Article

Fostering Inclusive Learning Environments Through Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for International Students in U.S. Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

When international students study at United States higher education institutions, they often encounter challenges that impact acculturation and academic success. This study applied community-based research to explore these students' experiences and discuss solutions in the form of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). I conducted semi-structured interviews with five international students in a Curriculum and Instruction graduate program at a Western U.S. university. Some participants reflected on opportunities they have had for diverse learning expressions and external support, but they also reported obstacles, such as some professors who use materials that are only relevant to American students. This research concluded that often, when professors are open-minded and culturally sensitive, students can become more engaged in the classroom, increase academic performance, and develop a healthy sense of belonging. This study sought to inspire more faculty to effectively implement CRP, ultimately contributing to more caring and inclusive learning environments for international students.

Keywords: academic performance, acculturation, culturally responsive pedagogy, equity, higher education, inclusion, international students

International students often bring diverse perspectives and skills to learning environments at United States institutions of higher education (IHEs). They represent a unique and diverse demographic. This study adopts Townsend' (2023) definition of international students as individuals who hold temporary visas and study at American IHEs. The U.S. is recognized as a top learning destination for students from all over the world, and these students make substantial contributions

to its economic and cultural richness (Duffin, 2020; Vakkai et al., 2020). Researchers emphasize that international students often contribute important viewpoints and experiences to the intellectual atmosphere, helping enhance innovation and promoting the expansion of worldwide viewpoints for all students (Martirosyan et al., 2019). In 2018–2019, 1,095,299 international students were enrolled at U.S. IHEs, comprising 5.5% of total U.S. college enrollment at that time (Yeh et al., 2022).

As international students embark on the arduous journey of studying abroad, leaving their home countries behind, many must navigate intricate visa procedures, acquire foreign language skills, adapt to unfamiliar cultural customs, and sometimes even face discrimination, all in pursuit of a better education (Gold, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wang & Freed, 2021). The acculturation process for these students is frequently accompanied by transformative experiences that profoundly affect their perspectives on the world, beliefs, and ways of interacting with others (Hastowohadi et al., 2025). Among U.S. international students, six of their top ten countries of origin have a native language other than English (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019; Yeh et al., 2022). This is notable because numerous international students also experience language-mastery issues. Therefore, it is no longer enough for educators to simply understand cultural differences to support international students (Yeh et al., 2022). A significant change in mindset is needed among educators and policymakers to see and welcome international students as assets who contribute to internationalization and stronger campus communities, rather than stereotyping that focuses on deficiencies (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Ryan, 2011, as cited in Khoo & Huo, 2022).

As the learning environments at U.S. IHEs diversify, educators are tasked with serving international students from around the world. However, the overall inadequacy of American higher education in meeting the needs of varied student groups is evident, as most institutions tend to prioritize white-centric approaches in their practices and curricula (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011; Johnson et al., 2021). In addition, international students tend to receive insufficient support with their language development, and faculty members who teach them are often unprepared to help (Khoo & Huo, 2022). Given demographic trends at U.S. colleges and universities, educators must modify pedagogy and practices to ensure that international students from diverse countries and experiences receive a high-quality education (Ballenger & Jiang, 2023).

One teaching method that has emerged to achieve a more inclusive and diverse curriculum and instruction for international students is culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), which utilizes "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Culturally responsive educators usually adopt multicultural teaching methods to create more effective and positive classroom environments (Ballenger & Jiang, 2023). CRP is committed to cultivating students' perspective-taking abilities, helping students understand and respect people with experiences different from their own, and encouraging students to show inclusiveness and empathy in intercultural

communication. It emphasizes that educators should have growth mindsets and actively engage in understanding the culturally informed viewpoints, beliefs, and knowledge held by their individual students, cherishing diversity as a valuable learning resource (Garrett et al., 2021).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Building off the previously discussed literature, this study explored the perceptions of five international graduate students regarding the CRP strategies implemented by their professors in a U.S. IHE and to understand how these practices impact the students' overall learning experiences. Ultimately, to the purpose of this research is to encourage more educators to consciously integrate CRP into their curriculum and instructional practices. By doing so, they can design inclusive and welcoming classrooms that help international students successfully adapt to new cultural and educational settings.

I purposefully selected the five international graduate students who participated in this study because each was, in addition to being a student, an educator with several years of teaching experience, enabling them to provide valuable insights for this research and contribute valuable knowledge to academia as they pursue future endeavors. This study differentiates itself from other similar studies because of its emphasis on student-educators in an education graduate program—individuals who not only might experience CRP as students themselves but must also decide if, and how, to use it in their own future classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was grounded in several research questions:

RQ1: How do international students perceive CRP practices, and how do these practices impact their adaptation to the U.S. higher education environment?

RQ2: How do CRP teaching strategies respond to the needs and interests of international students specifically studying in the field of education?

RQ3: What is the impact of CRP teaching strategies on students' growth as educators?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The pioneer of CRP, Gloria Ladson-Billings, encourages educators to utilize CRP to recognize and sustain their students' cultural and background differences in the classroom (Warren, 2018). The roots of CRP can be traced to the relentless endeavors of scholars of color who sought to defy the problematic stereotype that students from metropolitan areas are naturally low-achieving and flawed (Evans

et al., 2020). Within Ladson-Billings's framework, CRP can only be achieved when teachers fully consider students' cultures in every facet of planning, designing, and executing curriculum and instruction (Gay, 2014). The exploration of CRP in this article is consistent with Gay's (2010) goals, as explained by Michalec and Wilson (2022), which upholds an intersectional view of oppression and ways of resisting it:

> Seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (p. 31)

International Students at U.S. IHEs

Studying abroad can be a thrill for students, but it is often coupled with the fear and panic associated with new, uncertain learning and living environments. Unfortunately, not all overseas students who come to U.S. IHEs adjust smoothly to their lives on campus (Andrade, 2006a; Smith & Khawaja, 2011, as cited in Brunsting et al., 2018), and this difficult transition can result in adverse effects, such as feelings of sadness and reduced academic performance (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Wang et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007, as cited in Brunsting et al., 2018). Culturally responsive educators can help international students make this transition easier by recognizing their academic challenges and appreciating their different experiences and cultural backgrounds (Yeh et al., 2022). As this article explores, much of this work can happen in the classroom.

According to 2018 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data, one million students from abroad were actively enrolled in U.S. IHEs, 77% of whom were from Asia (Liu et al., 2020). Despite this, Asian international students' needs are often overlooked in U.S. colleges (Hyun et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2020). These needs typically stem from cultural differences between their hometowns and study abroad environments, as well as factors such as language proficiency, communication styles, cultural adaptation, academic standards, and psychological adaptation (Li et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020). When adapting to American university life, international students are more prone to encounter feelings of anxiety, longing for home, and academic pressure than domestic students (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008; as cited in Martirosyan et al., 2019). They are far away from family members and friends and unable to celebrate important holidays with loved ones, and their unfamiliarity with different cultural practices can easily lead to social isolation (Martirosyan et al., 2019). The above descriptions confirm the

importance of educators implementing cultural responsiveness in higher education learning environments.

The Implementation of CRP in Higher Education

Given the increase in international educational exchanges and the advancement of educational diversification in the U.S., CRP can promote cross-cultural understanding and communication. Thus, since it was introduced, its implementation in higher education has gradually received widespread attention. Han et al. (2014) and Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) pointed out university faculty promote the implementation of CRP by establishing friendly and positive relationships with their students. Building relationships, they wrote, relies on shared norms to create safe and respectful classroom learning environments. For example, educators build meaningful relationships with students by sharing personal stories and experiences, helping them better understand course content and deepen their connection to it, which is more meaningful than mere textbook study.

To effectively implement CRP, educators must focus on interaction and emotional connection with students, which can help promote their all-round development, especially in multicultural contexts. For example, Anderson and Deil-Amen (2024) and Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) described professors who encouraged students and provided opportunities for peer mentoring. Through shared experiences, peer mentoring provided students with support in interpersonal, psychological, and educational ways; enabled them to better connect with peers; and helped them cultivate friendships and strengthen their professional ethics as they engaged in deep analysis and innovative thinking while exploring the curricula (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In addition, these students received both support and affirmation from educators and peers during the peer-mentoring process, which helped them to establish connections, further enhancing their learning experience and sense of belonging. Similarly, Vail (2018) and Massar (2022) noted that higher education educators implemented CRP by encouraging students to actively participate in classroom learning. Educators were committed to creating an environment for students to express their opinions freely, encouraging them to actively speak out, while providing more opportunities for interaction with the community and society at large.

Moreover, supporting the personalized needs of students is crucial when implementing CRP in universities. Salgado et al. (2024) emphasized how professors flexibly adjusted pedagogy strategies according to students' needs and cultural backgrounds, thereby creating welcoming and inclusive classroom environments. Professors created classroom environments that welcomed students from all social backgrounds by encouraging them to share personal experiences and engage in activities involving self-expression. This approach not only promoted cultural exchanges among students but also enhanced the diversity and inclusiveness of the classroom, allowing students to learn in a more open and respectful atmosphere. In addition, professors got to know their students deeply before choosing instructional methods to ensure that curricula were presented in

the most appropriate way to enhance students' sense of participation and learning effectiveness. Likewise, in order to effectively promote internationalized education, some university educators adopted problem-based learning (PBL) when implementing CRP. PBL "involves a small group of students analyzing a problem, identifying relevant facts, and applying existing knowledge and experiences to solve a problem" (Katsara, 2023, p. 122). In PBL, the role of the professors shifts from traditional lecturers to facilitators, helping students adapt to collaborative learning, thereby better achieving the goals of internationalized education (Katsara, 2023).

Despite existing knowledge of CRP, a gap remains in understanding how to integrate it with CBR, especially for international students. While many studies have explored the implementation of CRP in higher education settings using qualitative research or mixed-methods research designs, research on integrating CBR with CRP to support international graduate students in U.S. higher education institutions remains limited. This study aimed to fill this gap by offering detailed descriptions of international graduate students' experiences and perceptions of CRP, through collaboration among the international students, a faculty member, and me. This method was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the real needs and challenges of these students, as well as the impact of CRP on their educational experience.

Community-Based Research and My Role as Researcher

In this study, community-based research (CBR) was an effective approach to describe and interpret international students' experiences with and perspectives concerning CRP in higher education. The unique contribution of this article is to fill the research gap on integrating CBR with CRP to support international graduate students at U.S. universities, specifically international students in an education graduate program who aspire to become teachers themselves. The collaboration among international students, a faculty member, and me promoted meaningful interactions and fostered community development. This tripartite collaboration model not only explored the experiences of international graduate students in the U.S. and their perceptions of CRP but also introduced an innovative method of combining CBR and CRP in a multicultural context, providing a new perspective on cross-cultural education.

Building on these experiences, my education in the U.S. further reinforced the importance of CRP. Some professors demonstrated open-mindedness and inclusiveness, working hard to improve their teaching methods and course content. Their efforts enriched my and other international students' experiences while developing our self-confidence, growth mindsets, and perseverance in learning. This supportive learning environment facilitated our transition and adaptation to a new educational and diverse environment. In addition, a community-based research (CBR) course during my doctoral program taught me the importance of knowledge-sharing produced in studies like this one; this research method promotes collaborative interactions, fosters equity, and works toward community development. The course provided training to become a

representative of international students while also ensuring that individuals' experiences were not generalized. Later in this article, how knowledge-sharing practices were employed to ensure that all collaborators' voices were heard during the research process is discussed. Conducting this study provided insights into how to appropriately represent international students and present the challenges they encounter in cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and academic matters. The CBR approach was effective in helping me better understand their challenges, backgrounds, experiences, needs, and interests, as well as promote research on CRP strategies for them.

METHOD

This study applied community-based research (CBR), which differs from traditional research by forming a collaborative alliance among students, faculty, and community members involved in the study. These parties work together to address urgent community issues and/or instigating social change (Strand et al., 2003). The community issue in this study was the need to better understand the benefits of CRP for international students with the hope that this awareness would prompt more professors to implement CRP strategies. This study's intent in conducting this research was to prompt professors to create more inclusive, caring, welcoming, and respectful learning environments for international students and actively communicate with these learners to better understand their goals and expectations, mental health statuses, study habits, challenges, and life situations. When professors truly implement the suggestions highlighted above, international students will be more likely to adapt to multicultural educational settings.

This study employed CBR to explore international students' stories and experiences studying at a U.S. IHE. The research team included me, one faculty member, and five community members who are international graduate students in a College of Education in the United States. The faculty member contributed his expertise and resources to the study because he, too, wanted to understand the challenges encountered by international students and promote academic transformation. The professor provided input on my research design including the interview questions, and the graduate students shared their experiences and struggles and suggested ways to address them in the form of interviews. The information obtained in these manners elicited important insights into CRP and potential improvements to learning environments for international students in this college of education.

Participant Selection

This study selected participants through purposive sampling, which allowed me to consciously select individuals who could offer comprehensive and pertinent data based on the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were recruited via email and one-on-one communication of the study to eligible students. The recruitment inclusion criteria are as follows: participants must be

full-time international students currently enrolled in graduate school at IHEs in the U.S., regardless of their academic background. Participants should have some teaching experience and have been exposed to or practiced CRP in the learning or teaching process. In addition, participants need to have the ability to communicate with me in English to ensure smooth participation in the study.

Interviews

This study conducted individual semi-structured interviews with five international students who are studying in a Curriculum and Instruction graduate program within a university in the Western United States. Their countries of origin included Thailand, Nigeria, Greece, and Saudi Arabia. Only one interview was conducted with each international student, and each interview lasted one hour. Five participants were sufficient in this study for the following reasons: first, during the data collection process, I initially planned to interview international students from different disciplines. However, upon communicating with some international students, I found that these students were completely unfamiliar with CRP. To address this, I introduced them to the definition and practices of CRP. The students then described the instructional practices and teaching materials implemented by their professors in class. Ultimately, I found that CRP was not implemented in their classes, and the students were unable to answer interview questions or participate in the study due to a lack of relevant experience. Additionally, some students were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Second, the five participants who were eventually selected for the study had studied CRP at a U.S. university and had personally experienced their professors' CRP practices in their learning environments. Therefore, they had unique insights into the ways in which professors implement CRP and could provide in-depth perspectives and experiences for this study. Last but not least, in CBR, the experience and background of participants are more important than sample size (Strand et al., 2003). This study was a collaborative effort among the international students, a faculty member, and me; all participants demonstrated a solid understanding of CRP. Therefore, selecting five representative participants facilitated the efficient collection and analysis of data within the limited time. Although the number of participants was small, these international graduate students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and experiences still provided valuable insights.

I conducted these semi-structured interviews either in-person or through Zoom, based on the participants' preferences. These interviews generated insights into the unique perspectives and experiences of these international students. Although their busy schedules, the international students agreed to be interviewed because they, like me, shared a common goal of improving higher education curriculum and instruction for international students and incorporating CRP in multicultural settings.

Data Collection

I contacted several international students studying at the university to inform them about my research. Interestingly, most of the participants reported that they had never heard of CRP before studying it at an American university. Recruitment efforts resulted in five students expressing an interest in being interviewed. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the College of Education approved this research. All participants voluntarily completed informed consent forms and were informed of the research purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. To ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, all personal information was pseudonymized, and the interview recordings were stored on an encrypted computer for analysis in this study only.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, and Merriam's (2009) open coding method was applied to uncover information that could shed light on the research questions, forming preliminary codes in the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview was then reviewed (within-case analysis) and all participants' interviews were compared (cross-case analysis) using thematic analysis, ultimately identifying common themes, which are discussed in the next section. Finally, the findings and participant information were shared with the five participants via email. This ensured the accuracy of the data and the validity of the analysis, and encouraged the participants to share their ideas and feedback to inform the findings.

Data analysis identified two main themes: benefits of CRP for international students and instructional practices, which are explored in the following findings.

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that CRP benefits international students by promoting a sense of belonging, improving learning engagement and performance, and providing support, while also pointing to the need to address cultural disconnection and enhance experiential learning. This section of the article presents specific examples to validate these findings.

Benefits of CRP for International Students

This section describes the benefits the international student participants reported when asked about their experiences with CRP.

Unpacking Stereotypes and Promoting Belonging

The international students reported that CRP can promote, embrace, and acknowledge the positive aspects of diversity, while also fostering students' respect for others' humanity and making them more aware of their stereotypes or biases. An international student from Greece spoke on this:

Culturally responsible pedagogy has made me more aware of my stereotyp[es] and my biases, because the minute we walk into the classroom, we carry with [us] our cultures, backgrounds, and our way of thinking. Our culture is a way of thinking. It is important to respect one's humanity. The most important thing is not just a sense of belonging in the classroom because you use your language [...] or because you talk about your cultural experiences. It is also important to feel accepted for who you are, and to accept other people for who they are. I am not trying to assimilate you. Adjusting to a new culture or to a new environment doesn't mean assimilating. It means that I respect everything that you believe in and I make space. And this could be through culture responsive pedagogy that shows [...] you have a place, not by changing you. Culturally responsible pedagogy is a way of boosting humanity. (Mary)

Furthermore, professors who effectively incorporate CRP often create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that embrace equity and diversity. The five international students reported that they were eager to become equity-minded and supportive educators. For instance, one international student from Thailand stated the following:

Some of my professors are open-minded and inclusive, they have adjusted their instruction methods to be more responsive and supportive to international students. This made me feel more comfortable in class. Cultivating feelings of belonging is important for international students. I feel I belong here when professors use culturally responsive pedagogy. I feel a sense of belonging. People here are welcoming when I am the classroom. [In] some classrooms, I am the only international student, [and] that make[s] me feel different. But somehow, everyone is welcoming and respectful and do not try to prevent me from doing any activities. I feel I belong here. (David)

Fostering Engagement, Academic Performance, & Diverse Learning Expressions

Professors who implement CRP in their classrooms often increase international students' engagement and enthusiasm for learning and make them feel supported, thus fostering a more positive learning experience. In many cases, a positive attitude toward learning leads to better academic performance. Two participants shared the following:

I used to be a silent learner, but some professors use culturally responsive pedagogy in my classes. I begin to participate in discussions, practicing critical and independent thinking skills. They encourage me to share my culture and past teaching and learning experiences. The environment is better to learn in, it facilitates learning. Culturally responsive pedagogy increases my engagement and academic performance. (Susan)

I become more actively engaged in the classroom when my professor employs culturally relevant instruction. The learning environment is positive, interactive, and inclusive. It fosters my engagement and collaboration among students from different backgrounds. (Thomas)

In addition, the international students spoke about the positive aspects of different forms of homework. One of the international students shared this:

There are different ways that I can participate. Other students and I submit our assignments not only in writing, but also with many different choices, such as dance, song, drawing, art, poetry, reports, or using technology to demonstrate our understanding of the material. There is no one way of showing my learning. I like there are a variety of ways to interact in class. My needs and interests are met. I can individually express, explore, and use my imagination to freely choose my favorite assignment formats. The assignments are personalized, which allows me and other students to connect with our cultural backgrounds. (Emily)

External Support & Caring Educators

Interviewees reported that they appreciate professors who support them not only in the classroom but also outside of it, such as during office hours or through other conversations. If professors cannot help immediately or directly, they provide students with resources and recommendations so they can get the support they need. As one Nigerian student explained:

Professor and I meet one-on-one when I have questions outside the classroom. They offer me support outside of class and give me information about different programs that I might be interested in. Listening is another form of support they provide if they are not able to offer resources or recommendations. They are also able to refer me to places where I can get support. Faculty resource recommendations help me understand areas of interest and provide more practice and learning opportunities, thereby enhancing my confidence and motivation to learn. (Susan)

Moreover, the participants expressed deep gratitude for the care that many professors demonstrated when interacting with them, and they hoped to become educators who care about and trust their students, constantly motivating and encouraging them, and establishing equal and supportive relationships with them. The participants in this study each said that they aspire to be open-minded, creative, and passionate educators who connect with and help their students as much as possible. Experiencing CRP as students will help them implement it when they are in educator roles themselves. The two international students, one from Thailand and the other from Nigeria, shared:

I want to be a good teacher. Culturally responsive pedagogy inspires me to be a better teacher than I used to be. I learned about differences,

diversity, equity, and inclusion. I hope to improve my teaching methods so that when I return to Thailand, I can achieve more equality and equity in education, at least in my classroom and my school. (David)

I never heard [of] culturally responsive pedagogy in my home country. Now I have to consciously recognize that all of my students are from different backgrounds. I want to better understand my students and listen to their voices. Also, I have to make sure that I accommodate everyone. Everyone has a voice and everyone finds their place within that space in the classroom. (Emily)

Instructional Practices

Although the international students described several positive aspects of CRP, they also shared their thoughts about areas where professors can improve and promote student learning in instructional practices.

Cultural Disconnect in Classroom Materials

Participants described that some professors tend to rely solely on materials and examples relevant to the American context, without considering international students' backgrounds and experiences. The international student who was interviewed thought that this teaching strategy does not align with CRP or address their interests and needs. One student shared "some faculty provide reading materials that are not relevant to my cultural background, which makes it difficult for me to incorporate my past experiences into class learning" (Mary).

In addition, interviewees mentioned that sometimes, the curriculum appears to be so standardized that professors design syllabi primarily with American students in mind. Equity and inclusion are often only reflected for certain racial groups in classroom learning, prioritizing some demographics over others. This kind of partial inclusion usually comes from a good place, but educators need to realize that even seemingly "diverse" materials can be exclusionary if they fail to consider entire groups of learners. If professors incorporate more different cultures in their curriculum, it can positively impact whether or not international students' feel welcome and included in the classroom.

Experiential Learning

This study showed that when classroom instruction and activities lack experiential learning, international students sometimes find it challenging to participate. One international student mentioned, "I engage in discussions when the professor implements culturally responsive instruction. Professors should use more videos to facilitate learning. There are not many experiential learning opportunities in my classes. Without learning by doing and reflecting, I can find it difficult to connect the knowledge learned in the classroom with practical application" (Thomas). These findings highlight the importance of incorporating

experiential learning strategies to improve student engagement and enhance learning outcomes.

These findings have significant implications for international educational practice. The effective implementation of CRP not only creates a supportive and inclusive learning environment but also significantly improves students' learning experience and enhances their sense of belonging and respect. By adopting CRP strategies, educators can help international students better acculturate and integrate into the new environment while cultivating intercultural communication skills. The findings provide actionable recommendations for faculty to implement CRP effectively, fostering inclusive learning environments for international students.

DISCUSSION

This article provides valuable insights into international education, offering a nuanced understanding of the positive impact of CRP on international students, their perspectives on CRP, and areas where educators can improve. The international students interviewed unanimously agreed that CRP enhances their learning experiences and creates a more supportive atmosphere. This study found that CRP helps international students break stereotypes and celebrate diversity. Professors who implemented CRP designed different assignment formats and provided external support to meet students' individual needs. The findings of this study differ from previous research in several key aspects: First, through professors' implementation of CRP, international students can reflect on their own stereotypes and develop a greater respect for diversity. Second, this study highlights that professors support individual needs by designing different forms of assignments. Furthermore, although previous studies have mentioned the limitations of the instructional practices, the findings of this study point out that some professors rely solely on materials related to the American context without considering the international students' backgrounds and experiences. At the same time, these findings align with previous research, which suggests that when educators implement CRP, they encourage students to actively participate in class and promote a sense of belonging through supportive and inclusive interactions. The application of these strategies demonstrates the wide applicability of CRP in actual curriculum design and instruction, not only providing practical support for international students' learning, but also enriching their learning experiences.

Although Salgado et al. (2024) stated that professors adjusted activities according to student needs, the assignment format designs identified in this present study provide new insights into academic research. This study also found that professors' effective implementation of CRP fostered a sense of belonging among students. This finding is consistent with Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017), who pointed out that CRP-based learning circles promote social connections and increase students' a sense of belonging. Similarly, Anderson and Deil-Amen (2024) noted that faculty foster students' sense of belonging by establishing humanized mentoring relationships. Additionally, the findings indicate that educators encourage students to actively participate in the classroom, which aligns

with Massar (2022), who highlighted that educators create an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions and engaging in discussions.

This study also found that international students view their professors as caring educators, which supports the findings of Han et al. (2014), who noted that faculty create a safe learning environment. Moreover, the study identified a cultural disconnect in classroom materials, which, while previously mentioned by Han et al. (2014) as a limitation of instructional practices, is presented here as a key barrier to inclusion. International students reported that some professors tend to use materials and examples only related to the American context, which limits the relevance of learning for students from diverse backgrounds. Finally, the present study emphasized the need to incorporate experiential learning strategies. While Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) suggested that professors should encourage students to engage in experiential learning, one participant in this study reported that their professors failed to incorporate such methods into their teaching.

In sum, the study finds that the effective implementation of CRP increases international students' classroom participation and learning motivation, thereby improving their academic performance. These findings have significant implications for the existing literature and provide valuable insights for future educational reform and practice. The key implication of this study is its potential to enhance the academic experiences and overall well-being of international students by promoting more culturally responsive practices. The research findings are generally consistent with the theoretical framework, supporting CRP's positive role in enhancing international students' sense of belonging and academic performance. The study also expands the understanding of CRP in terms of personalized learning expression and out-of-classroom support. However, it highlights issues of cultural disconnection and limited experiential learning opportunities, suggesting the need for improvements and adjustments in future CRP implementation.

Limitations and Future Research

Collaborating in real-world situations is complex and involves discussions among multiple parties on research design and implementation. Often, collaborators who are not trained researchers are not fully equipped to develop research designs or produce final reports (Strand et al., 2003). Efforts were made to ensure that the five participants contributed to this study, but they lacked the knowledge and experience recommended for various aspects of CBR such as data collection and analysis (Strand et al., 2003).

Another limitation in these types of collaborations is defining research questions that are clear, focused, and manageable in scope. Although the student participants had a deep understanding of their needs and challenges, as well as a strong desire to improve learning environments, they did "not have the technical expertise to frame a researchable question" themselves (Strand et al., 2003, p. 99).

Nevertheless, the group was guided in formulating researchable questions. Leadership was provided at these pivotal points in the study while ensuring that the ideas and opinions of other collaborators were incorporated. Recognizing that the research and interview questions required refinement, a faculty member was invited to join the study, and his contributions significantly improved the study design.

A further limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, which included one faculty member and five graduate students, all from the same graduate program. Although this sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader context, scholars might identify transferable elements that could apply to their own settings. Future CBR studies should include larger numbers of students and faculty and explore how to effectively integrate CBR and CRP to enhance international students' learning experiences, academic achievement, adaptability, and engagement. Additionally, this study did not determine whether the professors of the interviewed students had received CRP training, which may affect the accuracy of evaluating the effectiveness of CRP implementation. Future research could explore the impact of CRP training on professors' teaching effectiveness and students' learning experiences.

Another limitation is that this study did not include professors and international students from other disciplines and universities, making it difficult to assess the application of CRP in other educational contexts. Participants who were already familiar with CRP were more likely to emphasize its positive effects. Future research could explore CRP applications among students with no prior knowledge of this method. Future research could also include classroom observations and interviews with a more diverse sample of international students, professors, programs, and higher education institutions. This would provide educators, international students, and the broader academic community with more comprehensive insights.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Diverse teaching and learning environments pose challenges not only for educators but also for international students. Both parties need to be patient and invest time and effort to better understand each other. This article encourages more faculty to optimize curriculum design, materials, and instructional methods to ensure that they are inclusive and diverse, thereby helping international students adapt to multiculturalism and supporting personalized learning. IHEs should regularly provide training for faculty to enhance cultural sensitivity. Policymakers should promote culturally responsive education policies to ensure that international students have equal learning opportunities.

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I did not utilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in preparing this manuscript.

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