

## Teachers' Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Teaching in Multicultural Secondary Schools of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores secondary school teachers' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in the ethnically diverse educational landscape of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. As Malaysian schools serve students from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and various indigenous backgrounds alongside growing immigrant populations, understanding how teachers conceptualize and practice culturally responsive pedagogy becomes crucial for educational equity and effectiveness. Employing interpretive phenomenological methodology, this research investigated the experiences, beliefs, and practices of 28 secondary school teachers across six national secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. Findings reveal that while teachers recognize cultural diversity's significance and express commitment to inclusive education, their understanding and implementation of culturally responsive teaching vary considerably, influenced by personal cultural backgrounds, professional preparation, institutional support, and perceived tensions between standardized curriculum requirements and responsive pedagogy. Teachers identified challenges including limited training in CRT approaches, time constraints within

examination-focused systems, language complexities in multilingual contexts, and navigating sensitive cultural and religious differences. However, teachers also described meaningful practices including incorporating diverse cultural examples, building personal relationships with students, adapting communication styles, and creating inclusive classroom environments. These findings inform teacher education, professional development, and educational policy supporting culturally responsive practices in Malaysian multicultural contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia exemplifies extraordinary cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity resulting from its complex history of indigenous civilizations, colonial influences, immigration patterns, and nation-building processes. The Malaysian population comprises multiple ethnic groups—primarily Malay (approximately 69%), Chinese (23%), Indian (7%), and various indigenous communities—each maintaining distinctive languages, religions, cultural practices, and educational traditions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). This diversity manifests profoundly in educational contexts, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, where national secondary schools (*sekolah menengah kebangsaan*) serve heterogeneous student populations navigating multiple cultural identities, languages, and worldviews simultaneously. Malaysian secondary schools thus constitute complex multicultural environments where teachers encounter diverse learning styles, communication patterns, prior knowledge bases, family structures, and cultural values—diversity demanding pedagogical approaches acknowledging and leveraging cultural differences rather than ignoring or suppressing them.

However, Malaysian education policy historically emphasized standardization and national unity through uniform curriculum, centralized examinations, and Bahasa Malaysia as primary instructional medium—approaches potentially marginalizing minority cultural perspectives and creating barriers for students whose home cultures differ from dominant educational norms (Malakolunthu & Rengasamy, 2012). While the Malaysian education system has made significant strides in providing access across communities, persistent achievement gaps between ethnic groups, reports of cultural alienation among minority students, and ongoing debates about language policies and cultural representation suggest that mere access proves insufficient without pedagogical approaches responsive to students' diverse cultural backgrounds and identities (Tan & Santhiram, 2014). Understanding how teachers—as primary agents of curriculum enactment and pedagogical practice—conceptualize and navigate cultural diversity becomes essential for developing more equitable, effective, and inclusive educational practices.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT), as theorized by Ladson-Billings (1995) and elaborated by Gay (2010), offers frameworks for pedagogical practices that

acknowledge, respect, and leverage students' cultural backgrounds as assets for learning rather than deficits to overcome. Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as using "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective" (p. 31) (Muhsyanur and Mustapha, 2023). This approach involves multiple dimensions including validating students' cultural identities, incorporating diverse cultural content and perspectives into curriculum, employing varied instructional strategies aligned with diverse learning preferences, building caring relationships acknowledging cultural contexts of students' lives, and maintaining high expectations while providing culturally appropriate support. Research in Western contexts demonstrates that culturally responsive teaching enhances student engagement, achievement, and sense of belonging, particularly for marginalized cultural groups (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

However, translating CRT concepts developed primarily in U.S. contexts to Malaysian educational settings requires careful consideration of distinctive cultural, political, and educational characteristics. Malaysia's particular form of multiculturalism—shaped by bumiputera policies privileging indigenous Malay populations, complex relationships among major ethnic communities, Islamic positioning as official religion alongside religious pluralism, and colonial legacies—creates unique dynamics influencing how cultural diversity is understood and addressed in schools (Shamsul, 2001). Additionally, Malaysia's examination-oriented educational system emphasizing standardized achievement, centralized curriculum control, and teacher-centered pedagogical traditions may create tensions with culturally responsive approaches emphasizing student-centered learning, curricular flexibility, and responsiveness to local cultural contexts (Muhsyanur, 2023, 2024) Teacher perspectives prove particularly critical for understanding culturally responsive teaching implementation because teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences fundamentally shape how pedagogical approaches are enacted in practice. According to Pajares (1992), teacher beliefs serve as filters through which new information is interpreted and serve as frameworks guiding instructional decisions—meaning that even well-designed CRT frameworks will be implemented through teachers' existing belief systems about culture, diversity, teaching, and learning. Understanding teachers' own cultural backgrounds, their preparation for teaching diverse students, their conceptualizations of culture's role in education, and their perceived challenges and affordances in implementing responsive practices provides essential foundation for supporting effective culturally responsive pedagogy through teacher education, professional development, and policy frameworks.

The present study addresses these considerations by systematically investigating how secondary school teachers in Kuala Lumpur understand and experience culturally responsive teaching within Malaysia's distinctive multicultural educational context. Research questions guiding this investigation include: How do secondary school teachers in Kuala Lumpur conceptualize culturally responsive

teaching and its relevance to their practice? What culturally responsive teaching practices do teachers report implementing, and what factors facilitate or constrain these practices? How do teachers' own cultural backgrounds and experiences influence their approaches to teaching diverse students? What support and resources do teachers identify as needed for developing and sustaining culturally responsive pedagogy? Answering these questions through careful attention to teacher voices contributes empirical understanding of culturally responsive teaching in Malaysian contexts while informing practical efforts to support teachers in developing more equitable, inclusive, and effective practices serving Malaysia's diverse student populations.

## **METHOD**

This qualitative study employed interpretive phenomenological methodology to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of secondary school teachers regarding culturally responsive teaching in multicultural contexts. The research was conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year across six national secondary schools (*sekolah menengah kebangsaan*) in Kuala Lumpur selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse school demographics, geographic locations within the city, and student ethnic compositions. Participants comprised 28 teachers (17 female, 11 male; ages 28-56,  $M=38.4$  years) teaching core subjects including Malay language, English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Teacher ethnic backgrounds included Malay ( $n=15$ ), Chinese ( $n=7$ ), Indian ( $n=5$ ), and mixed heritage ( $n=1$ ), with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 28 years ( $M=12.6$  years). Selection criteria ensured diversity across subject areas, ethnic backgrounds, teaching experience levels, and schools serving varied student populations. All participants taught in schools with substantial ethnic diversity where no single ethnic group constituted more than 65% of student population—contexts where cultural responsiveness proves particularly salient (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

Data collection employed multiple qualitative methods over six months. Primary data came from semi-structured individual interviews (60-90 minutes each, conducted in participants' preferred languages: English, Bahasa Malaysia, or code-mixed) exploring teachers' understanding of cultural diversity, conceptualizations of culturally responsive teaching, reported practices, challenges and facilitators, professional preparation experiences, and personal reflections on teaching diverse students. Interview protocols, while providing structure, remained flexible allowing participants to emphasize aspects most meaningful to their experiences. Complementary data included three focus group discussions (8-10 participants each, 90 minutes) providing opportunities for collective reflection and dialogue about culturally responsive teaching, revealing both shared patterns and individual variations. Additionally, classroom observations (two 80-minute lessons per participant, 56 total observations) documented actual teaching practices, teacher-student interactions, and classroom environments, providing behavioral complement to self-reported interview data. Field notes captured pedagogical

strategies, cultural content integration, communication patterns, and classroom climate elements. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures: familiarization through multiple transcript readings, initial coding identifying experiential claims and conceptual understandings, developing emergent themes capturing psychological essence of experiences, identifying connections and patterns across themes, clustering related themes into superordinate categories, and cross-case analysis examining patterns while maintaining attention to individual experiences. Analysis proceeded iteratively with constant return to data ensuring interpretations remained grounded in participants' expressions. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, member checking where preliminary interpretations were shared with participants for validation, peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research, and reflexive journaling addressing researcher positionality. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities with informed consent from participants, confidentiality through pseudonyms, and voluntary participation assurances.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Teachers' Conceptualizations of Cultural Diversity and Responsive Teaching**

Teachers demonstrated varied and complex understandings of cultural diversity and culturally responsive teaching, shaped by their personal backgrounds, professional experiences, and institutional contexts. Most participants (24 of 28) acknowledged that Malaysian classrooms' ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity significantly influenced teaching and learning, yet their conceptualizations of how culture matters and what responsive teaching entails differed substantially. A dominant theme involved understanding cultural diversity primarily through ethnic categories—Malay, Chinese, Indian—rather than more nuanced recognition of within-group diversity, socioeconomic variations, regional differences, or intersectionality of multiple identity dimensions. Teachers frequently made generalized statements about cultural groups' characteristics: "Chinese students are very hardworking and focused on academics," "Malay students are more respectful of authority," "Indian students are good at mathematics." While these characterizations sometimes reflected teachers' genuine experiences with patterns in their classrooms, they also revealed essentialist thinking potentially leading to stereotyping rather than recognizing individual students' unique characteristics (Muhsyanur, Manivannan Murugesan, 2024).

When asked specifically about culturally responsive teaching, responses varied from limited awareness to sophisticated understanding. Seven teachers had not encountered the term previously and struggled to articulate clear definitions even after explanation, instead describing general good teaching practices like "treating all students fairly" or "being kind and understanding"—important qualities but insufficient for culturally responsive pedagogy's specific commitments. Twelve teachers demonstrated moderate understanding, recognizing that teaching should acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds and incorporate diverse perspectives,

though remaining uncertain about concrete implementation strategies. Nine teachers articulated more comprehensive understandings aligned with CRT literature, describing responsive teaching as involving validation of students' cultural identities, high expectations combined with culturally appropriate support, curriculum incorporating diverse perspectives, and explicit attention to how cultural contexts shape learning. One experienced teacher explained: "Culturally responsive teaching means I don't assume my way of communicating or organizing learning is the only way. I need to understand how my students' cultures might influence how they learn best, what examples resonate with them, how they're comfortable participating, and adapt my teaching accordingly while still maintaining rigorous standards."

Teachers' conceptualizations were significantly influenced by their own cultural backgrounds and experiences with diversity. Teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds (Chinese and Indian) more frequently articulated sophisticated CRT understandings and described personal experiences feeling marginalized in educational systems dominated by Malay language and Islamic cultural references – experiences fostering empathy for students from non-dominant backgrounds. One Chinese teacher reflected: "I remember feeling invisible in school when teachers only gave Malay or Islamic examples and never acknowledged Chinese festivals or perspectives (Benjamin Carter, Margot Smith, 2023). Now I'm conscious not to do that to my students—I try to include examples from all cultures so everyone feels their background matters." Conversely, some Malay teachers, particularly those who had attended relatively homogeneous schools or communities, expressed less awareness of cultural responsiveness needs, sometimes viewing standardized approaches as appropriately neutral rather than recognizing how standardization may privilege certain cultural norms. However, this pattern proved far from absolute, with several Malay teachers demonstrating deep commitment to culturally responsive practices, often influenced by professional development experiences, teaching in highly diverse schools, or personal intercultural relationships expanding their perspectives.

### **Culturally Responsive Practices and Implementation Challenges**

Teachers reported implementing various practices they identified as culturally responsive, though the sophistication, consistency, and alignment with CRT frameworks varied considerably. Table 1 presents the frequency and types of culturally responsive practices teachers reported and that were observed during classroom visits, revealing that while most teachers engaged in some responsive practices, comprehensive implementation across multiple CRT dimensions remained relatively rare.

**Table 1.** Teachers' Reported Comfort Levels Teaching Culturally Sensitive Topics

Practice Category	Teachers Reporting (n=28)	Frequency of Observation	Implementation Quality
Using diverse cultural examples in content	24 (86%)	Frequent	Variable; often superficial
Acknowledging cultural festivals/celebrations	22 (79%)	Occasional	Generally appropriate
Building personal relationships with students	26 (93%)	Frequent	Generally strong
Learning about students' cultural backgrounds	18 (64%)	Occasional	Variable depth
Adapting communication styles	15 (54%)	Occasional	Often implicit/intuitive
Incorporating students' home languages	12 (43%)	Rare	Usually code-switching
Addressing cultural bias/stereotypes	8 (29%)	Rare	Limited depth
Connecting content to students' lives	19 (68%)	Occasional	Variable relevance
Differentiating instruction culturally	11 (39%)	Rare	Often unintentional
Collaborating with families	14 (50%)	Rare	Logistically challenging
Critically examining curriculum content	6 (21%)	Very rare	Limited by curriculum control

Note. Observation data from 56 classroom observations (2 per teacher). Implementation quality based on researcher assessment of depth, consistency, and alignment with CRT principles.

The most common practice involved incorporating diverse cultural examples when teaching content—for instance, using food examples from multiple cuisines when teaching nutrition, referencing multiple cultural mathematicians, or discussing various cultural perspectives on historical events. However, observational data revealed that such inclusion often remained additive and superficial rather than transformative, with teachers mentioning diverse examples but not deeply engaging with how cultural perspectives might fundamentally shape understanding of concepts. Teachers frequently acknowledged cultural festivals (Hari Raya, Chinese

New Year, Deepavali, Christmas) through classroom decorations or brief discussions, though these acknowledgments sometimes felt tokenistic rather than substantively engaging with cultural meanings and practices.

Building caring relationships with students emerged as teachers' strongest and most consistent practice, with nearly all participants emphasizing knowing students personally, showing interest in their lives, and creating warm classroom environments – practices research identifies as foundational for culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). Teachers described learning about students' families, interests, challenges, and aspirations through informal conversations, observations, and attentiveness to individual needs. One teacher explained: "I make sure to greet every student by name, ask about their day, notice if someone seems upset or troubled. These small things build trust and show students I care about them as individuals, not just as students to teach content to." This relational foundation, while not sufficient alone, provides essential basis for other culturally responsive practices by establishing trust and mutual respect enabling teachers to learn about and leverage students' cultural resources.

However, teachers identified numerous challenges constraining culturally responsive teaching implementation. The most frequently mentioned challenge involved Malaysia's examination-oriented education system emphasizing standardized national assessments (PT3, SPM), creating pressure to cover prescribed content rapidly and teach to test formats rather than spending time on culturally contextualized instruction or responsive adaptations. Teachers described tension between wanting to make learning culturally relevant and feeling obligated to prioritize examination preparation. One teacher lamented: "I want to spend time discussing how different cultures understand concepts, connecting to students' experiences, but there's so much content to cover before examinations. I feel pressure to just deliver information efficiently rather than making it culturally meaningful."

Limited professional preparation for teaching diverse students constituted another significant barrier. Most participants reported that their pre-service teacher education provided minimal attention to cultural diversity or responsive pedagogy beyond cursory multicultural appreciation. Several noted that education courses presented idealized visions of Malaysian diversity – emphasizing harmony and unity – without addressing practical challenges of navigating cultural differences, language barriers, or potential conflicts. Professional development opportunities specifically addressing culturally responsive teaching proved rare, with most in-service training focusing on subject content, examination techniques, or technology integration rather than culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers expressed desire for practical guidance on implementing CRT rather than theoretical frameworks alone: "We need concrete strategies, lesson examples, and opportunities to practice and receive feedback – not just lectures about why diversity matters."

Language complexities in Malaysia's multilingual context presented particular challenges. While Bahasa Malaysia serves as official instructional medium in national secondary schools, students' home languages vary (Malay, various Chinese

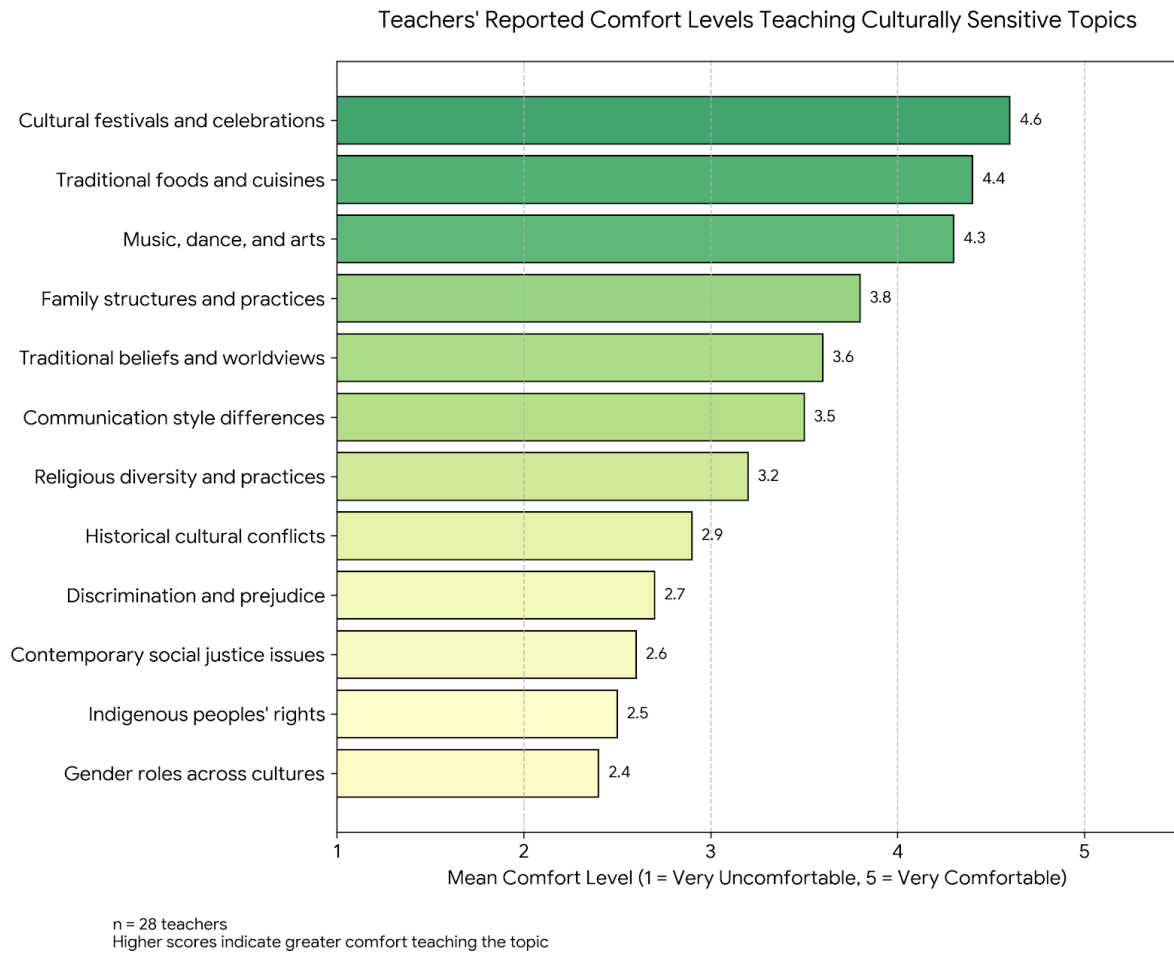
dialects, Tamil, English, indigenous languages), and proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia differs substantially. Teachers struggled with balancing language policy requirements with students' comprehension needs, sometimes using code-switching or students' home languages to ensure understanding but worrying about policy compliance or disadvantaging students who don't share those languages. Additionally, teachers noted that culturally significant concepts sometimes lack direct translation across languages, making culturally responsive content explanation linguistically challenging.

### **Cultural Sensitivity and Navigating Differences**

Teachers' experiences revealed complex negotiations around cultural and religious sensitivities—a dimension particularly salient in Malaysian contexts where cultural diversity intersects with religious diversity (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity) and where certain cultural practices carry religious significance requiring careful navigation. Teachers described heightened awareness and sometimes anxiety about inadvertently offending students, families, or colleagues through culturally insensitive content, comments, or practices. This sensitivity manifested in both productive and constraining ways—fostering respectful attention to cultural differences but sometimes leading to avoidance of cultural topics or superficial treatment preventing deep engagement.

Many teachers described deliberate strategies for navigating cultural and religious diversity respectfully. These included: consulting with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds when uncertain about appropriateness of content or activities; explicitly discussing with students how to respectfully engage with cultural differences; establishing classroom norms emphasizing respect for diverse beliefs and practices; and being transparent about their own cultural backgrounds and limitations. One Indian teacher explained her approach: "When teaching content that might touch on religious or cultural topics, I acknowledge upfront that we have diverse beliefs in our class, all deserve respect, and our goal is to understand different perspectives, not judge them. I share my own background and invite students to share theirs if comfortable. This openness creates safe space for learning about differences." This approach exemplifies Gay's (2010) emphasis on creating "culturally caring" environments where diversity is explicitly acknowledged and valued rather than ignored.

Figure 1 presents teachers' reported comfort levels teaching various culturally sensitive topics, revealing significant variation in confidence across different cultural domains. Teachers generally felt most comfortable acknowledging cultural festivals and incorporating diverse food or music examples—relatively safe, celebratory aspects of culture. However, comfort decreased substantially when addressing potentially controversial topics like religious differences, cultural conflicts, indigenous rights, or discrimination and prejudice—topics often most significant for developing critical cultural consciousness but also most likely to generate discomfort, disagreement, or parental complaints.



**Figure 1.** Teachers' Reported Comfort Levels Teaching Culturally Sensitive Topics

**Higher scores indicate greater comfort teaching the topic**

Teachers' reluctance to address more challenging cultural topics reflected several factors. Some teachers worried about lacking sufficient knowledge to teach complex cultural issues accurately and respectfully, fearing they might perpetuate stereotypes or misinformation. Others expressed concern about parental reactions, particularly regarding topics touching on religion or potentially challenging traditional cultural values. Malaysian education's emphasis on social harmony and avoiding controversial topics created implicit pressure to maintain surface-level cultural acknowledgment rather than engaging deeply with cultural conflicts, power dynamics, or inequality—yet these deeper engagements prove essential for developing students' critical cultural consciousness and preparing them to navigate Malaysia's complex multicultural society productively.

However, several teachers, particularly those with more experience and stronger institutional support, described successfully engaging students in substantive cultural discussions by establishing clear guidelines, providing multiple perspectives, focusing on understanding rather than judgment, and connecting to

students' real experiences. One teacher described facilitating discussion about how different cultural groups experienced Malaysia's history differently: "I presented perspectives from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities on historical events, acknowledging how the same events meant different things to different groups. Students found this eye-opening—many had never considered that their classmates' communities might understand Malaysian history differently. It created empathy and deeper historical understanding." This example illustrates culturally responsive teaching's potential for fostering both academic learning and intercultural competence when teachers possess confidence, skills, and support to engage cultural complexity thoughtfully.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that while Malaysian secondary school teachers in Kuala Lumpur recognize cultural diversity's educational significance and express commitment to serving diverse students equitably, their understanding and implementation of culturally responsive teaching vary substantially, influenced by personal backgrounds, professional preparation, institutional contexts, and systemic constraints including examination pressures and limited training, with teachers implementing some responsive practices—particularly building relationships and incorporating diverse examples—while struggling with deeper cultural engagement, language complexities, and navigating sensitive cultural differences in Malaysia's multicultural yet sometimes culturally cautious educational environment. Teacher education programs must comprehensively prepare prospective teachers for culturally responsive practice through coursework addressing cultural diversity's theoretical and practical dimensions, field experiences in diverse schools with mentorship from culturally responsive practitioners, and development of cultural self-awareness, knowledge of diverse cultural groups, and specific CRT pedagogical strategies contextualized for Malaysian settings.

Schools and education ministries should provide ongoing professional development emphasizing practical CRT implementation strategies rather than theoretical frameworks alone, create collaborative structures enabling teachers to share culturally responsive practices and collectively problem-solve challenges, reduce examination pressures allowing instructional flexibility for culturally contextualized teaching, develop curriculum resources incorporating diverse Malaysian cultural perspectives rather than dominant narratives only, and establish supportive policies explicitly valuing and protecting culturally responsive approaches even when addressing sensitive topics. Educational researchers should investigate longitudinal impacts of culturally responsive teaching on Malaysian students' achievement, engagement, and intercultural competence; examine effective models for CRT professional development in Malaysian contexts; explore students' and families' perspectives on culturally responsive practices; and develop Malaysian-contextualized CRT frameworks honoring Malaysia's distinctive multicultural characteristics rather than uncritically adopting Western models,

ultimately fostering educational practices that genuinely serve Malaysia's diverse student populations through pedagogies acknowledging, respecting, and leveraging cultural diversity as educational asset.

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