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Elementary Teachers' Experiences of Implementing Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Education in New York State

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Abstract: Many states in the United States have adopted culturally responsive sustaining education (CRSE) as a pedagogical framework to promote inclusive education and positive student outcomes for all students, including those from marginalized groups. Yet there is a paucity of knowledge on teachers' attitudes towards and experiences of implementing these initiatives. This study draws on survey data to explore how urban and rural/suburban elementary school teachers across the state of New York understand and implement the state's CRSE framework. Results show that although CRSE is not necessarily a top priority of many schools across the state, teachers generally have positive perceptions of CRSE and have been accountable in taking concrete steps towards implementing inclusive curriculum. However, they can benefit from more school- and district-level support. Lastly, teachers in rural/suburban districts outside of NYC reported significantly lower rates of school-wide buy-in into CRSE. These findings support the development of school- or districtwide professional learning opportunities to build understanding of the state's framework and ways to collaboratively translate CRSE values into inclusive teaching.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education; elementary education; teacher education; inclusive education

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1. Introduction

The definitions of inclusive education have evolved in the last thirty years since the 1994 United Nations Salamanca Statement laid out the goal of "building an inclusive society and education for all" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 4). Although the conceptualization of inclusive education is rooted in disability justice for students with special needs (Amor et al., 2019), the term has increasingly broadened to encompass all forms of diversity and groups vulnerable to exclusion (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Haug, 2017; Messiou, 2017; Slee, 2011). As such, inclusive education has become part of a broader discourse on promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in education (Hardy & Woodcock, 2024).

To this end, some states in the United States (US) have banned all DEI initiatives in schools (Feder, 2024), while other states have adopted culturally responsive sustaining education (CRSE) to promote inclusive education and positive student outcomes for all students, including those from marginalized groups. For instance, the New York State (NYS) Board of Regents released a DEI policy in 2021, in which they stated an expectation for all school districts in New York to implement DEI policies and practices with "fidelity and urgency" (NYSED, 2021, p. 1). The NYS Office of the Attorney General and NYS Education Department (NYSED) subsequently issued a joint guidance in August 2023, stating that a primary way by which schools and districts can institute DEI practices is to adopt the state's CRSE framework (NYSED, 2023, pp. 6–7). The framework is grounded in four principles,

chief among them a principle on inclusive curriculum and assessment. Furthermore, the framework contains three vision statements, whereby a culturally responsive education system is one where students can experience academic success, become sociopolitically conscious and socioculturally responsive, and become critical thinkers who challenge inequities in society (NYSED, 2019).

Despite support for the framework across NYS since its launch in 2019, there is little knowledge of its implementation or accountability process. It is not well understood what teachers' perceptions and experiences are of adapting instruction to build inclusive classrooms. In the broader scholarship on inclusive education, there too has been more emphasis placed on issues of access and placement, rather than on pedagogy and teaching for inclusion (Haug, 2017; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2022). This study first aims to address the knowledge gap in professional development and teacher accountability in implementing inclusive education. Specifically, I seek to shed light on the critical question of what teachers are gleaning and translating into action after receiving professional development on inclusive teaching (Van Mieghem et al., 2020).

Secondly, scholars have observed that inclusive education policies across the world are "strongly value- and ideology-driven," so much so that the term has become a "rhetorical masterpiece" that states use to promote "the selling of inclusive ideas" (Haug, 2017, p. 207). Inclusive education can thus be a highly politicized endeavor, both in theory and in practice. To this end, research on political geographies substantiate the existence of a rural–urban divide in social values; this divide is particularly salient in higher income countries and particularly stark on the issue of attitudes towards minoritized immigrant groups (Luca et al., 2023; Rickardsson, 2021). Accordingly, I also explore to what extent attitudes and approaches towards CRSE vary between rural/suburban schools that serve more homogenous student populations versus urban schools that serve more diverse student populations.

Finally, this study examines the accountability process by which a state policy on inclusive education trickles down to schools and students. In his study of inclusive education across the Global North, Haug argued that "no country has yet succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion" (Haug, 2017, p. 215). Hence, I investigate the process of implementing the CRSE framework through the lens of accountability in actualizing the stated policy intentions. The accountability literature has been dominated by neoliberal conceptualizations of accountability based on outcomes like student performance and impact, as compared to emphasizing accountability for inputs, processes, and practices (Cochran-Smith, 2021). This study contributes to the relative dearth of literature in the latter area by analyzing schools' accountability in engaging in the process of instituting CRSE, as well as teachers' accountability in implementing CRSE practices.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How do elementary school teachers in NYS perceive and implement CRSE? (2) How accountable have schools been in implementing the state's CRSE framework? (3) And how accountable have teachers been in ensuring students receive inclusive instruction and curriculum? Furthermore, is there a significant geographical difference in how urban vs. rural/suburban teachers approach CRSE?

The findings show that teachers across the state have strong interest in and positive perceptions of CRSE. Beyond just the rhetoric, teachers in this study have made great strides in translating the CRSE values into action. However, more school-level support could magnify the impact of their work, particularly for teachers outside of NYC who teach in rural and suburban school districts. As debates over education become more contentious across the United States and other parts of the world, results from this study can help to elucidate the experiences of public-school teachers who are caught in between the

shifting educational policies and politics on providing inclusive education to marginalized student populations.

This article proceeds by first reviewing the literature on CRSE as it relates to inclusive education. This is followed by the methodology, results, and discussion of the implications and limitations of this study.

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education

Besides drawing on special education policies to deliver inclusive education to students with disabilities and special needs, educators in the US have for decades drawn on the framework of multicultural education to improve the educational experience and outcomes of marginalized groups who are excluded from education due to their language and culture. From the outset, multicultural education scholars have called for challenging the dominant, Eurocentric curriculum by representing and affirming students' diverse backgrounds and cultures (Banks, 1981; Nieto, 1992). By the 1990s, however, mounting critiques increasingly framed multicultural education as frivolous acts of curriculum inclusion around surface themes like eating ethnic foods, singing cultural songs, or reading international folktales (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

In contrast, Ladson-Billings' (1995) seminal article on culturally relevant pedagogy argued that many multicultural educational interventions adopted a cultural deficit model of remediating students who were perpetually seen as children "at risk" of academic failure. She found that teachers who experienced the most success in working with Black students aimed to "produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 474). Ladson-Billings' perspective represented a radical departure from multicultural education in her contention that the mere inclusion of students' cultural backgrounds in curricula is not enough. Culturally responsive teachers must go further to systematically enact the following three practices: foster students' academic success, cultivate students' cultural competence, and develop students' critical consciousness.

Ladson-Billings' work then inspired Geneva Gay to create a narrower framework that specifically focused on culturally responsive teaching (CRT), which Gay defined as "the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to, and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). In other words, Gay argued that education institutions must teach to and through students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences. Doing so, however, required dismantling the pathological perceptions of students of color, challenging resistance towards adopting CRT, deepening teachers' understanding of culture and difference, and ensuring teachers know how to pedagogically apply CRT to disciplinary subjects (Gay, 2013).

Since then, further critiques have pushed the conceptualization of CRP and CRT in new and deeper ways. Namely, Django Paris (2012) has called for models of inclusive education to go further in maintaining diversity in linguistic and cultural pluralism. Although ethnic and linguistic differences are foregrounded in models of CRP and CRT, he argued that these approaches still amount to acts of culturally assimilating diverse students into the dominant monolingual, monocultural society. Schools and teachers instead need to take explicit action to sustain students' heritage through an approach he re-coined as culturally sustaining pedagogy. More recently, scholars like Gholdy Muhammad (2020) have called for cultivating not only black and brown children's identity, skills, intellect, and criticality but also their joy.

As CRSE increases in popularity and praxis, empirical studies of CRSE have emerged, highlighting the importance of investigating teachers' conceptions and potential misconceptions of CRSE. For example, Jackson (2013) found that elementary school teachers who are successful at teaching African American students have knowledge of CRP, but Vasquez (2021) further points out the prevalence of teachers' misunderstandings of CRP that leads them to inadvertently normalize and reproduce the dominant White cultural hegemony. Ladson-Billings herself has also critiqued top-down policy prescriptions of CRP—like that in New York—for falling short and being antithetical to the original theory itself (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Similarly, Sleeter (2012) found four ways by which CRP is commonly oversimplified: teaching CRP as cultural celebrations, trivializing differences, essentializing culture and identities, and substituting culture for political analysis of inequalities.

Additionally, research has turned towards exploring the professional development of CRSE. A recent survey study by Comstock et al. (2023) investigated how US teachers' self-efficacy and professional learning on cultural responsiveness influence their instruction. They found evidence that teachers who reported higher levels of self-efficacy and participation in professional learning were more likely to practice culturally responsive teaching. They also found that having beliefs that aligned with cultural responsiveness played an instrumental role in teachers' self-efficacy and engagement in culturally responsive teaching practices. Most importantly, they found that changes in teachers' self-efficacy were associated with changes in teachers' self-reported enactment of CR practices. Ultimately, their study suggests that a key to increasing the use of culturally responsive teaching practices in the classroom is to increase teachers' confidence in adapting instruction to represent and meet the needs of different cultural groups.

Taken together, these studies highlight the need to further understand how teachers are principal actors in ensuring system-wide accountability for translating policies and theories on cultural responsiveness and inclusion into classroom practices. It is also clear from the literature that beliefs and values play a salient role in understanding teachers' experiences of implementing inclusive education. Finally, similar to the literature on inclusive education, the CRSE scholarship shows the importance of examining teachers' professional development and learning in the overall accountability process. These three factors shaped the methodological design of the survey study, as described next.

2. Methods

This cross-sectional study surveyed in-service public elementary school teachers across New York State primarily through close-ended, multiple choice quantitative questions (e.g., on Likert scales), combined with a limited number (for the sake of survey brevity) of open-ended, qualitative questions designed to support the quantitative data. The survey development process began with the creation of a question bank of potential survey questions pulled from the US Department of Education's (2022) National Teacher and Principal Survey, the Panaroma Teacher and Staff Survey (Panorama Education, 2023) that is widely used by school districts in New York, and Grebing et al.'s (2023) survey study which was selected based on a literature search for survey instruments that measured teacher buy-in into school reforms. Survey items were categorized into constructs such as teacher demographics, school demographics, cultural awareness and action, and faculty perceptions of equity. Additional survey questions were created to measure the respondents' knowledge and implementation of specific parts of NYS CRSE framework, such as the three vision statements and suggested teaching practices aligned with the four CRSE principles. The survey development process also included conducting cognitive interviews with two in-service elementary school teachers who provided feedback on areas such as the content validity, clarity in language, and response options of a first draft of the survey. For instance,

they affirmed that a set of survey questions to measure school-level accountability should include questions about colleagues' implementation of CRSE. They also helped to shorten the overall length of the survey and revise questions by creating more refined intervals for the number of professional development hours that teachers received.

The anonymous online survey, which was designed to take an average of 15–20 min to complete, consisted of four parts. The first brief section of the survey included demographic questions about the teacher's background and characteristics of where and who they teach. Questions also asked about the amount of CRSE-related professional development the teacher received. The second survey section was designed to evaluate school-wide buy-in and accountability through questions about school priorities and the extent to which principal and staff have adopted and enacted the state's CRSE framework. The third survey section assessed the teacher's knowledge of and attitudes towards CRSE. The fourth set of survey questions examined teacher-level accountability in terms of meeting their responsibility to implement the CRSE framework principle of inclusive curriculum and assessment. All quantitative survey questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Any teacher in New York State was eligible to respond to this survey, which was administered between June 2023 and January 2024 through Microsoft Forms. Using publicly available school contact information from NYSED, the study information and survey link was emailed to the school principal of all 2427 public elementary schools across New York State. Principals were asked to share the survey with teachers in their school, to which teachers had to provide internet-based informed consent. Two follow-up emails were sent to all principals, and nominal e-gift cards were given to survey completers in order to increase the response rates. This study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB#2023-0085).

2.1. Sample

This study sample consists of 71 in-service NYS teachers who responded to the survey. About 65% of survey respondents reported being White, followed by 18% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Black or African American, and 7% Asian (see Table 1). About 55% of respondents taught in a school outside of NYC. A total of 89% of respondents were female, 21% were certified to teach special education classes, and 10% were certified to teach bilingual education classes. About 15% of teachers reported teaching pre-K or kindergarten, while about 50% reported teaching the upper elementary grades of 3–5. Survey respondents reported working as a full-time teacher for an average of 12 years. On average, teachers reported having about 21 students in their class.

Table 1. Demographic composition of survey respondents (n = 71 *).

	Frequency	Percent of All Respondents
Race		
American	1	1.4
Asian	4	5.6
Black or African American	3	4.2
Mixed	1	1.4
Hispanic/Latino	13	18.3
Middle Eastern/North African	1	1.4
Not relevant	1	1.4
White	46	64.8
White/Jewish	1	1.4

Table 1. *Cont.*

	Frequency	Percent of All Respondents
Location		
in NYC	32	45.7
Outside of NYC	38	54.3
Gender		
Female	63	88.7
Male	7	9.9
Not relevant	1	1.4
Special certification		
Special education	15	21.1
Bilingual education	7	10.0
Grades currently teaching		
Pre-K	3	4.4
K	7	10.1
1	4	5.8
1;2;3;4;5;6;K	1	1.5
1;2;3;4;5;K	3	4.4
1;4	1	1.5
2	10	14.5
2;3	2	2.9
2;3;4	2	2.9
2;3;4;5	1	1.5
3	7	10.1
3;4;5	2	2.9
4	14	20.3
5	12	17.4

* Note: For some percentage calculations, the total number of respondents who answered that demographic question was 69 or 70 instead of n = 71.

Survey respondents outside of NYC altogether hailed from fifteen counties across the state. Using county-level data from NYSED, a comparison of the student enrollment data shows that while 84% of students in NYC are of color, only 59% of students in the counties of the teachers who took the survey are of color (see Table 2). In other words, the rural/suburban teachers who responded to this survey come from districts where students are more likely to be predominantly White. In fact, in three out of the fifteen non-NYC counties, more than 90% of the students in the district were White. The county-level data also showed that the rural/suburban districts had relatively fewer students with disabilities and English language learners.

Table 2. Comparison of average student enrollment data based on the counties of the survey respondents (Data source: NYSED, 2024).

	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% White	% Multiracial	% Students with Disabilities	% English Language Learners
NYC	20	42	19	16	2	24	16
Outside NYC	11	37	7	41	4	17	10

2.2. Analysis

Analysis of the data first entailed cleaning the data. To facilitate the easier interpretation of results and the identification of patterns, I elected to recode survey items by collapsing the 5-point Likert scale into a positive response defined as the top two response choices (i.e., four and five) above the neutral point of three. Using Stata (SE18), I then conducted descriptive statistics of all survey items. This was followed by conducting chi-square tests of independence to test for statistically significant differences in positive response rates between teachers in NYC and outside of NYC.

Open-ended, qualitative survey questions were coded using an inductive, iterative coding process (Creswell, 2014; Saldaña, 2015) to identify themes, with a focus on analyzing teachers' responses to the question of "How would you explain what CRSE is to someone who does not know what that means?" Specifically, I conducted a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework that began with familiarizing myself with the data to generate initial codes before identifying, reviewing, and defining themes in how teachers understand and perceive CRSE.

3. Results

3.1. School-Level Accountability

Aggregate results of survey responses about school-level accountability showed that almost 30% of teachers report CRSE being a top priority of their school (see Figure 1). Over one-third of teachers said their principal or school leader was supportive of CRSE initiatives. A total of 57% of respondents reported having colleagues who speak positively about the value of implementing CRSE in their school, compared to 48% of respondents saying their colleagues are enthusiastic about taking specific actions to implement CRSE. Only one-third of respondents reported that teachers, staff, and administrators openly discussed each other's views on social justice during meetings. However, 71% of respondents said their students are given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures.

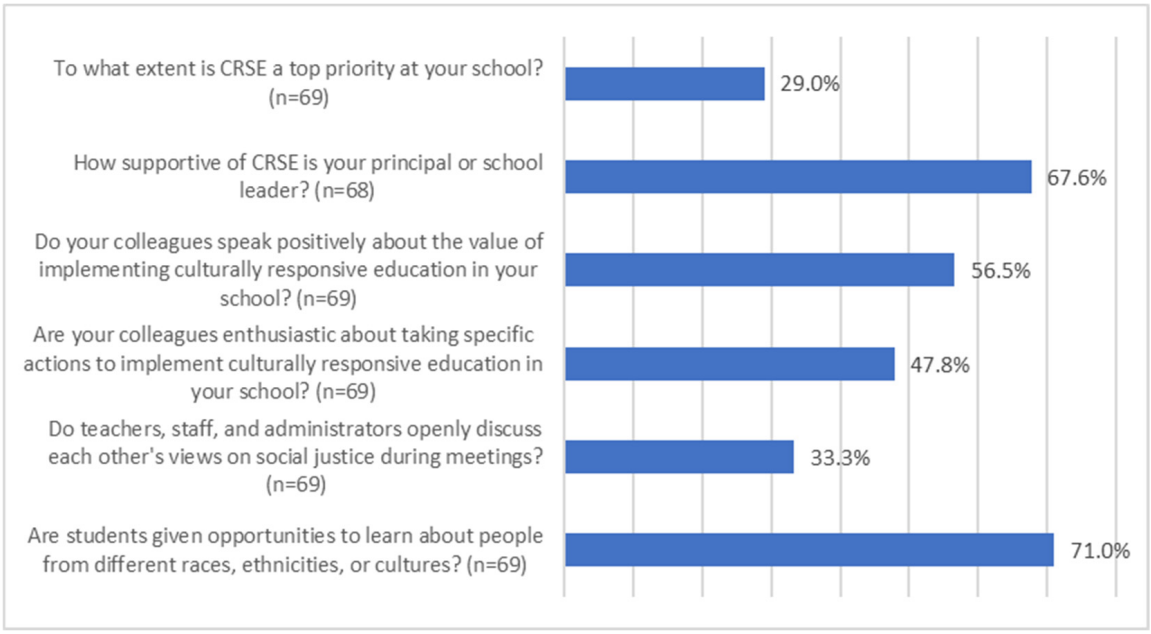

Figure 1. Percent of positive responses to survey questions about school-level accountability in implementing CRSE.

3.2. Professional Development

The tabulation of the total number of hours of in-service professional development that teachers have ever received on CRSE (not counting any teacher certification courses) showed that about one-third (32.9%) of respondents participated in one to five hours of training (see Figure 2). Almost a quarter of teachers have participated in 16 to 24 h of professional learning, and one-fifth of teachers have completed 25 or more hours of professional development on CRSE. Although the survey was not designed to evaluate professional learning, the results do show that a majority of teachers have received over ten hours of professional development on CRSE, signifying that many teachers in this sample engaged in deeper learning of the topic than a one-off training.

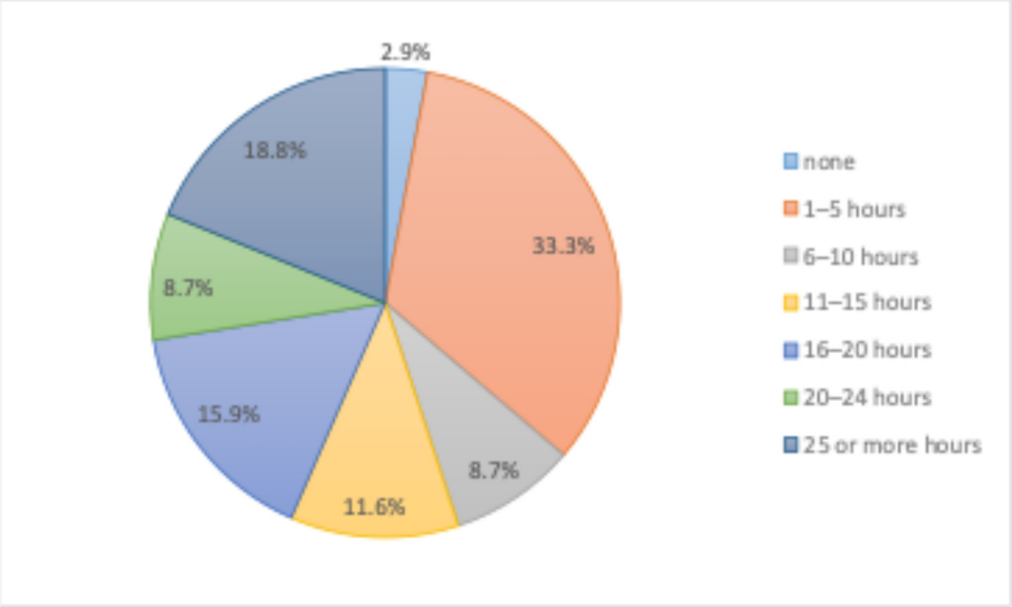

Figure 2. Relative frequency of the total number of hours of professional development teachers have ever received on CRSE (n = 69).

3.3. Teachers' Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards Implementing CRSE

In terms of responses to survey questions about teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards applying CRSE, about one-quarter of respondents said they were familiar with the NYS CRSE framework (see Figure 3). When asked how much they value the three pillars of the NYS CRSE framework, about 90% reported valuing "students who experience academic success"; 85% reported valuing "students who are sociopolitically conscious and socioculturally responsive;" and 84% reported valuing "students who have a critical lens through which they challenge inequitable systems of access, power, and privilege". Two-thirds of respondents favored CRSE being a mandated part of public elementary education. Only about half (49%) of the respondents were knowledgeable of where to find resources for working with students from different cultural backgrounds and felt effective at having a student who could not communicate well with anyone in class because their home language was unique. Less than half (44%) of the respondents were comfortable discussing race-related topics with their students.

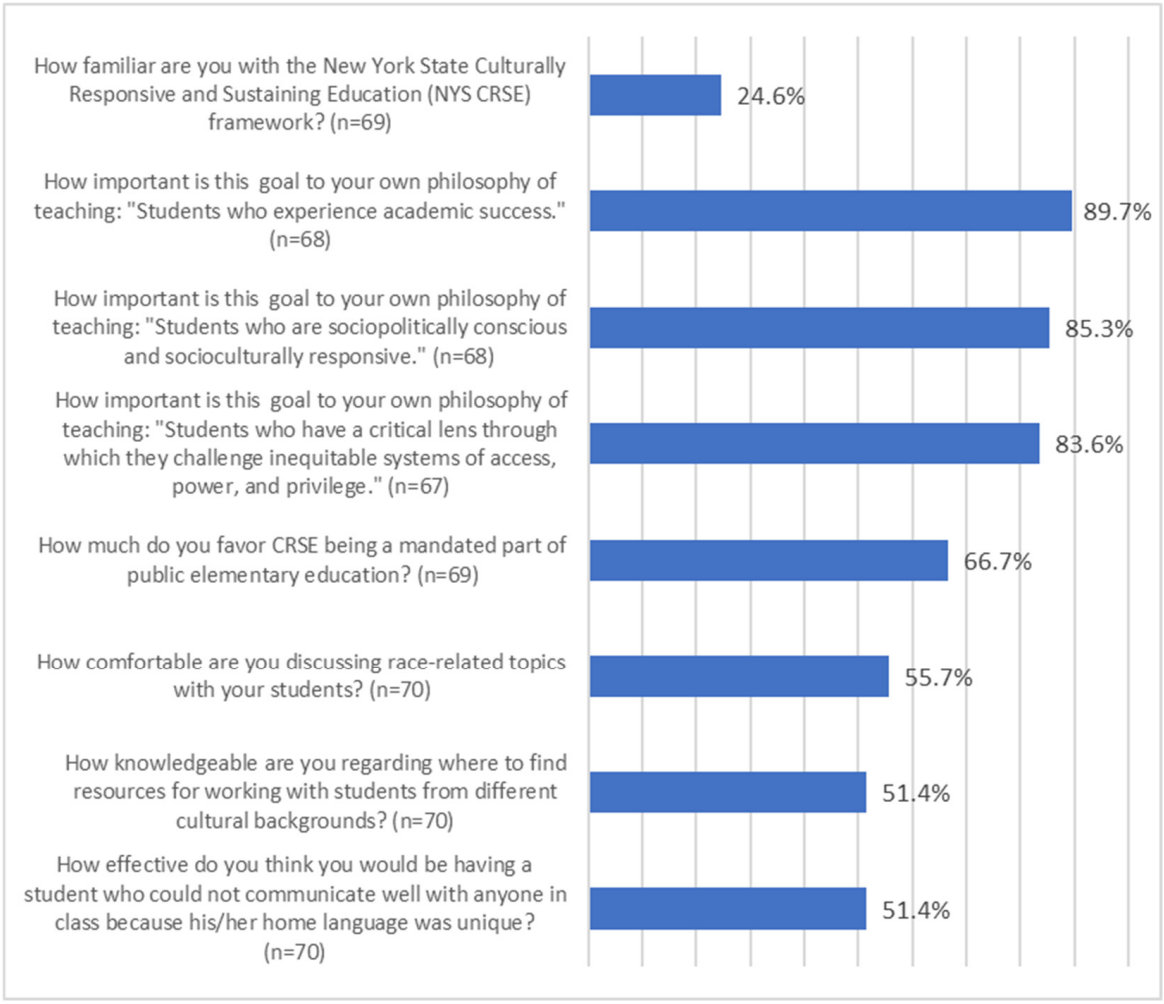

Figure 3. Percent of positive responses to the survey questions about teacher knowledge of, attitudes towards, and challenges in implementing CRSE.

Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses revealed a wide variation in how teachers understand and define CRSE. Most (n = 33) respondents defined CRSE using a theme of cultural inclusion through practices like celebrating cultural differences and ensuring a diverse representation of authors and perspectives in curricular materials. When asked how they would explain CRSE to someone who does not know what that term means, one teacher said it is a framework "that encourages teachers to teach lessons/create a learning environment that recognize[s] and celebrate[s] cultural differences".

Six teachers emphasized in their response the idea of learning about and using students' prior experiences to make learning relevant to them. For instance, one teacher described CRSE as "teaching that incorporate students' cultural identities and lived experiences into the classroom as tools for effective instruction," while another described it as "provid[ing] a curriculum in which students can identify and relate [it] to their education". Notably, many teachers recognized that this would necessitate work on their part to learn from and about their students, like a teacher who said CRSE involves "learning about your students' cultural background and using it to better your lessons," and another who described CRSE as adapting the curriculum so "students [can] see themselves in all work that they do".

Only four teachers referenced social justice through statements like teaching about the inequities that marginalized populations face and their "erasures" from curriculum. For one teacher, this meant "talking, teaching, and responding to topics that impact people that are not white, talking about things that are not a problem for white people, [and] reminding

ourselves that there are people with cultures, races, genders, thoughts, and ideas that are not the same as our own". Another put it simply as "teach[ing] through a social justice lens to confirm students' identities and to fight against injustices".

In contrast, two teachers notably opposed CRSE. One study participant, for example, defined CRSE in their survey response as "the government and miniscule sections of society pushing an agenda onto highly influenced minors". Another described CRSE as "being racist by giving other races more opportunity than others".

Interestingly, three teachers connected CRSE to the idea of creating a safe learning environment for students, like a teacher who said CRSE entails "working to ensure that everyone feels that this is a safe learning environment no matter what your cultural or racial background". Three teachers talked about recognizing and incorporating different languages, and similarly, three teachers described CRSE as an approach that can increase academic rigor and student outcomes.

3.4. Teachers' Implementation of Inclusive Curriculum

Teachers' quantitative responses to questions about whether they were enacting inclusive curricula showed that 77% of teachers frequently connected instructional content with the daily lives of students by using culturally specific examples that tap into students' interests, knowledge, and culture (see Figure 4). Half of the teachers reported frequently integrating current events into daily instruction, and a little more than half (52%) frequently encouraged students to explore completing assignments in their preferred language—an important aspect of inclusive curricula for language learners. A total of 62% of teachers frequently reported using resources written and developed by racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives. Remarkably, only a little more than one-third of teachers (38%) frequently included students as co-designers of a curriculum. Additionally, teachers reported implementing CRSE mostly in social studies and English, as opposed to subjects like mathematics and science (see Figure 5).

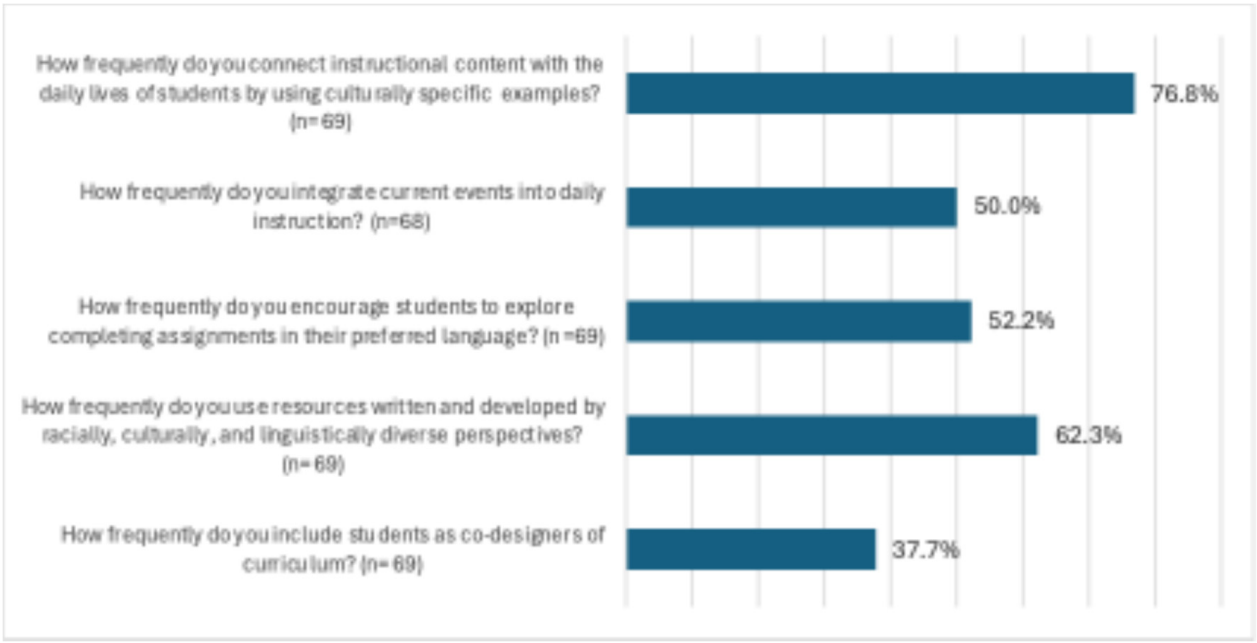

Figure 4. Percent of positive responses to the survey questions about teacher accountability in enacting inclusive curricula.

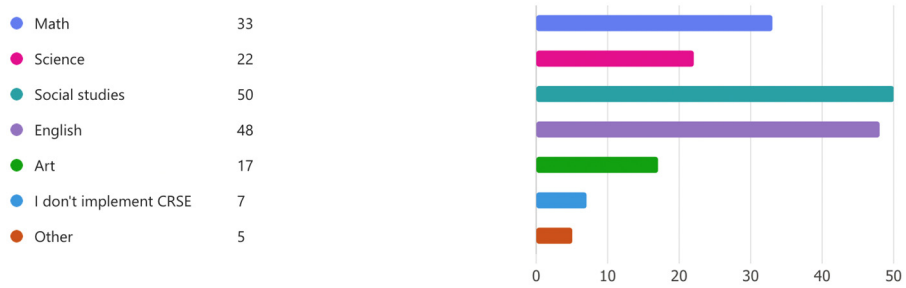

Figure 5. Count of number of teachers who reported implementing CRSE in each subject (n = 71).

3.5. Comparison of Rural/Suburban vs. Urban Teachers

Chi-squared tests showed statistically significant differences in school-level accountability variables between urban teachers in NYC and rural/suburban teachers outside of NYC (see Table 3). While 48% of the 31 respondents who teach in NYC reported CRSE being a top priority at their school, only 13% of the 38 respondents who teach outside of NYC reported the same; this difference was significant at the alpha = 0.01 level ($\chi^2(1) = 10.2938$, $p = 0.001$). A total of 81% of 31 urban teachers reported having principals who were supportive of CRSE, compared to 57% of 37 rural/suburban teachers ($\chi^2(1) = 4.3981$, $p = 0.036$). There was an over 30% point difference in teachers who said their colleagues speak positively about the value of implementing CRSE in their school (74% in NYC vs. 42% outside of NYC; ($\chi^2(1) = 7.1532$; $p = 0.007$)). Similarly, 61% of urban teachers said their colleagues were enthusiastic about taking specific actions to implement CRSE, compared to 37% of rural/suburban teachers $\chi^2(1) = 4.0895$ $p = 0.043$). A total of 55% of teachers from NYC said teachers, staff, and administrators openly discussed each other's views on social justice during meetings, compared to 16% of teachers outside of NYC ($\chi^2(1) = 11.7148$, $p = 0.001$). Almost 84% of urban teachers reported that their students are given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures, compared to 61% of rural/suburban teachers ($\chi^2(1) = 4.5200$, $p = 0.033$).

There was, however, no significant differences between urban and rural/suburban teachers in their knowledge and perceptions of implementing CRSE. Although more teachers in NYC reported being very or extremely familiar with the NYS CRSE framework, this difference was not statistically significant. Interestingly, teachers outside of NYC reported higher rates of being in agreement with the three CRSE framework values, namely students experiencing academic success, students who are socio-politically conscious and socioculturally responsive, and students who have a critical lens through which they challenge inequitable systems of access, power, and privilege. Relatively more teachers outside of NYC also favored CRSE being a mandated part of public elementary education. At the same time, teachers outside of NYC reported relatively lower rates of being comfortable discussing race-related topics with students, being knowledgeable of where to find resources for working with students from different cultural backgrounds, and being effective at working with a student who could not communicate well with anyone in class because of their unique home language. Yet again, it is important to bear in mind that these differences were not statistically significant.

Finally, there was no statistically significant differences in teachers' accountability in implementing inclusive curricula. Teachers across NY state reported similar rates of frequently connecting instructional content with the daily lives of students. There was similarly an insignificant difference in teachers integrating current events into daily instruction, teachers encouraging students to complete assignments in their preferred language, and using resources written and developed by diverse perspectives. Both groups of teachers also reported comparably low rates of frequently including students as co-designers of a curriculum.

Table 3. Percent of responses (n) that was positive for urban vs. rural/suburban teachers.

Survey Item	Total		Urban		Rural/Suburban		Chi-sq Test	
	n	Percent Positive	n	Percent Positive	n	Percent Positive	Pearson $\chi^2(1)$	p-Value
School-Level Accountability								
To what extent is CRSE a top priority at your school?	69	29.0%	31	48.4%	38	13.2%	10.2938	0.001 ***
How supportive of CRSE is your principal or school leader?	68	67.6%	31	80.6%	37	56.8%	4.3981	0.036 **
Do your colleagues speak positively about the value of implementing culturally responsive education in your school?	69	56.5%	31	74.2%	38	42.1%	7.1532	0.007 ***
Are your colleagues enthusiastic about taking specific actions to implement culturally responsive education in your school?	69	47.8%	31	61.3%	38	36.8%	4.0895	0.043 **
Do teachers, staff, and administrators openly discuss each other's views on social justice during meetings?	69	33.3%	31	54.8%	38	15.8%	11.7148	0.001 ***
Are students given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?	69	71.0%	31	83.9%	38	60.5%	4.5200	0.033 **
Teachers' Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards CRSE								
How familiar are you with the New York State Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (NYS CRSE) framework?	69	24.6%	31	32.3%	38	18.4%	1.7605	0.185
How important is this goal to your own philosophy of teaching: "Students who experience academic success".	68	89.7%	30	86.7%	38	92.1%	0.5370	0.464
How important is this goal to your own philosophy of teaching: "Students who are sociopolitically conscious and socioculturally responsive".	68	85.3%	30	83.3%	38	86.8%	0.1645	0.685
How important is this goal to your own philosophy of teaching: "Students who have a critical lens through which they challenge inequitable systems of access, power, and privilege".	67	83.6%	29	79.3%	38	86.8%	0.6799	0.41
How much do you favor CRSE being a mandated part of public elementary education?	69	66.7%	32	62.5%	37	70.3%	0.4662	0.495
How comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your students?	70	55.7%	32	62.5%	38	50.0%	1.1001	0.294
How knowledgeable are you regarding where to find resources for working with students from different cultural backgrounds?	70	51.4%	32	59.4%	38	44.7%	1.4901	0.222
How effective would you be having a student who could not communicate well with anyone in class because his/her home language was unique?	70	51.4%	32	56.3%	38	47.4%	0.5486	0.459

Table 3. *Cont.*

Survey Item	Total		Urban		Rural/Suburban		Chi-sq Test	
	n	Percent Positive	n	Percent Positive	n	Percent Positive	Pearson $\chi^2(1)$	p-Value
Teachers' Implementation of Inclusive Curriculum								
How frequently do you connect instructional content with the daily lives of students by using culturally specific examples (e.g., music, movies, and text) that tap into their existing interests, knowledge, and youth culture?	69	76.8%	31	74.2%	38	78.9%	0.2166	0.642
How frequently do you integrate current events into daily instruction?	68	50.0%	30	56.7%	38	44.7%	0.9544	0.329
How frequently do you encourage students to explore completing assignments in their preferred language?	69	52.2%	31	58.1%	38	47.4%	0.7828	0.376
How frequently do you use resources written and developed by racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives?	69	62.3%	31	67.7%	38	57.9%	0.7050	0.401
How frequently do you include students as co-designers of curriculum?	69	37.7%	31	41.9%	38	34.2%	0.4339	0.51

Note: Asterisks denote statistical significance as follows: ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study first reveals that there remains a general gap between inclusive education in policy, as represented by the NYS CRSE framework, and inclusive education in practice as represented by how and what is being implemented in schools. Specifically, the findings suggest that while school principals are broadly supportive of CRSE initiatives and that students are given opportunities to learn about people from different or marginalized backgrounds, CRSE is not reported as a top priority of many schools across NY state. Results also suggest a potential gap in faculty more highly valuing CRSE than they are enthusiastic about taking specific action steps to implement CRSE. It may be possible that teachers value being a culturally responsive teacher but need more guidance on how to translate those values into concrete action.

Furthermore, only about a quarter of teachers in this study reported high levels of familiarity with the state's CRSE framework. Only about half of teachers reported knowing where to find resources for working with students from different backgrounds. These findings suggest room for providing more districtwide professional learning opportunities about the state's framework, including specific guidance for teachers on how to apply inclusive education and how to access resources for working with diverse student populations.

Qualitative results also show that teachers predominantly seemed to interpret CRSE as acts of cultural inclusion through the recognition of cultural differences and diverse representation in curriculum. Some teachers underscored drawing on students' prior experiences and interests to make learning relevant to them—an idea that Gay (2010, 2013) stressed in her definition of culturally responsive teaching. Despite concerns in American politics that CRSE constitutes a left-wing "woke" approach towards teaching critical race theory and radicalized notions of social justice (Tanase & Kayaalp, 2024), only a few teachers connected CRSE to teaching for social change by having their students learn about the struggles of marginalized groups and their omissions from curriculum. Instead, teachers by and large interpreted CRSE through a multicultural instructional lens of including content

that reflects the cultural diversity of the US, even if they teach a largely White student population. Interestingly, three teachers connected CRSE to the idea of creating a safe learning environment for students. Finally, few teachers highlighted language or the idea that CRSE can increase students' academic outcomes. This particular finding suggests that these two areas of linguistic inclusion and student outcomes can be bolstered in both the research on and training of teachers about CRSE.

In terms of applying inclusive curricula, quantitative survey results showed teachers across the state reported frequently connecting instructional content with students' daily lives and interests. More often than not, teachers seemed to frequently use curricular resources that are created by diverse authors and perspectives. However, only about half of the teachers frequently integrated current events into daily instruction, and about one-third included students as co-designers of curriculum. The latter notion of providing students agency in collaboratively designing what they learn could be a particular area of potential growth for teachers who are interested in implementing CRSE practices.

Being that differences in student demographics between NYC and non-NYC school districts might significantly impact teachers' experiences of implementing CRSE, this study also sought to examine the presence of geographic variation in teachers' responses. For instance, one might expect NYC teachers who teach more diverse student populations to have more individual as well as school-wide buy-in into CRSE and to implement CRSE at higher rates in order to directly accommodate their minoritized students' needs and cultural backgrounds. Conversely, upstate teachers in rural districts that are more politically conservative and demographically homogenous may experience less motivation and need to implement CRSE.

To this end, a deeper quantitative analysis of the geographic differences showed that rural/suburban teachers outside of NYC did indeed report statistically significantly lower rates of experiencing school-wide buy-in into CRSE than urban teachers in NYC. Namely, rural/suburban teachers were statistically significantly less likely to report having a principal who was supportive of CRSE, having colleagues who value and take specific actions to implement CRSE, and openly discussing differing views on social justice during staff meetings. That said, teachers in and outside of NYC reported similar levels of individual knowledge and attitudes towards CRSE, as well as of implementing inclusive curriculum. Results similarly showed no significant geographic difference in teachers wanting CRSE to be a mandated part of public elementary education or in teachers being in agreement with the state's vision of CRSE (i.e., that students experience academic success, are sociopolitically conscious and socioculturally responsive, and have a critical lens to challenge inequitable systems of access, power, and privilege). Urban and rural/suburban teachers also showed similar rates of implementing inclusive curricula.

Taken together, these results imply that there seems to be many individual teachers across NY state, including those upstate in areas that are more politically conservative, who have bought into valuing and implementing CRSE. However, teachers in rural and suburban schools may be performing this work alone or in a silo with insufficient support. More practical work can be conducted, particularly in rural and suburban schools and districts outside of NYC, to ensure school-wide buy-in and accountability in implementing the framework. Research has shown whole-school and districtwide professional learning opportunities to be effective at producing a collaborative approach towards school change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As opposed to teachers independently pursuing CRSE training as individual continuing teacher and leader education hours, districts in both geographic contexts can thus consider designing and delivering professional development workshops as school-wide initiatives, such as establishing "Professional Development Hubs" and "Peer Learning Networks" as proposed by Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis (2024).

Geographic differences in school-wide buy-in, however, suggest that a "one-size-fits-all" approach towards designing professional development activities would not be successful. Rather, professional learning must be tailored to accommodate the different types of CRSE challenges teachers might be facing. For instance, some NYC teachers may benefit from trainings on how to better sustain their diverse students' cultures by including them as co-designers of curriculum. On the other hand, rural/suburban teachers who teach more homogenous student populations may benefit from trainings on how to balance the difficult task of teaching a variety of histories that reflect the ethnic diversity across the state and country, with the goal of affirming and connecting content with their predominantly White students' daily lives.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First of all, this study does not attempt to represent the perspectives and experiences of the entire population of teachers in NY state. Rather, it is important to note the limitation that there was an overrepresentation of teachers who identified as White (65%) and female (89% female vs. 10% male and 1% other). The survey sample also carries a potential upward bias in favor of CRSE since the survey administration depended on principals first sharing the survey with teachers, and then teachers consenting to and taking the survey. Both conditions lead to the bias of responses representing principals and teachers who are more likely to be interested in, and hence in favor of, CRSE. Given this potential upward bias, it is remarkable that only two thirds of survey respondents favored CRSE being a mandated part of public education. This somewhat mitigates concerns that this survey sample might be dominated by CRSE advocates who are more progressive in their educational views and philosophies than the typical teacher in NYS.

Secondly, this study was designed to only align with the teacher practices delineated in the NYS CRSE framework. To this end, it provides evidence that teachers across NYS have positive perceptions of CRSE and have begun to take concrete steps to implement inclusive curriculum, yet they can benefit from more school-wide support. The findings additionally substantiate the importance of principals supporting teachers' enactment of CRSE. However, this study does not capture how principals perceive and implement CRSE within their schools. The study thus echoes previous calls for more research on school leaders' role in delivering inclusive education (Van Mieghem et al., 2020).

To this end, the NYS CRSE framework does contain culturally responsive practices for school principals and district leaders. For example, the framework calls for school leaders to consider "support[ing] staff in embedding grade-level, standards-aligned resources that emphasize cultural pluralism; social justice; and current events into curriculum across content areas", along with "support[ing] the design and implementation of multiple forms of assessment that consider personalized student needs (i.e., learning style, learning preferences, language proficiency)" (NYSED, 2019, p. 34). District leaders, on the other hand, are encouraged to "formally disseminate existing research on best practices from the field regarding culturally responsive-sustaining curriculum, instruction, and assessment to stakeholders in the district" (NYSED, 2019, p. 39). Some dissertation studies have explored how school and district leaders are implementing the NYS CRSE framework (Lysenko, 2023; Wynne, 2021). Given these implementation studies and the existence of suggested practices that practitioners and policymakers can readily adopt, more research can move towards exploring the effectiveness of school- as well as districtwide CRSE initiatives, including which specific practices seem to be the most successful and under what conditions and contexts. Studies can also examine the mediating effect of professional development by exploring whether teachers who have more and what types of professional development experience more buy-in, implementation, and success with implementing CRSE.

Lastly, this study was framed around examining the *process* accountability of school and teachers implementing a state-wide inclusive education policy. Future research can adopt a different accountability lens by studying school and teachers' accountability in improving student *outcomes* through inclusive education and teaching.

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