophy, goals, and principles of CRT still needs strengthening so that teachers can apply this approach authentically in culturally diverse classrooms.

Understanding the Background of the Emerging Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

Regarding the background of the CRT approach, 97.6% of students answered correctly, identifying it as an approach that integrates cultural, social, and socioeconomic values into learning. Only 2.8% answered in the good category. This shows that PPG students understand the definitional and contextual origins of the CRT approach, reflecting their general exposure to course content on cultural diversity in education. This cognitive understanding is expected to serve as capital for applying CRT in the learning process and evaluation, since understanding the background of an approach shapes teachers' motivation and rationale for its implementation. Rahim et al. (2020) confirmed that knowledge of CRT is important for teachers to eliminate misunderstandings about culture in classroom learning.

Gay (2015) emphasised that understanding CRT's background requires teachers to recognise the complexity of the cultural contexts in which teaching occurs. This complexity requires serious consideration in

planning and implementing programs about cultural diversity. The principles of local contextuality must guide teacher decisions and actions, the plurality of teaching methods informed by different student configurations, and the view that cultural understanding is the foundational platform from which effective educational decisions are made for diverse students, schools, and communities.

Understanding the Benefits of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

The data on students' understanding of the benefits of the CRT approach revealed a concerning pattern: 18.6% did not understand, 71.4% had a poor understanding, 7.0% had a moderate understanding, and only 3.0% had a very good understanding. The high proportion of students with poor or no understanding of the benefits (90.0% combined) is particularly worrying, as teachers who cannot articulate the concrete benefits of CRT are unlikely to sustain its implementation in classrooms. This finding aligns with Civitillo et al. (2018), who found that simply exposing Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers to information about cultural diversity is insufficient to shift their beliefs and dispositions unless the practical benefits and equity implications of CRT are made explicit and compelling.

The core purpose of the CRT approach is to help teachers cultivate a culturally responsive attitude (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000, 2009). A culturally responsive attitude enables teachers to understand which cultural behaviours are appropriate and which are inappropriate in classroom settings. Teachers who understand the benefits of CRT will work to foster a supportive classroom ecology by creating learning plans that prioritise bullying-free principles based on students' race, religion, culture, social values, and economic status. J. A. Banks (2016) stated that responsive learning to cultural diversity plays an important role in creating an inclusive and empowering learning environment. Siwatu (2007) found that Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers who understood and applied CRT were more effective in helping students feel valued in the classroom and in developing positive teacher-student relationships. (Reskyani et al., 2024) reported that CRT-based learning increased student learning activity and attracted students' interest in learning.

Franco et al. (2024) found that teachers' knowledge of the benefits of CRT is a significant predictor of their motivation to consistently implement it. The current study's finding that 90.0% of Pre-service Teacher Professional programs lacked a clear understanding of CRT's benefits suggests a critical curriculum coverage gap that teacher education programs must address to ensure that Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers are genuinely motivated to apply CRT rather than treating it as an additional bureaucratic requirement.

Understanding the Principles of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach

Only 14.28% of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education PPG students answered correctly about the principles of the CRT approach, placing overall understanding in a low category. The principles of CRT include: 1) perspectives on parents and families based on socio-cultural circumstances; 2) learning within the context of culture; 3) student-centred instruction; 4) reshaping the curriculum to fit students' socio-cultural conditions; and 5) teachers as facilitators rather than transmitters of information. Villegas & Lucas (2002) explained that implementing a culturally responsive approach requires teachers to understand the principles of: (a) sociocultural awareness, (b) affirmative views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) viewing teachers as responsible agents of change, (d) understanding how learners construct knowledge, (e) knowing about students' lives, and (f) designing instruction that builds on what students already know.

This finding is consistent with Civitillo et al.'s (2019) case study, which found that teachers with a strong understanding of CRT principles demonstrated elaborated patterns of self-reflection on their teaching and showed high congruence between their beliefs and classroom practices. Conversely, teachers with a limited understanding of CRT principles tended to limit their cultural responsiveness to surface-level adaptations, such as incorporating cultural holidays or traditional foods, rather than fundamentally transforming their instructional approaches to centre students' cultural knowledge. The current study's result that only 14.28% of Pre-service Teacher Professional Education students have a good understanding of CRT principles suggests that teacher education programs need to devote substantially more instructional time to the principled foundations of CRT and the practical competencies required to implement it authentically.

Conclusion

The cognitive aspects of the Culturally Responsive Teaching approach shows marked unevenness across dimensions. The results show that: a) the philosophical foundation of the CRT approach is in a very bad category (19.28% correct); b) the definition of the CRT approach is in a good category (97.6% correct); c) the purpose of the CRT approach is in the sufficient category; d) the components of CRT are in the sufficient category (92.9% can identify all components); e) the background of CRT is not good; f) the benefits of the CRT approach show very poor understanding (90.0% poor or no understanding); g) the characteristics of the CRT approach are moderate; and h) the principles of the CRT approach are in a low category (14.28% correct).

These findings reveal a significant discrepancy between students' surface-level conceptual knowledge of CRT (definition, components) and their deeper normative understanding (philosophical foundations,

principles, benefits). This discrepancy has important implications for teacher education programs: preparing teachers who can define CRT is insufficient if they cannot articulate its moral foundations or apply its principles in practice. In line with the findings of Civitillo et al. (2019) and Franco et al. (2024), teacher education programs must develop Pre-service Teacher Professional Education teachers' cultural diversity beliefs, self-reflection capacities, and principled commitments alongside their factual knowledge of CRT.

Future research should focus on developing comprehensive guidelines and instructional frameworks to strengthen understanding of the Culturally Responsive Teaching approach as part of implementing learning that centres on the principle of justice, serving students who differ socially, economically, culturally, and religiously. Such frameworks should incorporate experiential, reflective, and community-based learning experiences that develop the normative depth of CRT understanding, not only its cognitive breadth.

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