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How Can Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Teacher Competence Advance Inclusive Education in Elementary Schools?

Anna Isabela Sanam[1], *Adiyono Adiyono[2], Ameh Timothy Ojochegbe[3]
1Lecturer in Research and Evaluation of Education, Institute of Business, Timor-Leste
2 Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Ibnu Rusyd Tanah Grogot, Indonesia
3Prince Abubakar Audu University, Kogi State, Nigeria
Email: adiyono@stitibnurusyd-tgt.ac.id

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Abstract: Inclusive education calls for more than placing students with different learning needs in the same classroom. Teachers also need ways to recognize their students' cultural experiences and adapt instruction without compromising equitable participation. This systematic literature review examines the contributions of teacher competence and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) to inclusive education in elementary schools. Following PRISMA 2020, searches of Scopus and Web of Science identified 300 records; 20 studies were retained for synthesis. Across the literature, teachers' professional knowledge, classroom management, inclusive attitudes, and ability to adapt instruction emerged as important dimensions of competence. CRP adds attention to students' languages, identities, family experiences, and cultural knowledge when planning lessons and interactions. Differentiated instruction offers one way of connecting these capacities to classroom participation, although its usefulness depends on how teachers respond to specific learning needs. School leadership, collaboration, resources, and sustained professional learning also shape what teachers can put into practice. Taken together, the literature supports treating professional competence and cultural responsiveness as complementary elements of inclusive teaching rather than as separate approaches.
Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy; teacher competence; inclusive education; elementary schools; systematic literature review.

Introduction

Inclusive education has changed what elementary schools are expected to provide. Enrolling students with different needs is only a starting point; the more difficult task, emphasized across studies and policy guidance, is ensuring that they can participate in lessons, feel recognized in the classroom, and learn through approaches suited to their circumstances. Differences in language, disability, family experience, and cultural background all affect how children encounter school (Rowan et al., 2020; Semião et al., 2023; Trainor & Robertson, 2020). Teachers therefore make decisions about inclusion every day in the examples they choose, the questions they ask, and the ways they assess learning (Jugan et al., 2024; Yusuf & Fajari, 2025; UNESCO, 2022).

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) offers one way to approach these decisions. Rather than treating culture as an occasional classroom topic, it asks teachers to consider how students' experiences and identities can inform teaching

(Ciampa & Reisboard, 2024; Gulya & Fehérvári, 2023; Idrus et al., 2023). Applying that approach requires professional competence: knowledge of students, a flexible instructional repertoire, and the judgment to adapt teaching when a strategy does not work (Azizah et al., 2024; Irvan et al., 2023). In inclusive classrooms, the two are closely connected.

The difference between recognizing diversity and teaching responsively is particularly important in inclusive schools. Wulandari and Hendriani describe uneven teacher preparation in Indonesia, including difficulties in understanding students' characteristics and evaluating their learning. Studies of teacher competence likewise draw attention to differentiated instruction, classroom management, and access to specialist assistance. These issues indicate why a teacher's commitment to inclusion must be accompanied by opportunities to develop and apply professional judgment (Wulandari & Hendriani, 2021; Rapisa et al., 2026).

Existing reviews illuminate different parts of this relationship. Lestari et al. (2025), for example, discuss how culturally responsive practices can make learning more relevant to students with diverse backgrounds. Their work also draws attention to collaboration and reflection, both of which matter when schools try to sustain inclusive practice beyond an individual teacher's initiative. A related review examines teachers' knowledge of students' cultures (Petri et al., 2025).

Professional development presents a related challenge. Teachers may leave a training program with stronger knowledge or greater confidence without making lasting changes to their instruction. Similar concerns appear in research on preparing teachers for diverse learners (Khadia et al., 2026). In their review, Fu et al. (2026) report improvements in several teacher outcomes but also describe variation in the design and durability of professional-development efforts. What teachers know, then, cannot be considered separately from the conditions under which they teach.

The review by Fu and colleagues draws on 16 studies of professional development in primary and secondary education. Reported benefits included gains in knowledge, beliefs, self-efficacy, and, in some cases, teaching practices. Yet the programs differed in their pedagogical alignment and in the extent to which changes endured. Methodological concerns are also relevant: preparation programs are often assessed through relatively small studies and measures based on teachers' own reports. These sources help explain why increased confidence should not automatically be interpreted as sustained classroom improvement (Fu et al., 2026; Khadia et al., 2026).

The literature provides substantial discussion of teacher competence, CRP, and inclusive schooling, yet their connections are less clearly developed for elementary education. One question remains particularly important: how do teachers turn an understanding of learner diversity into instruction that is both culturally meaningful and accessible? Addressing that question requires attention to classroom decisions as well as to the support available within schools (Cruz et al., 2020; Ghaemi & Boroushaki, 2025).

The contribution sought here is not the discovery of a previously unstudied topic. Both teacher competence and CRP have substantial research histories. What requires closer attention is the process connecting professional capacity, responsive classroom decisions, and the learning opportunities available to children. The review considers institutional conditions alongside those decisions, since the same teaching strategy may be feasible in one school and difficult to sustain in another. This perspective places the relationship among the constructs, rather than any one construct alone, at the center of the synthesis.

This review brings those strands of research together. It asks how teacher competence supports inclusive education in elementary schools, how CRP informs teaching in diverse classrooms, and how the two can be understood in relation to one

another. It also considers the conditions that help or hinder implementation, including professional learning, collaboration, and school resources.

The analysis accordingly addresses four connected issues: which dimensions of teacher competence are especially relevant to inclusion; how culturally responsive pedagogy appears in teaching and learning; what is known about the relationship between those practices and students' participation; and how leadership, training, resources, and collaboration affect implementation. The review covers literature published between January 2020 and the final search in 2026. Its proposed framework is intended to organize the evidence and identify areas requiring more direct classroom research, not to imply that the relationships have already been tested as a single causal model.

The analysis begins from a distinction between capacity and practice. Teacher competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and professional judgment educators bring to their work; CRP concerns how teaching responds to students' cultural and social experiences. School conditions can enable or constrain the connection between the two. By considering these elements together, the review develops an integrated account of inclusive practice while remaining attentive to differences in the evidence reported across studies.

Three questions guide the inquiry. First, what forms of teacher competence support inclusion in elementary classrooms? Second, how do culturally responsive practices accommodate differences in language, cultural experience, and learning needs? Third, how are competence and CRP related, and which school conditions appear to strengthen or constrain their use? Keeping these questions distinct is important: a study may provide evidence about teachers' attitudes, for instance, without documenting changes in instructional practice or student outcomes. Such distinctions also limit the claims that can reasonably be drawn from a synthesis.

Method

1. Research Design and Reporting Framework

A systematic literature review (SLR) was used to examine the relationship among teacher competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, and inclusive education in elementary schools. The identification and selection of studies followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework (Page et al., 2021). This approach allowed findings from research conducted in different settings to be compared while keeping the search and selection process explicit.

Using PRISMA as a reporting guide also makes the review process more open to scrutiny. Readers should be able to follow how records were identified, why some were excluded, and which studies remained for synthesis. These selection decisions serve a different purpose from substantive analysis: a transparent flow diagram documents the evidence base, but it does not establish the effectiveness of CRP or teacher competence. The analysis of included studies must supply that explanation through their research designs, contexts, findings, and limitations (Page et al., 2021).

2. Data Sources, Search Strategy, and Eligibility Criteria

Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) served as the two bibliographic sources. The search covered publications from 2020 through 2026 and combined terms associated with inclusive education, teacher competence, culturally responsive teaching, and elementary or primary schooling. The databases were selected for their coverage of peer-reviewed educational research and the availability of bibliographic records for screening.

The initial Boolean strategy combined four groups of terms:
("inclusive education" OR "inclusive classroom " OR "inclusive teaching") AND ("culturally responsive pedagogy" OR "culturally responsive teaching" OR "cultural responsiveness" OR

"culturally sustaining pedagogy") AND ("teacher competence" OR "teacher competency" OR "teacher preparedness" OR "teacher professional development") AND ("elementary school" OR "primary school" OR "primary education").

Syntax was adjusted for the functions of each database. The use of related expressions was intended to capture different labels for comparable educational concerns.

The search used combinations of these concepts rather than relying on one narrowly defined phrase. Two- and three-concept combinations were also considered to capture studies that addressed relevant connections without naming every construct in their titles or abstracts. Eligible publications needed a substantive connection to the review questions and to elementary education. Records outside that focus, or those that did not meet the stated publication criteria, were excluded.

Eligible publications were peer-reviewed studies within the specified period that addressed elementary education and contributed evidence relevant to at least one of the relationships under review. Editorial material, conference abstracts without accessible full texts, duplicate records, and publications unrelated to elementary schooling or the review's substantive questions were excluded. Studies spanning multiple educational levels require careful interpretation because an observation about secondary students or preservice teachers may not translate directly into an elementary classroom. The review thus treats population and setting as substantive criteria rather than merely bibliographic labels.

3. Article Selection Procedure and Data Collection

Records from both databases were combined and checked for duplicates using titles, DOIs, and other bibliographic information. The remaining records were screened first by title and abstract and then, where appropriate, by full text. For each study retained, the review recorded its setting, research design, participants or target population, analytical focus, principal findings, and reported limitations.

Screening was organized as a sequence of increasingly detailed decisions. Titles and abstracts were checked first so that clearly unrelated records could be removed without unnecessary full-text assessment. Potentially eligible publications were then read more closely for their populations, settings, and contribution to the research questions. The method described two independent reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion and a third reviewer when needed. Recording the reasons for exclusion matters because otherwise a reader cannot distinguish an irrelevant topic from a relevant study conducted at the wrong educational level.

The extraction form also captured the dimensions most relevant to the review: teacher knowledge and preparedness, culturally responsive instructional practices, indicators of inclusive participation, and contextual support. Organizing the information in this way made it possible to compare studies that used different methods without assuming that their findings were directly interchangeable.

The extraction form was designed to retain information that might otherwise disappear in a broad thematic summary: publication identity, country, design, participants, dimensions of competence and cultural responsiveness, indicators of inclusion, reported findings, and limitations. It was also intended to support comparisons across studies with different approaches. The manuscript identifies MMAT and design-appropriate JBI instruments as quality-appraisal options. Appraisal should inform how confidently findings are interpreted rather than being reduced to a single quality label detached from the study's methods.

4. Data Analysis, Synthesis, and Trustworthiness

The analysis combined descriptive mapping with thematic synthesis. Publication years, countries, educational settings, designs, and study populations were examined to describe the scope of the literature. The thematic analysis then considered how

teacher competence was defined, how cultural responsiveness appeared in classroom practice, and what conditions were associated with inclusive teaching.

The thematic procedure moved from reading and coding individual findings to comparing codes, grouping related ideas, and refining broader themes. Four areas organized this work: teacher competence and readiness, responsiveness to cultural and learning diversity, classroom participation and adaptation, and school conditions that enable or hinder inclusion. These themes are analytically connected, but they are not interchangeable. For example, a report of positive teacher attitudes belongs to the first area unless the study also documents the strategies enacted or the responses of students.

Studies were read alongside one another to identify recurring themes as well as differences in context and interpretation. Particular attention was given to evidence from Indonesia and Southeast Asia in relation to studies from other settings. Screening criteria and the common extraction framework provided a consistent basis for comparing the sources and tracing the claims developed in the discussion.

Comparisons across countries and school systems were approached with similar care. A strategy described in one national setting may depend on a particular curriculum, staffing model, or form of specialist support. Differences in research design also affect what can be concluded: interview-based accounts can illuminate how teachers understand a practice, whereas classroom observations or measures of participation provide different kinds of evidence about implementation. The synthesis therefore considers both recurring patterns and findings that do not align neatly, rather than treating frequency of mention as proof of effectiveness.

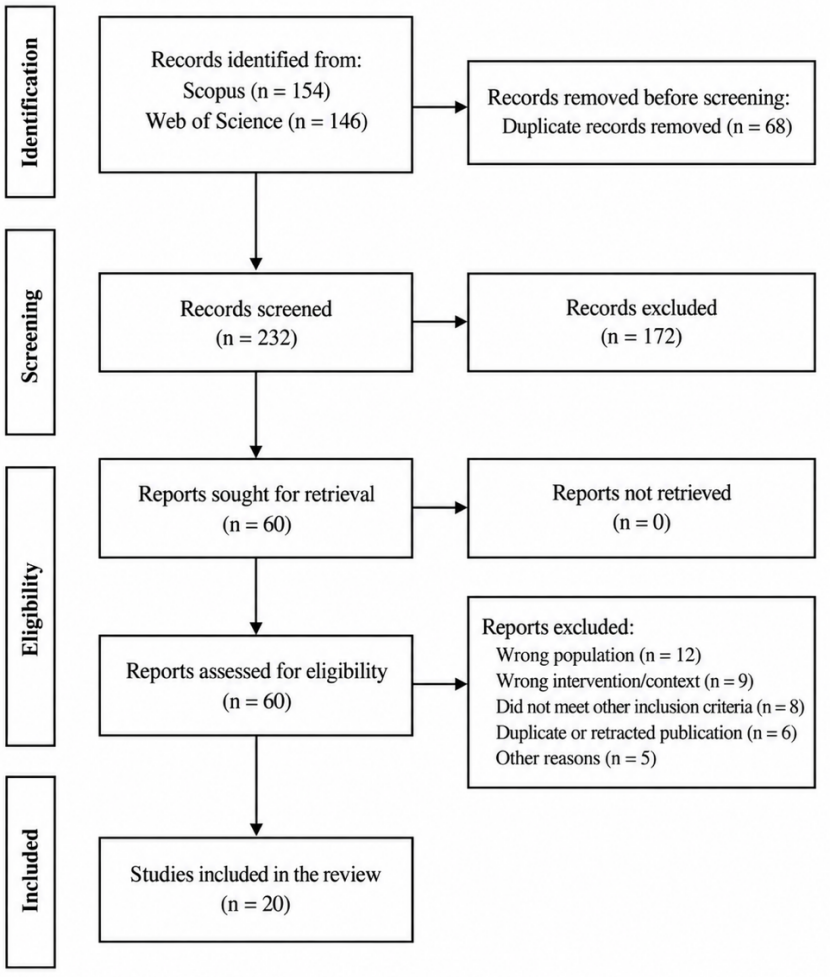


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Figure 1 traces the review process from identification to final inclusion. Scopus yielded 154 records and Web of Science 146, giving 300 records before deduplication. Removing 68 duplicates left 232 records for title-and-abstract screening. Of these, 172 were excluded, and 60 full-text articles were assessed. Forty were subsequently excluded for reasons related to population, context, eligibility, or other criteria. The final synthesis included 20 studies.

Results and Discussion

Results

1. Identification and Selection of Studies Using PRISMA 2020

The screening process reduced 300 database records to 20 included studies (Figure 1). After the removal of duplicates, 232 titles and abstracts were assessed; 60 articles proceeded to full-text review. These numbers describe how the review narrowed a broad set of publications to sources considered relevant to teacher competence, CRP, and inclusive education at the elementary level. The distribution at each stage is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of records across each stage of the literature-selection process

Selection stage	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Records from Scopus	154	51.3
Records from Web of Science	146	48.7
Total records identified	300	100.0
Duplicate records removed	68	22.7
Records after deduplication	232	77.3
Records excluded during title and abstract screening	172	74.1*
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	60	25.9*
Full-text articles excluded	40	66.7**
Studies included in the final synthesis	20	33.3**

Note: Percentages were calculated based on the relevant stage. Percentages use 232 screened records as the denominator. Percentages use 60 full-text articles as the denominator.

Scopus accounted for 154 of the 300 records (51.3%), while Web of Science contributed 146 (48.7%). After duplicate removal, 232 records 77.3% of the original set remained. Sixty of those records proceeded to full-text assessment. The numbers establish the scope of the selection process but do not, by themselves, indicate the strength of the evidence contained in the included studies.

At the screening stage, 60 of the 232 records were retained for full-text assessment, equivalent to 25.9% of the records screened. Twenty of these 60 articles met the final inclusion criteria. Overall, the final set represented 6.7% of the 300 initially identified records. These percentages describe the selection process and its selectivity; they are not indicators of the methodological quality of the included studies. Quality and relevance must be interpreted from the contents of the studies themselves and the reasons for including them.

2. Records Excluded During Screening

Title-and-abstract screening led to the exclusion of 172 records (Table 2). The most common reason was a mismatch with the review topic, followed by studies outside elementary education. Other records did not meet publication criteria or lacked a complete research article, as in the case of some conference abstracts and editorials.

Table 2. Reasons for exclusion at the title-and-abstract screening stage

Reason for exclusion	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Not relevant to the research topic	78	45.3
Not focused on elementary education	32	18.6
Did not meet publication-status criteria	28	16.3

Editorial or conference abstract without full text	20	11.6
Other reasons	14	8.1
Total	172	100.0*

Note: Percentages were calculated from the 172 excluded records. Total percentages may differ slightly from 100% due to rounding.

Of the 172 records excluded at screening, 78 (45.3%) were not sufficiently related to the topic. For this review, relevance required more than a passing reference to diversity or inclusion: the source needed to help explain teacher competence, culturally responsive teaching, or inclusive practice within the stated educational focus. Applying that distinction helped keep the selection aligned with the research questions.

Of the 172 records excluded at this stage, 78 were not sufficiently relevant to the topic, 32 were outside the elementary-education focus, and 28 did not meet publication-status criteria. Another 20 consisted of editorial material or conference abstracts without complete texts, while 14 were excluded for other stated reasons. These categories describe different questions and should remain separate in the selection record. Relevance concerns what the study addresses; publication status concerns the type of evidence available; and school level concerns whether the findings speak directly to the population under review.

Another 32 records were excluded because they did not address elementary education. This boundary matters because instructional decisions, student needs, and the organization of support can differ considerably between elementary and later levels of schooling.

3. Full-Text Eligibility Assessment

Sixty articles underwent full-text assessment. Decisions at this stage focused on the populations and settings examined, the substantive relevance of the research questions, and whether the findings could inform the review's analysis of teacher competence, CRP, or inclusive schooling.

Table 3. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text eligibility-assessment stage

Reason for exclusion	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Population mismatch	12	30.0
Intervention or context mismatch	9	22.5
Did not meet other inclusion criteria	8	20.0
Duplicate or retracted publication	6	15.0
Other reasons	5	12.5
Total articles excluded	40	100.0
Studies included in the synthesis	20	-
Total articles assessed for eligibility	60	-

Note: Exclusion percentages were calculated from the 40 articles removed during the full-text eligibility-assessment stage.

Population mismatch accounted for 12 of the 40 full-text exclusions (30.0%). The remaining reasons included differences in intervention or setting, failure to meet other eligibility criteria, duplicate or retracted publications, and other grounds listed in Table 3.

Nine full-text articles were excluded because their interventions or contexts did not fit the review. Some addressed inclusion without providing a meaningful connection to teacher competence or culturally responsive teaching; others examined settings too far removed from the study's elementary-school focus. The exclusion categories shown in Table 3 document the decisions made at the full-text stage. Grouping reasons consistently also allows readers to distinguish questions of population and setting from publication-related exclusions.

Six full-text exclusions were reported under the combined heading "duplicate or retracted publication." These are related but different grounds for exclusion. A

repeated bibliographic record is normally addressed during deduplication, whereas multiple reports of one study or a retraction may become apparent only after closer reading. The reported total is retained here as part of the final selection data; the distinction remains useful when describing the process accurately and avoiding confusion between duplicate records and different reports of the same investigation.

4. Characteristics of the Included Studies

The 20 included studies were examined for their publication dates, geographic settings, school contexts, research designs, participants, and main concerns. Comparing these characteristics helps readers see where the evidence is concentrated and where differences in context may affect how findings are interpreted.

Table 4. Matrix of study characteristics included in the synthesis

Analytical dimension	Information extracted	Analytical purpose
Publication identity	Authors, year, title, journal, DOI	To ensure source traceability
Geographical context	Country and region of the study	To compare national and international contexts
Educational level and setting	Elementary school, inclusive school, regular classroom	To ensure contextual relevance
Research design	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or conceptual study	To identify the characteristics of the evidence
Teacher competence	Professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, attitudes, readiness	To map competence dimensions
Culturally responsive pedagogy	Recognition of cultural identity, curricular relevance, instructional adaptation	To identify culturally responsive practices
Inclusive-education implementation	Participation, access to learning, differentiation, learner support	To identify indicators of inclusion
Findings and limitations	Key findings, limitations, recommendations	To assess the strength and boundaries of the evidence

Note: The table sets out the extraction dimensions used to compare the 20 included studies, including their publication details, contexts, designs, and substantive findings.

The characteristics of the studies matter for interpreting their contributions. Research on teacher preparation or professional learning, for instance, sheds light on how competence develops; studies of classroom adaptation show more directly how that competence may be used. Reading these sources together clarifies the relationship between professional capacity and teaching practice without treating them as the same outcome.

The matrix is best read alongside evidence drawn directly from the included publications. A table identifying a study's focus tells readers what was examined; it does not by itself show whether the intervention worked, whether teachers' practices changed, or how students experienced inclusion. Those questions require attention to measures, observation periods, participants, and stated methodological limitations. When the sources are heterogeneous, a narrative or thematic account may provide a more faithful synthesis than a numerical comparison that suggests a degree of equivalence the studies do not share.

5. Thematic Synthesis

Four themes guided the synthesis: teacher competence and readiness, culturally responsive teaching, inclusive classroom practice, and the conditions that

support or constrain implementation. Table 5 summarizes the questions used to organize evidence across these themes.

Table 5. Analytical framework for the relationship among culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher competence, and inclusive education

Thematic dimension	Analytical focus	Analytical question
Teacher competence and readiness	Knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional development	What competencies do teachers need to address student diversity?
Culturally responsive pedagogy	Cultural relevance, language, family experience, and representation in learning	How do teachers connect students' experiences to learning activities?
Inclusive classroom practice	Differentiation, participation, material adaptation, and assessment	How are competence and cultural responsiveness enacted in classroom practice?
Enablers and barriers	Leadership, resources, training, collaboration, and policy	What conditions support or constrain implementation?

An important distinction runs through the synthesis. Knowing how to support diverse learners is not the same as acting on that knowledge, and neither necessarily demonstrates a change in students' experiences. Keeping teacher capacity, classroom practice, and student participation separate makes the conclusions more precise.

At least three levels of evidence need to be distinguished. The first concerns capacity: what teachers know, believe, or report being prepared to do. The second concerns enactment: the teaching decisions, adaptations, interactions, and assessments documented in practice. The third concerns students' experiences or outcomes, including participation, access to materials, engagement, or learning. A teacher may understand cultural diversity without consistently adjusting instruction, just as a classroom adjustment may be promising without a measured change in student participation. Preserving those differences keeps the framework explanatory rather than overstated.

6. Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 presents the conceptual relationship developed from the review: professional competence informs culturally responsive teaching, which in turn can support inclusive classroom practice. School conditions influence whether that progression can be sustained.

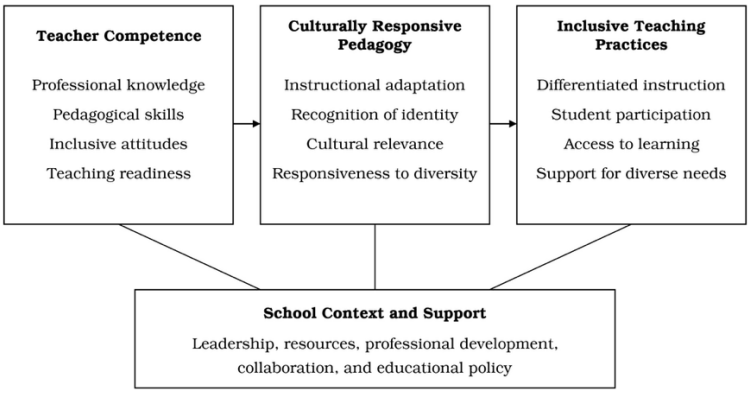


Figure 2. Conceptual Relationship Among Teacher Competence, CRP, and Inclusive Teaching

The figure places teacher competence and CRP in a sequence of practice rather than treating them as competing approaches. Teachers draw on professional knowledge and judgment to adapt materials, instruction, and assessment to students' experiences and needs. The resulting opportunities for participation depend partly on the school environment: leadership, resources, ongoing learning, collaboration, and policy all affect what can be accomplished in classrooms. These relationships describe a conceptual interpretation of the literature, not a measured causal pathway.

The framework also identifies questions for future research. If much of the literature measures teacher confidence or attitudes, further classroom observation is needed to examine how these capacities are translated into action. If evidence clusters in a small number of countries, comparisons across policy settings could reveal where a proposed mechanism depends on local institutional conditions. These are directions suggested by the framework rather than claims of established effects. They underscore the need to compare the breadth and quality of the included evidence before generalizing to elementary schools more widely.

7. Summary of Findings and Limits of Interpretation

Across the reviewed literature, effective inclusion appears to depend on the connection between what teachers know and what they do. Professional competence helps teachers recognize different learning needs; cultural responsiveness makes students' experiences visible in instructional decisions. Neither operates in isolation. School support and the circumstances of individual studies remain important when interpreting how these practices are implemented.

The synthesis should not be read as evidence that one approach will produce the same results in every elementary school. National settings, study designs, and definitions of inclusion vary across the literature. These differences are important to the strength and transferability of the conclusions.

The conceptual model should therefore be read against the quality and scope of the studies, not against the PRISMA counts alone. Where sources disagree, the review needs to consider whether the difference arises from contrasting settings, definitions, or research methods. A study documenting changes in teachers' self-efficacy may not contradict one finding little change in observed practice; they may be assessing different outcomes. Recognizing this possibility is central to a careful account of what the literature can and cannot establish.

Discussion

1. Teacher Competence in Inclusive Elementary Education

Teacher competence is often discussed as a matter of qualifications, but inclusive classrooms reveal a more practical dimension. Teachers need to recognize barriers to learning, manage varied classroom needs, adapt materials, and assess progress in ways that do not disadvantage particular students. Professional knowledge matters because it informs these decisions; its value becomes visible when teachers use it in everyday instruction.

This understanding of competence has implications for assessment as well as instruction. A uniform task may be convenient to administer but can obscure what a student knows when it relies on an unfamiliar language, inaccessible format, or narrow cultural experience. Teachers may instead vary how students encounter content or demonstrate understanding while maintaining meaningful learning expectations. Doing so calls for judgment about which differences require accommodation and which curricular goals should remain common across the class. Competence is thus evident in adaptation and evaluation, not simply in familiarity with inclusive-education terminology.

Rapisa, Hermanto, and Suparno (2026), in their review of 20 studies, identify professional knowledge, classroom management, and differentiated instruction as recurring elements of competence for inclusive education. They also report obstacles familiar to many schools, including limited training, large classes, and insufficient specialist support. Taken together, these findings suggest that competence involves both instructional judgment and the opportunity to exercise it.

The distinction is especially important when schools enroll students with a wide range of needs. Admission may satisfy an administrative requirement, but it does not tell us whether a child can follow a lesson, contribute to a discussion, or demonstrate understanding. Those outcomes depend in part on the choices teachers make about instruction and assessment.

Wulandari and Hendriani (2021) describe challenges faced by teachers in Indonesian inclusive schools, including uneven preparation, difficulty identifying learners' characteristics, and limited assessment skills. Their findings point to the need for continuing professional learning grounded in classroom problems. They also caution against viewing the teacher as the sole source of success or failure. Leadership, access to materials, collaboration with specialists, and school policies shape the choices available to teachers (Muafiah et al., 2025; Wang & Tian, 2023; Yusuf & Fajari, 2025).

The Indonesian evidence is particularly useful because it locates professional challenges within schools that are expected to serve diverse learners. Differences in teachers' educational backgrounds affect preparation, while difficulty identifying children's individual characteristics complicates lesson planning and evaluation. Preservice preparation, practical mentoring, and opportunities to reflect on actual lessons are therefore complementary rather than competing approaches to professional learning. At the same time, no amount of individual training can fully substitute for accessible materials, collegial assistance, and leadership that makes inclusive teaching feasible on a daily basis.

2. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Inclusive Practice

Culturally responsive pedagogy begins with the premise that students do not leave their languages, identities, or family experiences at the classroom door. These experiences can help teachers select examples, frame questions, and communicate expectations. CRP therefore concerns the substance of teaching, not simply the addition of cultural activities to an otherwise unchanged lesson.

Franco, Bottiani, and Bradshaw (2024) examine how culturally responsive classroom practices have been measured through reports from teachers, students, and observers. Their review highlights a challenge for research and professional development alike: confidence in one's cultural responsiveness does not necessarily demonstrate responsive teaching. Observations and students' accounts can offer a different view of what happens in classrooms.

The measurement issue deserves attention because self-report, student-report, and observation capture different aspects of a classroom. Teachers may be best placed to explain their intentions and planning decisions; students can describe whether they feel represented or able to participate; and observers may document the interactions that unfold. None of these perspectives is a complete substitute for the others. Bringing them into conversation offers a more credible view of how culturally responsive teaching is practiced and whether professional-development efforts change classroom experience.

In elementary classrooms, responsive teaching might mean choosing stories that reflect students' communities, allowing different ways to explain an idea, or using familiar experiences to introduce new content. Such choices can make participation easier for children whose backgrounds are rarely represented in

standard materials. Lestari et al. (2025) likewise emphasize connections between students' experiences and instruction, alongside the need for collaboration and reflection. These practices are relevant to inclusion because they create more than one route into the learning activity (Rad, 2026; Viano & Darling-Aduana, 2025).

For instance, a reading lesson might offer texts portraying several family and community experiences, allow discussion in ways that acknowledge students' language resources, and give students more than one format for expressing comprehension. This does not require abandoning shared learning objectives. Rather, it asks the teacher to consider whether the usual route to meeting an objective creates avoidable barriers. Such decisions are also strengthened when teachers exchange materials, discuss difficult cases, and reflect collectively on the participation of children who may otherwise remain at the margins of classroom interaction.

CRP does not, however, cover every aspect of inclusive education. Cultural recognition is essential, but students may also need adjustments related to disability, communication, access, or other learning barriers. CRP is therefore best understood as one part of an inclusive instructional approach, working alongside rather than replacing other forms of support.

3. Bringing Teacher Competence and CRP Together

Teacher competence and CRP are frequently discussed in different terms: the former describes professional capacity, while the latter emphasizes how teaching relates to learners' cultural experiences. In practice, the boundary is less clear. A teacher's understanding of diversity matters most when it influences the examples, activities, relationships, and assessments students encounter.

Their integration can be described as a sequence of educational decisions. Teachers first identify the strengths and barriers present in a class, drawing on professional knowledge and understanding of learners. They then select materials, examples, interactions, and assessments that are culturally relevant and accessible. Finally, they examine whether these choices create meaningful opportunities for participation. This sequence does not imply that every part of the process has been tested as a single model; it offers a way to connect evidence about competence with evidence about classroom practice.

Consider a class in which students bring different language experiences and levels of familiarity with the curriculum. A competent teacher may recognize these differences. CRP helps turn that recognition into decisions about which voices are represented, which examples make sense, and how students can participate. The two concepts become useful together at the point of lesson design and classroom interaction.

The reviewed studies support this distinction from different angles. Rapisa et al. (2026) discuss the knowledge and skills required for inclusive teaching, whereas Franco et al. (2024) focus on how responsive practice is recognized and measured. Their emphases are not identical, but placing them side by side suggests why teacher self-assessment alone is an incomplete account of inclusion.

For schools, the practical question is not simply whether teachers value diversity. It is whether that commitment changes what students can read, discuss, attempt, and demonstrate. Adapting instruction and assessment to students' circumstances makes cultural responsiveness part of the work of inclusion rather than an additional classroom theme.

4. Differentiated Instruction in Practice

Differentiated instruction offers a practical connection between teacher competence and inclusive teaching. A teacher may vary the level of support, the materials students use, or the ways they show understanding while working toward

shared learning goals. When informed by CRP, these choices also consider students' linguistic and cultural experiences.

The range of possible adaptations is broad. Teachers may vary the complexity or representation of content, offer different routes through an activity, permit several forms of response, or change features of the classroom environment that limit participation. Within CRP, such adaptations should also consider students' linguistic repertoires, cultural references, and experiences outside school. Different tasks are not necessarily culturally responsive, however, and culturally relevant examples do not by themselves resolve barriers related to communication, disability, or access. Both dimensions must be addressed deliberately.

In their systematic review and meta-analysis of 49 primary studies, Amriadi et al. (2023) report a positive association between differentiated instruction and learning outcomes. That finding is relevant, but it does not mean that any variation in tasks is automatically inclusive or culturally responsive. The quality of differentiation depends on how teachers identify students' needs and on whether the adjustments expand meaningful participation. Related discussions of differentiation and classroom diversity offer useful contextual comparisons (Adiyono et al., 2025; Zaier & Maina, 2022).

Reported positive effects of differentiated instruction provide a reason to investigate its potential, but they should not be treated as a universal effect across settings. The primary studies in a meta-analysis may differ in their participants, comparison groups, implementation periods, and measures of learning. A favorable average finding cannot establish that every adaptation will benefit all students in an inclusive classroom. The practical question is how differentiation is designed, which learners it supports, and whether the changes preserve ambitious but accessible learning goals.

The task for teachers is therefore twofold. They need to make learning accessible to students with different levels of readiness, and they need to do so without diminishing the cultural knowledge and experiences students bring with them. A simpler worksheet may remove one barrier, for example, but it does not necessarily make a lesson culturally meaningful or inclusive in a broader sense.

5. Beyond Individual Teachers: The Role of Schools

Even well-prepared teachers can struggle to put inclusive strategies into practice when schools provide little time for planning, limited materials, or no opportunities to consult colleagues. Such constraints are not peripheral. They influence whether teachers can respond to individual needs consistently rather than only when circumstances happen to allow it (Fu et al., 2026; Rapisa et al., 2026).

School support can take modest but consequential forms: time to plan lessons with colleagues, mentoring based on classroom cases, access to specialist advice, and opportunities to review students' participation. Leadership matters because these activities require coordination and an institutional commitment to inclusion. Professional learning is more likely to influence classroom routines when schools make room for it (Geletu, 2023; Van Weerdenburg & Kroesbergen, 2025; Vlcek & Somerton, 2023).

Collaboration may involve classroom teachers, special-education personnel, counselors, school leaders, families, and community partners. Each contributes different knowledge about learners and the barriers they face. Structured observation and case-based discussion can help identify whether a difficulty stems from the instructional task, classroom interaction, limited resources, or a need for specialist assistance. Leadership matters in creating time for this work and ensuring that responsibility for inclusion does not fall entirely on an isolated classroom teacher.

6. Research Gaps and Conceptual Contribution

The review draws attention to a recurring gap between reported competence and demonstrated practice. Surveys may show what teachers believe they can do, while classroom observation and students' accounts reveal different aspects of inclusion. Franco et al. (2024) raise this concern in relation to CRP measures. Future research could strengthen the evidence by examining these perspectives together instead of treating them as interchangeable (Guo & Keles, 2026; Vantieghem et al., 2023).

An important gap concerns the outcomes used to judge progress. Research often emphasizes teachers' stated attitudes, confidence, or knowledge because these are relatively straightforward to measure. Evidence about how teachers adapt instruction, how students respond, and whether participation changes over time can be more difficult to collect. Studies that combine classroom observation with teacher and student accounts would help bridge these levels of evidence. Cross-context comparisons could also show whether the proposed relationship among competence, CRP, and inclusion remains meaningful under different school arrangements.

The conceptual framework developed here brings together three related dimensions:

a. Teachers' professional capacity, including knowledge of students' learning needs, pedagogical skills, inclusive attitudes, and reflective ability.
b. Responsive pedagogical practice, including cultural relevance, differentiated learning, flexible assessment, and the reduction of participation barriers.
c. School support conditions, including leadership, professional development, collaboration, resources, and family partnerships.

What matters about this framework is the relationship among its elements. Professional competence is not simply a credential or the result of attending a workshop; it must become visible in teaching. This distinction appears in research on professional capacities and curriculum enactment, including work beyond elementary education (Dignath, 2021; Moreira et al., 2023; Tran & O'Connor, 2023). Cultural responsiveness gives that teaching a connection to students' lived experiences, while school conditions determine what support is available. The framework organizes these relationships without presenting them as a new empirically validated theory.

The proposed framework is therefore an organizing explanation rather than a claim to a fully validated new theory. It brings attention to three linked but distinguishable areas: professional capacity, the responsive practices through which that capacity is enacted, and the institutional conditions that support or constrain enactment. Its value lies partly in making these relationships easier to investigate. Future studies can test which connections hold, for whom, and under which circumstances instead of assuming that an increase in teacher knowledge necessarily produces better outcomes for every student.

7. Implications for Elementary Schools and Policy

Teacher professional development would benefit from closer attention to the decisions teachers face in real classrooms. Alongside concepts of inclusion, programs could provide opportunities to adapt materials, design flexible assessments, discuss cultural relevance, and review what happens when students engage with those changes (Roca-Campos et al., 2021; Treacy & Leavy, 2021).

Evaluation of professional learning should also move beyond attendance, participant satisfaction, and short-term knowledge gains. Reviewing lesson materials, observing instruction, and asking students about their learning experiences can reveal whether training is influencing practice. Follow-up opportunities matter because teachers may need to try an approach, notice a barrier, and revise it in

collaboration with colleagues. Programs that link cultural understanding with differentiation and inclusive assessment are more likely to address the day-to-day decisions described throughout this review than programs that present these topics as separate theoretical modules.

School leaders can support this work by protecting time for collaborative planning and encouraging teachers to examine barriers to participation together. Policy also has a role: standards for teacher learning and school support should consider whether inclusive intentions translate into classroom resources and workable routines (Ardenlid, 2025; Cai & Wei, 2025; Mubarok et al., 2024; Porta & Todd, 2023).

At the school level, inclusion also requires care in how students are described. Adapting tasks should not become a reason to attach fixed labels or lower expectations for particular groups. Teachers need materials connected to local communities and procedures that preserve students' dignity while responding to genuine differences in support needs. Collaborative planning can help colleagues examine whether a proposed adaptation expands participation or unintentionally separates students from meaningful common learning experiences. These concerns make reflective school leadership an integral part of inclusive practice.

An inclusive school is not defined only by who is admitted. The quality of students' daily experiences whether they can take part, access materials, and receive appropriate support is equally important. That is where the connections among teacher competence, CRP, and school conditions become most visible.

Policy recommendations must account for differences in resources between schools. Standards that expect flexible assessment, differentiated teaching, or individual assistance are unlikely to be implemented consistently if schools lack preparation time, personnel, and appropriate learning materials. Institutional support should therefore be considered alongside professional expectations. The implications developed here are grounded in the conceptual relationships and evidence discussed in the review; they should guide practical inquiry rather than be read as a claim that one policy arrangement will suit every elementary school.

8. Responses to the Research Questions

The three research questions lead to a common conclusion. Teacher competence supports teachers' ability to recognize learning needs and make instructional decisions; CRP encourages those decisions to draw on students' cultural experiences; and school conditions shape how consistently the two can be combined. This account is more useful as an explanation of how inclusive practice may be supported than as a claim that any single component is sufficient on its own.

The number of included studies should not be confused with an estimate of impact. Nor can evidence from other educational levels be assumed to apply without qualification to elementary classrooms. Attention to research design, setting, and the outcomes actually measured remains essential when applying these insights.

Conclusion

Inclusive teaching is strongest when professional competence and cultural responsiveness inform one another. Teachers need the knowledge and judgment to identify learning barriers, but they also need to understand the experiences students bring to the classroom. The literature reviewed here points to differentiated instruction, flexible assessment, and respectful interaction as practical ways of connecting these responsibilities.

Neither cultural recognition nor pedagogical skill is sufficient on its own. Classroom inclusion also depends on whether teachers can adapt materials and assessment without weakening learning opportunities, and whether students' identities are respected in their interactions with others. Leadership, sustained

professional development, family engagement, and appropriate resources make those decisions easier to implement. The synthesis thus supports an integrated view of teacher capacity, responsive practice, and school conditions, while stopping short of claiming that the framework establishes a direct causal improvement in academic outcomes.

For elementary schools, the implications are tangible. Professional learning should give teachers opportunities to adapt real lessons, select culturally relevant materials, and reflect on participation. School leaders can support those efforts through collaboration, resources, and sustained guidance. Inclusion ultimately concerns more than access to a classroom; it concerns whether students can take part in learning in ways that are meaningful and fair.

Several limitations warrant attention. The review drew on Scopus and Web of Science over the 2020–2026 publication period, so relevant research outside those databases, published in other languages, or unavailable in full text may not have been captured. Differences in study designs, national contexts, participants, and outcome measures also limit direct comparison. Future research could examine the proposed framework through classroom observations, teacher and student accounts, measures of participation, and studies that follow changes over time. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs would be especially valuable for understanding how professional competence and cultural responsiveness interact under different school conditions.

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Author Contributions
Anna Isabela Sanam contributed to the study's conceptualization, theoretical framework, and literature review. Adiyono Adiyono coordinated the review methodology, literature search and screening, data analysis, synthesis, and manuscript preparation as the corresponding author. Ameh Timothy Ojochegbe contributed to the interpretation of findings, critical review of the manuscript, and language editing.

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Data Availability
The search records, extraction materials, and synthesis tables are maintained by the authors and may be provided upon reasonable editorial request, subject to database licensing restrictions.

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