

# Culturally Relevant Literature and Student Engagement in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Evidence from Awka, Anambra State

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## Abstract

This study investigates the impact of culturally relevant literature on behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement among secondary school students in Awka, Anambra State. Guided by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), the research adopted a descriptive survey of 80 SS2 students and 20 teachers across five schools. Data were gathered through a two-point questionnaire and interviews and analysed using mean, standard deviation, and thematic analysis. Results reveal that culturally relevant literature significantly enhances attention, participation, comprehension, motivation, and cultural identity, while also encouraging collaborative learning. Nevertheless, challenges such as inadequate resources, curriculum rigidity, limited teacher training, and language barriers constrain effective implementation. The study recommends curriculum reforms, regular teacher training, and increased access to Nigerian-authored texts to optimise the benefits of culturally relevant literature.

Key Words: learning. students. challenges. curriculum. participation. cultural

## Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, culturally relevant teaching (CRT) has emerged as a critical approach for improving student engagement in diverse classroom settings. CRT emphasises instructional strategies that reflect students' cultural backgrounds to foster inclusive and effective learning environments (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Literature that mirrors students' identities validates their experiences and promotes engagement across behavioural, emotional, and cognitive domains (Paris & Alim, 2017).

In Nigeria, however, traditional curricula remain dominated by Eurocentric texts, creating a cultural disconnect that undermines motivation and participation (Kelly, 2021; Bobongie-Harris & Youse, 2023). This disconnect limits students' ability to see themselves in the learning material, thereby reducing comprehension and enthusiasm. It also constrains teachers, who often rely on imported literature that does not resonate with local realities.

This study explores how integrating culturally relevant literature affects student engagement in Awka, Anambra State. Specifically, it seeks

to determine the influence of such literature on behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement and to examine the extent to which culturally grounded texts foster identity formation and motivation.

## Literature Review

### Meaning and Advantages of Culturally Relevant Literature

Culturally relevant literature refers to texts that reflect the history, experiences, values, and linguistic patterns of students' own communities. Such literature validates cultural identity and promotes critical thinking (Okpara, 2024; Ifarajimi, 2022; Oladejo, 2022). Levy et al. (2025) argue that culturally aligned texts enhance comprehension by linking academic content to familiar contexts.

### Student Engagement in Nigerian Education

Student engagement—behavioural, emotional, and cognitive—is widely recognised as a key predictor of academic success (Ajao et al., 2024; Asanre et al., 2024). Akpan and Umobong (2013) emphasise that motivation is central to sustaining engagement, while factors such as insecurity (Igboeli, 2021) and digital distractions (Samuel et al., 2019) can impede participation. Olebara (2021) adds that social validation, where students feel seen and respected, strengthens engagement.

## Culturally Relevant Texts and Engagement

Empirical studies confirm the positive effects of culturally relevant literature on student motivation and comprehension. Nigerian evidence shows that literature reflecting local realities strengthens participation and enthusiasm (Odebunmi, 2021; Okonkwo & Anyanwu, 2019). Internationally, Muhammad and Gonzalez (2021) report that culturally grounded texts improved critical thinking and classroom discussion among minority students.

## Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) developed by Ladson-Billings (1995) and expanded by Gay (2018). CRP holds that teaching anchored in students' cultures promotes academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. By using texts that reflect students' lived realities, teachers bridge home and school experiences, fostering engagement and identity formation.

## Methodology

A descriptive survey design was adopted. The population comprised 720 SS2 students and 35 teachers across five public secondary schools in Awka. Using convenience sampling, 100 respondents were selected (80 students and 20 teachers). Data were collected via a two-point questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

Quantitative data were analysed using mean (benchmark = 1.50) and standard deviation, while interview responses were subjected to thematic analysis.

## Results

Table 1: Responses to Influence of Culturally Relevant Literature Text on Students' Engagement

### Quantitative Findings

| S/NO | QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS   | AGREE<br>(2) | DISAGREE<br>(1) | MEAN | SD   | DECISION |
|------|---|--------------|-----------------|------|------|----------|
| 1    | Using culturally relevant literature make classroom activities more interesting.                      | 80           | 20              | 1.80 | 0.40 | Agree    |
|      | I pay more attention when literature reflects familiar cultural experiences.                          | 75           | 25              | 1.75 | 0.44 | Agree    |
|      | Lessons with culturally relevant literature encourage active participation.                           | 85           | 15              | 1.85 | 0.36 | Agree    |
|      | culturally relevant literature helps me understand lesson content better.                             | 73           | 27              | 1.73 | 0.45 | Agree    |
|      | I feel more motivated to complete learning tasks when cultural relevance is present in the materials. | 78           | 22              | 1.78 | 0.43 | Agree    |

Students reported increased attention (Mean = 1.75), participation (Mean = 1.85), and comprehension (Mean = 1.73) when exposed to culturally relevant literature (Table 1). They also indicated that culturally relevant texts validated their culture (Mean = 1.85) and improved motivation (Mean = 1.80). Teachers corroborated these results, observing greater class participation and improved comprehension (Table 2).

Table 2 Challenges that Hinder Effective Incorporation of Culturally Relevant Literature in Secondary Education

| QUESTIONS  | AGREE<br>(2) | DISAGREE<br>(1) | MEAN | SD   | DECISION |
|--|--------------|-----------------|------|------|----------|
| 1. The curriculum is not designed to include culturally relevant literature.   | 70           | 30              | 1.70 | 0.40 | Agree    |
| 2. Teachers lack the necessary training and resources to effectively incorporate culturally relevant literature.       | 68           | 32              | 1.68 | 0.43 | Agree    |
| 3. Limited access to diverse cultural texts and materials hinders the incorporation of culturally relevant literature. | 72           | 28              | 1.72 | 0.41 | Agree    |
| 4. The school administration does not prioritize the inclusion of culturally relevant literature in the curriculum.    | 65           | 35              | 1.65 | 0.48 | Agree    |

### Qualitative Insights

Interview excerpts reveal that students felt “seen” and “respected” when

lessons incorporated Nigerian authors and indigenous narratives. Teachers noted richer discussions and heightened confidence among students.

## Discussion

The findings align with Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (2021), affirming that culturally relevant literature enhances engagement and identity formation. Students demonstrated higher behavioural engagement—manifested through active participation and attentiveness—as well as emotional engagement, expressed through enthusiasm and cultural pride. Cognitive engagement improved as students were better able to connect classroom material to their lived experiences.

However, systemic constraints such as curriculum rigidity and inadequate resources mirror observations by Hammond (2020), who argues that structural barriers often limit the full implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Culturally relevant literature significantly improves student engagement and strengthens cultural identity among Nigerian secondary school students. To maximise these benefits, the following steps are recommended:

1. Curriculum Reform: The Ministry of Education should revise the

literature curriculum to include more Nigerian-authored texts.

2. Teacher Training: Regular workshops should equip teachers with skills to integrate culturally relevant materials effectively.

3. Resource Provision: Schools should prioritise procurement of locally produced literature and ensure availability in libraries.

4. Community Collaboration: Engagement with local authors and cultural institutions can enrich classroom resources.

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