



1.3 Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Teaching³⁷

Human Rights Goal

In order to fully realize the human right to education, all students must have access to materials, curricula, teaching practices and a school community that affirm and celebrate their varied identities and cultures. A culturally relevant school environment and curriculum means that all students would see themselves in the material they are learning and that their cultures' and communities' accomplishments are celebrated, their histories lifted up, and their stories told.

Definitions

1. **Curriculum** – Lessons and academic content taught in a school or in a specific course or program; the courses that are taught by a school or college.³⁸
2. **Pedagogy** – Science and art of education, specifically instructional theory; the art or science of teaching; instructional methods.³⁹
3. **Culture** – Customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life shared by people in a place or time). There are seven elements of culture: Social Organization, Customs and Traditions, Religion, Language, Arts and Literature, Government and Economic Systems.⁴⁰
4. **Culturally Relevant Teaching** – A term created by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) to describe “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”⁴¹ Culturally relevant teaching creates a bridge between students’ home and school lives, while meeting the expectations of academic requirements.⁴²
5. **Intersectionality** – A theory that seeks to examine the ways in which various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels to manifest themselves as inequality in society. Intersectionality holds that the classical models of oppression within society, such as those based on race/ ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, class, or disability, do not act independently of one another; instead, these forms of oppression interrelate creating a system of oppression that reflects the “intersection” of multiple forms of discrimination.⁴³ Kimberle Crenshaw developed this framework as a way to describe the particular ways Black women experience oppression.⁴⁴

Recommended Language

- A. **States, districts⁴⁵ and schools shall ensure that in addition to meeting all the requirements listed for providing a quality education and using effective instructional methods (see Section 1.1 Education for the Full Potential of Children and Youth), the curriculum, teaching methods and school environment for each grade level must have cultural relevance to all the students in the classroom. States, districts and schools shall:**
 1. Complete a yearly assessment of the demographic and cultural make-up of the student body and surrounding community and compare it to the representation of different cultures in the curriculum,⁴⁶ teaching style, physical environment, events and holidays of the school system and of individual schools.⁴⁷

- a. This assessment should look at all the different forms of diversity in the student body and surrounding community. A student’s culture can include their racial and ethnic identity, language, ability, religion, immigration story, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other identities they bring into the classroom.
 - b. The school’s culturally relevant practices should be intersectional and reflect the full diversity of the classroom, not just the majority of the students in the classroom or one aspect of their identity. Be sure to include examples that reflect the intersecting identities the students hold, for example race and ability, or gender and ethnic identity.
2. Ensure that the curriculum includes lessons, readings, activities and examples that are relevant to every student in the classroom and that connect to their culture and multiple identities throughout the school year. Examples across different subject areas include:
 - a. English/Language Arts/Literature curriculum that include authors and subject matter that reflect the students’ experiences;
 - b. Math and Science topics, word problems and science experiments that are culturally relevant and highlight achievements of members of different students’ cultures;⁴⁸ and
 - c. Social Studies/History curriculum that include readings and political education on the history of students’ culture, especially told or written from the perspective of members of that community.⁴⁹
 - d. Other examples that incorporate different elements of culture (across Social Organization, Customs and Traditions, Religion, Language, Arts and Literature, Government and Economic Systems).
 3. Ensure that teaching styles are responsive to the different cultures represented in the classroom, including but not limited to:
 - a. Adopting “the Centric Idea⁵⁰” that students will learn best when their cultures are centered and they are empowered;
 - b. Finding ways to bridge the material that must be learned with the students’ lived experiences so that it is relevant to their lives, also known as “cultural referents;”⁵¹
 - c. Bringing in outside speakers or members of the students’ communities to highlight diverse voices and role models for the students;
 - d. Using culturally responsive classroom practices like talking circles;
 - e. Teaching to a full range of learning styles to help students learn in the ways they learn best, such as techniques that support kinesthetic learners;⁵²
 - f. Ensuring that increasing self-esteem, pride, self-reassurance and a positive self-outlook are part of the goals of teaching (see Section 3.1 Key Elements of School Climate and Positive Discipline, sub-section B on culturally affirming social and emotional learning);
 - g. Ensuring that all school staff have at minimum basic cultural competence⁵³ in relation to the cultures represented in the student body and encouraging staff to take additional opportunities to learn more about their students cultures and communities (for example, attending events in the local community; or reading material that will expand their understanding); and
 - h. Adopting positive approaches to managing classroom behavior that are relevant to different learning styles and cultures (see Section 4.2 Disproportionate Use of Discipline, sub-section C on Culturally Responsive Classroom Management).
 4. Provide professional development and ongoing access to resources for all school staff to support them in crafting culturally relevant curriculum.⁵⁴
 - a. Trainings should instruct teachers how to center and empower the students in their own cultures, and help teachers unlearn any ethnocentrist views they may have.
 - b. Training should be developed in consultation with youth and parents from the various identities and cultures reflected in the school community. When possible, youth and parents can also be involved in providing the trainings.
 5. Ensure that the physical environment, including artwork, decorations, and overall feel of the space is reflective of and welcoming to the cultures of all members of the school community.

- a. Ensure that there is visual representation of people of different racial and ethnic identities on the walls of the school and classroom, while making sure that those images are not limited stereotypical roles or imagery.⁵⁵
 - b. Encourage spaces for students and school staff to bring their own artwork or examples of their cultural aesthetic into the school environment.
6. Ensure that school-wide celebrations, events and the schedule of holiday days off are reflective of the whole student body's culture and traditions.
- a. Ensure that decorations are put up to reflect all the different holidays and important cultural events, not just those celebrated by the majority of the students in the school or those that the staff celebrate.
 - b. Include age-appropriate information and critiques about holidays that may have different cultural connotations for different students, including negative ones (like Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, Columbus Day, etc). Allow time for students to bring their own perspectives on these holidays to the discussion.
 - c. If even a small number of students in the school celebrate a particular holiday or date that requires them to miss school,⁵⁶ where possible offer this as a day off for the whole school or district.⁵⁷ If that is not possible, avoid scheduling tests or other activities that would be difficult for those students to miss.
 - d. Educate students on holidays that some of their peers may celebrate. Do not expect students who have traditions that are different from others in the school community to be the ones to have to explain their culture if they don't want to (but allow them the space if they do).
 - e. In order to address any first amendment concerns around discussing religious holidays or traditions in a school environment, follow guidance developed by the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and the National PTA in their guide "Finding Common Ground,"⁵⁸ which states:
 - i. Have an approach that is academic and not devotional;
 - ii. Focus on the awareness of religions rather than acceptance of any one religion;
 - iii. Sponsor study about religion, not the practice of religion;
 - iv. Expose students to a diversity of religious views and do not impose any particular view;
 - v. Educate about all religions — do not promote or denigrate any religion; and
 - vi. Inform students about various beliefs, rather than conform students to any particular belief.
7. Respond to the requests of students, parents and community members when they propose ideas for improving or adding to the curriculum, especially where the administration or teaching staff does not reflect the cultural background of the parents and students in the school community.
- B. States, districts⁵⁹ and schools shall preserve⁶⁰ ethnic studies programs where they exist and create new programs where possible.^{61 62}**
- C. States, districts and schools shall ensure that other school-wide practices are culturally responsive including:**
1. Any school-wide approach to discipline including Restorative Justice Practices, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. (see Chapter 3 generally, and Sections 3.1 Key Elements of School Climate and Positive Discipline and 3.7 Model Policies on SWPBIS and Restorative Justice Practices);
 2. Culturally affirming social and emotional learning (SEL) (see Section 3.1 Key Elements of School Climate and Positive Discipline, sub-section B on social and emotional learning); and
 3. Culturally Responsive Classroom Management techniques (see Section 4.2 on Disproportionate Use of Discipline, sub-section C on Culturally Responsive Classroom Management).

³⁷ This section is based heavily on the work of Racial Justice NOW! and West Dayton Youth Taskforce, who have been leading local and national work promoting culturally relevant curriculum including releasing a joint toolkit with DSC available at: [http://dignityinschools.org/crctk and https://rjohio.org/](http://dignityinschools.org/crctk_and_https://rjohio.org/).

³⁸ The Glossary of Education Reform. Available at: <https://www.edglossary.org/curriculum/>.

³⁹ Adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

⁴⁰ Adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

⁴¹ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing Co.

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- ⁴² Coffey, Heather (2008) Culturally Relevant Teaching. Available at: <http://k12blendedandonlinelearning.weebly.com/uploads/2/3/1/9/23193436/culturallyrelevantteaching.pdf>.
- ⁴³ Girls for Gender Equity, Schools Girls Deserve. Available at: <https://www.ggenyc.org/the-schools-girls-deserve/>.
- ⁴⁴ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color (1991). Available at: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>.
- ⁴⁵ NYC Schools recently adopted Culturally Responsive-Sustain Education <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education>.
- ⁴⁶ Coalition for Educational Justice - Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard. Available at: <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/atn293/ejroc/CRE-Rubric-2018-190211.pdf>.
- ⁴⁷ Examples of questions for the assessment can be found in the SCAM Matrix by Victor Gibson, available at: <http://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SCAM-School-Cultural-Assessment-Matrix-.pdf>.
- ⁴⁸ A Culturally Relevant Curriculum Webinar on "Histematics" with Mathematics Teacher Akil Parker. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjWPAo0tewl>.
- ⁴⁹ New Jersey Department of Education, New Jersey Amistad Commission. "The Amistad Bill" (2002) Available at: <https://www.nj.gov/education/amistad/about.htm>.
- ⁵⁰ Dr. Molefi Asante "Afrocentric Curriculum" (1991).
- ⁵¹ Ladson-Billings, G.J. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Education Research Journal*, 35.
- ⁵² University of Massachusetts, Tips for Educators on Accommodating Different Learning Styles. Available at: <https://www.umassd.edu/dss/resources/faculty--staff/how-to-teach-and-accommodate/how-to-accommodate-different-learning-styles/>.
- ⁵³ National Education Association. Diversity Toolkit: Cultural Competence for Educators. Available at: <http://www.nea.org/tools/30402.htm>.
- ⁵⁴ Johnston, E., D'Andrea Montalbano, P., & Kirkland, D.E. (2017, August 17). Culturally responsive education: A primer for policy and practice. Available at: https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/atn293/pdf/CRE_Brief_2017_PrintBooklet_170817.pdf.
- ⁵⁵ Dr. Cynthia Lundgren, Giselle Lundy-Ponce. Culturally Responsive Instruction for Holiday and Religious Celebrations. Available at: <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/culturally-responsive-instruction-holiday-and-religious-celebrations>.
- ⁵⁶ Washington Post (2018) "Holidays for all: Asian students ask for a day off school on Lunar New Year". https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/holidays-for-all-asian-students-ask-for-a-day-off-school-on-lunar-new-year/2018/07/08/e7f3d004-7bf3-11e8-80be-6d32e182a3bc_story.html?utm_term=.2d982dfe4f16.
- ⁵⁷ NY Times (2015) "New York City Adds 2 Muslim Holy Days to Public School Calendar". Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/nyregion/new-york-to-add-two-muslim-holy-days-to-public-school-calendar.html>.
- ⁵⁸ Religious Freedom Center, Finding Common Ground. Available at: <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Religion-in-the-Public-School-Curriculum-Questions-and-Answers.pdf>.
- ⁵⁹ New York Times. "Philadelphia Mandates Black History for Graduation" (2005). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/25/education/philadelphia-mandates-black-history-for-graduation.html>.
- ⁶⁰ Where political opposition or budget concerns threaten these programs, using the latest research to show the positive impact of ethnic studies programs on overall academic success for students.
- ⁶¹ Nolan L. Cabrera, Jeffrey F. Milem, Ozan Jaquette, and Ronald W. Marx, "Missing the (Student Achievement) Forest for all the (Political) Trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies Controversy in Tucson" *American Educational Research Journal* 51, no. 6 (2014): 1084-1118.
- ⁶² Lopez, F. A. (2016). Culturally responsive pedagogies in Arizona and Latino students' achievement. *Teachers College Record*, 118 (5). Retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=19369>.