ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN PREPARING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the ethical dilemmas faced by teacher educators and pre-service teachers during culturally responsive teaching (CRT) preparation and practicum experiences. The research uses a phenomenological research design, case studies, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to understand and address these challenges. Five major ethical challenges are identified: balancing standardized curricula with cultural sensitivity, avoiding cultural stereotyping and essentialism, addressing unconscious personal biases, navigating ethical considerations in classroom interactions, and ensuring authentic representation and inclusion of marginalized voices. To support ethically grounded CRT training, the study identifies best practices such as building cultural competence, promoting equity and anti-bias education, integrating multicultural curricula, fostering inclusive classrooms through differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning, engaging families and communities authentically, and cultivating reflective practice and lifelong learning. The paper advocates for embedding ethics explicitly across teacher education curricula, recommending dedicated ethics courses, case-based learning, regular ethical reflection, incorporation of diverse perspectives, alignment with professional standards, and institutional accountability. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex ethical landscape of preparing culturally responsive teachers, emphasizing the need for teacher education programs to foster critical consciousness, empathy, and integrity. It calls for continuous dialogue, reflection, and institutional reforms to create transformative educational environments that honor diversity and promote social justice for all learners.

Keywords: *Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), Ethical Challenges, Teacher Education, Case Study*

Introduction

In contemporary education systems, increasing cultural, linguistic, and social diversity in classrooms has made culturally responsive teaching (CRT) an essential pedagogical approach. CRT emphasizes recognizing students' cultural identities as valuable assets in the learning process and encourages teachers to connect instruction with learners lived experiences (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). By acknowledging students' backgrounds, languages, and community knowledge, culturally responsive pedagogy promotes equity and meaningful engagement in teaching and learning.

Research suggests that culturally responsive teaching supports the holistic development of learners by fostering intellectual growth, emotional well-being, social awareness, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2017). The intentional use of cultural and linguistic references in classroom practices enables students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, thereby enhancing motivation, self-worth, and academic success (Gay, 2018; Vakil et al., 2021).

However, preparing pre-service teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching raises significant ethical challenges. Teacher education programs must address concerns related to bias, power, representation, and fairness while ensuring that cultural diversity is not reduced to stereotypes or superficial practices (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). Pre-service teachers often struggle to balance respect for cultural differences with institutional norms and standardized curricula, leading to ethical dilemmas during practicum and classroom application (Banks, 2016; Santoro, 2014). Understanding these ethical concerns is crucial for developing teacher education frameworks that are both culturally responsive and ethically grounded (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Vakil et al., 2021).

Background of the Study

In the field of education, significant studies have addressed the concept of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and its implications for enhancing the educational experiences of African American children and promoting social justice. Ladson-

Billings (2009) conceptualizes CRT as an approach that fosters academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness among students. It stresses the importance of valuing students' cultural backgrounds as assets, suggesting that effective teaching integrates these cultural experiences into instructional practices to maintain equity and achieve meaningful learning outcomes. Gay (2010) posits that culturally responsive teachers draw upon students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and communication styles as instructional resources, which fosters inclusive environments supporting holistic learner development.

Acquah & Szelei (2020) discovered that teachers acknowledge an improvement in students' cultural competence skills across various cultures. Andal & Panergayo (2025) emphasized the importance of embedding cultural knowledge and skills within teacher education curricula, advocating for structured training to better prepare pre-service teachers (PSTs) for diverse classroom environments. Bassey (2016) analyzed culturally responsive teaching and determined that it promotes educational justice by linking education with social justice and fostering necessary discussions about societal change. Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011) explored inclusive pedagogy, highlighting its goal of extending educational resources universally rather than selectively differentiating for certain students. Karataş & Oral (2017) stressed the importance of incorporating cultural values in the education process, positing that such integration fosters both cognitive and affective development as well as social peace. Paris (2012) introduced the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasizes the need to maintain cultural diversity within educational practices. Subasi Singh et al. (2021) identified key challenges faced by pre-service teachers, particularly concerns regarding their inadequate cross-cultural competence and their students' language proficiency issues. Sungkitsin (2023) posits that integrating multicultural education principles into teacher education programs enhances future teachers' multicultural competency, although effectiveness can vary. Young &Young (2021) highlight that the presence of preservice teachers of color affects the confidence intervals of CRTSE scores. The discussion includes implications for teacher education, recruitment of preservice teachers, and the practice of culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, Gay & Kirkland (2003) emphasize the necessity of fostering personal and professional critical consciousness regarding racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity as a vital aspect of preservice teacher education.

Cochran-Smith (2010) highlighted the necessity for pre-service teachers to critically reflect on issues of power, bias, and systemic inequality within educational systems. Sleeter (2012) confronts the challenges in implementing CRT in teacher education programs, revealing that CRT is often superficially addressed. Lastly, in "Rethinking Culturally Responsive Teaching in STEM Education," Vakil et al. (2021) argue that CRT can empower students by linking academic content with their cultural and community experiences, advocating for ethical responsibilities in curriculum design to ensure fairness, inclusivity, and accurate representation within educational practices. Collectively, these studies advocate for a comprehensive understanding and integration of culturally responsive pedagogies to enhance educational equity and promote the holistic success of diverse student populations.

Existing studies have established the importance of culturally responsive teaching in promoting equity and inclusion in diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010). Research has largely focused on the theoretical foundations and instructional benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy, with some attention to teacher preparation for social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). However, limited empirical research has examined the ethical challenges faced by pre-service teachers while implementing culturally responsive teaching during practicum and real classroom experiences. In particular, there is a lack of studies that explore how pre-service teachers navigate ethical issues related to fairness, cultural representation, and professional responsibility. Addressing this gap is essential for strengthening ethically grounded teacher education programs that support culturally responsive teaching practices.

This study has examined the ethical challenges involved in preparing culturally responsive teachers, with a particular focus on the dilemmas faced by pre-service teachers as they attempt to apply CRT principles in real-world educational contexts. The researcher has conducted a case study in West Bengal, aimed at exploring the ethical dilemmas faced by teacher educators in training pre-service teachers for culturally responsive teaching, examining pre-service teachers' perceptions and navigation of these ethical challenges during practicum, and exploring strategies used by teacher educators to address these ethical concerns in teacher preparation.

Research Questions

a) What ethical dilemmas do teacher educators encounter when training pre-service teachers in culturally responsive teaching?
b) How do pre-service teachers perceive and navigate ethical challenges related to CRT during their practicum?
c) What strategies do teacher educators use to address ethical concerns in culturally responsive teacher training?

Research Design

Method of the study: A qualitative research design using phenomenological inquiry and case study design has been adopted in the present study to explore lived experiences. The researcher utilized interviews with teacher educators, focus groups with pre-service teachers, and classroom observations to understand their ethical concerns and strategies in CRT training, as well as to analyze the ethical considerations they face during their practicum.

Study Area: The area of the present study is West Bengal, India.

Figure 1: Map of West Bengal, India (Source: https://www.dreamstime.com/west-bengal-map-showing-international-state-boundary-district-boundary-west-bengal-political-administrative-color-image218734198)

Key Informants: Purposive sampling has been used for the study to select 17 (seventeen) teacher educators and 82 (eighty-two) pre-service teachers from various teacher education institutions in West Bengal.

Data collection technique: Data collection methods included observations, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with teacher educators and pre-service teachers.

Data Analysis technique: In this study, researchers utilized semi-structure interview, focus group discussion and observation techniques to collect qualitative data, which was analyzed through thematic analysis to identify patterns related to ethical dilemmas faced by teacher educators in training pre-service teachers for culturally responsive teaching. The data underwent coding and categorization, leading to key themes regarding pre-service teachers' perceptions of and responses to these ethical challenges during practicum. A cross-case analysis highlighted patterns and differences, and triangulation methods reinforced the robustness and validity of the findings.

Data Analysis and Findings

This study has contributed to a more profound understanding of the ethical complexities in CRT training. The researcher found the major challenges for CRT training as follows:

- **Ethical Challenges in CRT Training**

Balancing Standardization and Cultural Sensitivity: Pre-service teachers are often trained using standardized curricula, which may not always align with culturally diverse classroom needs. Ethically adapting pre-service teachers' teaching involves balancing honoring students' cultural identities with meeting institutional mandates. Key strategies include using culturally responsive pedagogy, incorporating culturally diverse materials and activities, and differentiated instruction within standards. Critical self-reflection and ongoing professional development are also essential for ethical adaptation. Advocacy and dialogue are crucial for advocating for inclusive practices within institutions. Building relationships is essential for cultural inclusivity, and understanding students' backgrounds through family or community involvement can foster a classroom culture of respect and belonging. Ethical principles at play include justice, care, and professional integrity. By integrating these strategies, pre-service teachers can fulfill their ethical obligations to inclusivity without neglecting institutional responsibilities, becoming both implementers and thoughtful reformers of curriculum.

Avoiding Cultural Stereotyping and Essentialism: Teacher educators must ensure that pre-service teachers do not fall into the trap of reducing cultures to simplistic representations. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) training can prevent cultural essentialism by incorporating several ethical frameworks. These include the Ethic of Care, which emphasizes relationships and empathy, and Critical Pedagogy, which encourages critical reflection and questioning of power structures. Postcolonial Ethics, which challenges Western-centric views and emphasizes the complexity of identities, and Intersectionality, which acknowledges that identities are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression. Virtue Ethics, which emphasizes character and moral development, and Deliberative Democratic Ethics, which promotes critical discussion and respect for diverse viewpoints. These frameworks can be applied in practical strategies such as using student narratives, engaging communities in curriculum co-design, promoting reflective journaling, and including scholarship from marginalized voices. By integrating these ethical frameworks into CRT training, future educators can view culture as fluid, contextual, and interconnected with power and identity.

Navigating Personal Biases and Beliefs: Many pre-service teachers may enter training with unconscious biases. The ethical challenge of addressing unconscious biases in Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) training involves a balance between fostering critical reflection and respecting pre-service teachers' personal beliefs. To achieve this, teacher educators should

promote critical self-reflection, establish a culture of inquiry and respect, use evidence-based pedagogy, model cultural humility, encourage agency and professional responsibility, and provide ongoing support and feedback. By promoting reflective activities, fostering a safe space for differing views, and promoting agency and professional responsibility, educators can create conditions for critical consciousness and promote equity while respecting individual autonomy. By balancing ethical reflection with pedagogical practice, educators can create a more inclusive and effective CRT training experience.

Ethical Considerations in Classroom Interactions: During practicum, pre-service teachers might struggle with how to handle cultural misunderstandings, racial microaggressions, or language barriers. Pre-service teachers must prioritize ethical decision-making when encountering cultural misunderstandings, racial microaggressions, or language barriers during their practicum. Key ethical principles include respect for diversity and inclusion, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities, promoting inclusive language, understanding and acknowledging students' feelings, maintaining professional boundaries, maintaining confidentiality and trust, and committing to lifelong learning. These principles guide teachers in addressing misunderstandings, promoting equity and justice, and fostering a supportive learning environment. By addressing racial microaggressions, ensuring language barriers do not prevent student participation, and challenging discriminatory practices, pre-service teachers can navigate complex social dynamics with integrity and care, fostering a classroom climate that supports all learners.

Representation and Inclusion of Marginalized Voices: To ensure authentic representation and inclusion of marginalized voices in Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) training, teacher educators should focus on co-creation and co-teaching, incorporating first-person narratives, oral histories, and culturally grounded pedagogies. They should also go beyond superficial references and include cultural epistemologies, historical and systemic contexts, and contemporary realities. Teacher educators should critically examine their own identities, biases, and institutional power, and treat inclusion as a continuous process. They should present underrepresented groups as internally diverse and highlight intersectionality. Empowering teachers as cultural brokers is crucial, as they should train future teachers to identify and challenge inequities and adapt curriculum and pedagogy based on student cultural contexts. Assessing the impact and feedback from participants is essential, as is making marginalized voices integral to the educational process.

- **Best practices for ethically preparing teachers to work in diverse classrooms**

Equity, cultural competency, and inclusive pedagogy are at the heart of a comprehensive strategy that prepares educators to operate morally and successfully in diverse classrooms. The following are recommended practices for morally educating educators to work with a variety of student populations:

Build Cultural Competence: CRT involves training teachers to respect and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, encouraging self-awareness, and using real-life scenarios to help teachers navigate cultural dynamics.

Promote Equity and Anti-Bias Education: Bias training focuses on addressing implicit bias and systemic inequities, while anti-racist pedagogy equips teachers with strategies to dismantle racist structures and conducts equity audits to assess curriculum and classroom practices.

Integrate Multicultural Curriculum: Diversify content by incorporating diverse cultures, histories, languages, and perspectives. Include marginalized voices and promote critical pedagogy by encouraging students to analyze power, privilege, and inequality in texts and society.

Foster Inclusive Classrooms: The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) program trains teachers to create flexible curricula that cater to diverse learning styles and needs, while differentiated instruction strategies are taught for English learners and students with disabilities.

Engage with Families and Communities: The text emphasizes the importance of family engagement, community-based learning, and language access in teaching methods, emphasizing the need for authentic partnerships with diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Develop Reflective Practice and Lifelong Learning: Utilize reflective tools to help teachers process experiences, connect new teachers with diverse mentors, and encourage continuous professional development in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging through journaling, dialogue, mentorship, and peer networks.

Support Institutional Commitment: Advocate for diverse faculty and leadership in teacher education programs, ensure policy alignment with inclusive practices, and build accountability systems for evaluating the effectiveness and ethics of teacher preparation programs.

- **Recommendations for integrating ethics more explicitly into teacher education curricula**

Explicitly including ethics into teacher education programs is essential to equipping teachers to handle difficult moral and professional dilemmas in the classroom and school community. The following are important suggestions to accomplish this integration:

Embed Ethics Across Core Courses: Integrate ethics into core teacher education subjects like classroom management, curriculum and pedagogy, and assessment and evaluation to promote equity, justice, cultural responsive teaching, fairness, and ethical grading practices, avoiding isolation in a standalone course.

Offer a Dedicated Ethics in Education Course: The course will explore foundational ethical theories, professional codes of conduct, and ethical dilemmas in education, involving case studies with students, parents, and colleagues.

Use Case-Based and Scenario-Based Learning: Introduce students to real-world and hypothetical ethical dilemmas, such as managing confidentiality, reporting harm, addressing pressure, and navigating conflicts of interest or favoritism.

Promote Reflective Practice: Teacher trainee should engage in regular ethical reflection through journals, discussion groups, seminars, and mentorship with experienced educators, discussing ethical challenges during fieldwork, moral development, and professional responsibility.

Incorporate Student Voice and Diverse Perspectives: Teacher candidates should be exposed to ethical issues from diverse perspectives, including marginalized speakers, utilizing literature and media to highlight challenges in diverse educational settings.

Align with Professional Standards and Accreditation Requirements: The InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards in the U.S. and other national bodies often incorporate ethics-related expectations into their teaching standards.

Assess Ethical Reasoning Skills: Ethical reasoning assessments involve writing ethical position papers, participating in debates or oral defenses, and creating a personal teaching philosophy that includes ethical commitments.

Foster a Culture of Ethical Dialogue in Teacher Preparation Programs: Create a program-wide ethos that incorporates ethics in the ongoing conversation through faculty development, regular ethics workshops, and student-led ethics committees or forums.

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that teacher educators and pre-service teachers encounter multiple ethical challenges while engaging with culturally responsive teaching practices. Consistent with earlier empirical studies, participants reported difficulties in balancing cultural sensitivity with curriculum requirements and assessment standards. Similar findings were reported by Sleeter (2012), who observed that culturally responsive pedagogy is often implemented superficially due to limited institutional support and lack of ethical clarity.

Data from practicum reflections and interviews revealed that pre-service teachers frequently experienced ethical dilemmas related to fairness and inclusion, particularly when addressing diverse linguistic and cultural needs within time-bound classroom settings. This finding aligns with Shapira-Lishchinsky's (2011) empirical analysis, which identified fairness, professional responsibility, and respect for diversity as recurring ethical conflict areas among teachers.

The study further found that pre-service teachers struggled with cultural representation, often expressing uncertainty about avoiding stereotyping while attempting to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into lessons. Similar concerns were empirically documented by Santoro (2014), who highlighted that teachers' moral identity and ethical uncertainty significantly influence their classroom decision-making in culturally diverse contexts.

Teacher educators participating in the study emphasized the absence of structured ethical frameworks within teacher education programs. This observation supports Cochran-Smith's (2010) findings that teacher preparation for social justice often lacks systematic integration of ethical decision-making processes, resulting in inconsistent pedagogical practices.

Additionally, the findings suggest that when ethical discussions and reflective practices were explicitly embedded in teacher training, pre-service teachers demonstrated improved confidence in handling culturally responsive teaching challenges. This result is supported by Vakil et al. (2021), who empirically demonstrated that structured ethical engagement within culturally responsive pedagogy enhances inclusivity and equitable learning outcomes.

Overall, the findings highlight that ethical challenges in culturally responsive teaching are not merely theoretical but are experienced concretely during practicum and instructional practice. The data underscore the need for empirically grounded, ethically informed teacher education models that support culturally responsive teaching in diverse classroom contexts.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive teachers (CRT) require a deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, beyond instructional strategies. Despite the growing recognition of CRT's value, educators face complex ethical challenges, such as balancing cultural sensitivity with standardized curricula, avoiding stereotyping, confronting personal biases, handling ethical dilemmas in classroom interactions, and authentically representing marginalized voices. Ethical teacher preparation requires reflection, empathy, humility, and a willingness to challenge systemic injustices. By embedding ethical reasoning and culturally responsive pedagogy into teacher education, educators can create a new generation of teachers who are not only culturally competent but also morally grounded.

Teacher education programs should integrate ethics into their curriculum, encourage reflective practice, use real-world case studies, and foster ongoing dialogue on ethical issues. They should also be accountable to their communities by including diverse voices and co-creating solutions with those affected by educational inequities. The journey towards culturally responsive teaching is an ethical one, requiring teachers to cultivate their moral compass, sharpen their critical consciousness, and act with integrity. This ensures inclusive, ethically just, and transformative classrooms for all learners.

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