

# Culturally Responsive Teaching

## What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest and appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters (Gay 2002, 106).

Culturally responsive educators seek to validate, affirm, and empower students to advocate for themselves, their families, and their communities. This pedagogy allows educators to make academic success an achievable goal for students through relevant content and teaching strategies that promote collectivist learning.

## What Are the Components of Culturally Responsive Teaching?

To lead a culturally responsive classroom, an educator must commit to building and sustaining authentic relationships with students and families throughout the school year. These relationships provide students with the level of trust needed as they expand their knowledge, skills, and mind-sets and begin examining and critiquing the status quo of their community, nation, and world.

In culturally responsive classrooms, educators do the following:

- **Hold high expectations for students and their academic success.** Educators are conscious of designing lessons and experiences that are relevant

to students and allow them to make connections to their own life through the curriculum.

- **Implement teaching strategies that create a collectivist environment in which students feel a responsibility toward their peers.** These classrooms encourage collaboration and implement strategies that promote oral traditions. Oral traditions are when communities transfer cultural knowledge through song, speech, chants, or oral literature without a writing system.
- **Validate and affirm the identity of their students.** This occurs through the implicit and explicit messages students receive daily. In practice it looks like building in opportunities for students to share stories of their lived experiences or cultural background. It also includes learning about people who share their social identity markers (ability, age, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, religion, or sexuality). Culturally responsive educators do not pit academic success and cultural affiliation against each other. Rather, academic success and cultural consciousness are developed simultaneously. Teachers encourage students to be proud of their ethnic identities and cultural backgrounds instead of being apologetic or ashamed of them (Holliday 1985).
- **Seek to build their students' sociopolitical consciousness.** This practice allows students to study and critique economic, social, and political inequities within their community, nation, and world. Culturally responsive educators provide opportunities for students to become agents of change by promoting the idea and teaching them the skills needed to become leaders in their community.

## Why Is Culturally Responsive Teaching Important for FoodCorps Service Members?

FoodCorps does its work within the context of a food system in which people of color and low-income families are more likely to experience diet-related disease and have limited access to healthy foods. Our understanding of the correlation among race, socioeconomic status, and health outcomes for US children guides our strategy as it relates to where we serve and how we train members and alumni of our organizational community. At FoodCorps, we are committed to training our service members to be culturally responsive because we believe it's a critical component of planning and executing hands-on learning activities in both the urban and rural communities where we serve.

Children without a quality diet are more likely to suffer from health problems that contribute to social and productivity challenges throughout their lives: they miss more days of school, score lower on tests, advance less often academically and in their careers, and raise children who repeat this cycle at elevated rates (Rappaport, Daskalakis, and Andrel 2011). There are many reasons for this, including structural racism and resulting social inequities. For the following reasons, we believe CRT is necessary as a service member:

- **Every student's culture is unique.** In American schools, ethnically diverse students have traditionally been expected to “divorce themselves from their cultures to learn according to European American cultural norms. This places them at double jeopardy—having to master the academic tasks while functioning under cultural conditions unnatural (and often unfamiliar) to them” (Gay 2002). Adjusting classroom and garden-based teaching to embrace differences can have a profound effect on student achievement.
- **Every school and community is unique.** It is imperative to learn about local culture, and consider how this plays into building relationships with your students and school community as well as the context for hands-on lessons you lead in the

classroom, garden, and cafeteria environments. Geneva Gay (2002), author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice*, writes, “The knowledge that teachers need to have about cultural diversity goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways.” It is important to acquire “detailed factual information about the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups (e.g., African, Asian, Latino, and Native American). This is needed to make schooling more interesting and stimulating for, representative of, and responsive to ethnically diverse students” (107).

- **Every classroom lesson is unique.** Although FoodCorps service is focused on food, nutrition, cooking, and gardening-based topics, it spans multiple disciplines. As Gay points out, “There is a place for cultural diversity in every subject taught in schools (2002). Cornel Pewewardy (1993), a Native American educator, suggests instead of the dominant practice of “inserting culture into education,” there is power with an approach of “inserting education into culture” (Ladson-Billings 1995, 159). You have the power to do this through FoodCorps service. To help support your efforts, please review the tips below, along with the “Getting To Know Your Community” section of this guide for tips on how to engage with your local community.

### Recommended Resource

- “Preparing For Culturally Responsive Teaching,” Geneva Gay

## Culturally Responsive Teaching and FoodCorps Lessons

FoodCorps has developed its lessons with the CRT framework below. During service, if you are not using a FoodCorps Lesson, or you are adapting an existing lesson, please consider using the questions below to guide you.

| <b>RELATIONSHIPS</b>  |
|---|
| Does this lesson allow students to build/deepen their relationship with the service member?   |
| Does this lesson allow students to build/deepen their relationships with one another?   |
| <b>CONTENT</b>  |
| Does this lesson enhance skills students are expected to master by the end of the school year?  |
| Does this lesson allow students to make connections between the content they are learning and themselves, their families, their community, the nation, or the world?                                  |
| Does this lesson give students the ability to learn about other people's viewpoints, values, customs, or beliefs?   |
| Does this lesson engage students by creating opportunities for questioning, interpreting, and analyzing information in the context of problems or issues that are interesting and meaningful to them? |
| Does this lesson allow students to take action based on what they've learned when applicable?   |
| (Grades 3–5): Does this lesson build students' sociopolitical consciousness?  |
| <b>IDENTITY AFFIRMATION</b>   |
| Does this lesson affirm the identities of students, their families, and the community?  |
| Does this lesson allow students to view themselves and their community as victims or victors?   |
| <b>TEACHING PRACTICES</b>   |
| Does this lesson promote oral traditions in the classroom?  |
| Does this lesson allow students to work collaboratively?  |

## How Can I Create a Culturally Responsive Teaching Environment?

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| <p><b>HONOR CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION</b></p>                    | <p>As you get to know your school and community, consider how students communicate. Determining what ethnically diverse students know and can do, as well as what they are capable of knowing and doing, is often a function of how well teachers can communicate with them (Gay 2002). Although it is extremely important to not stereotype individuals within a specific culture, understanding cultural descriptors can be helpful to navigate and build relationships with students.</p> <p>Mainstream school environments promote a passive relationship between students and teachers. The teacher talks while the student listens. This cultural norm may not be representative of how all students communicate. Gay notes, the “communication styles of ethnic groups of color in the United States are more active, participatory, dialectic and multimodal. The role of speaker and listener may be more fluid among African Americans, this interactive communicative style is referred to as ‘call-response’; and for Native Hawaiians it is called ‘talk-story.’ Among European American females, the somewhat similar practice of ‘talking along with the speaker’ to show involvement, support and confirmation is described as ‘rapport talk.’” (2002, 111) These examples show how “natural” ways of talking among student populations vary and should be considered as you engage students.</p> <p><b>Tips</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate opportunities for storytelling and sharing of oral traditions in your lesson.</li> <li>• If you are not from the same cultural background as your students, ask educators who come from the same cultural background as the students about effective ways to connect with them.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>PLAN STUDENT-CENTERED INSTRUCTION</b></p>                     | <p>Student-centered instruction differs from traditional teacher-centered instruction. With this style of instruction, learning is cooperative, collaborative, and community-oriented. Students are encouraged to direct their own learning and to work with other students on research projects and assignments that are both culturally and socially relevant to them. Students become self-confident, self-directed, and proactive by receiving feedback and learning from their peers.</p> <p><b>Tips</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage students by having them generate topics they wish to study during a lesson.</li> <li>• Promote collaborative conversation during lessons.</li> <li>• Focus projects and lessons on topics that relate to the community.</li> <li>• Encourage a community of learners through cooperative learning strategies.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>PROMOTE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND TRADITIONS</b></p> | <p>Consider if students see themselves in the topics of your lessons. Are you connecting your lesson to real-life situations your students have experienced? Do students feel a sense of pride discussing their community? Develop strategies to reach out to parents and the broader community to inform your teaching. Letters home, meeting parents and families, and attending community events help you understand the fabric that holds the community together. By engaging families, you will better understand the background knowledge of your students and how they learn best. You can then use students’ personal experiences to develop new skills and knowledge, and make meaningful connections between your lesson and real-life situations in the community.</p> <p><b>Tips</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview parents about how and what students learn from the community and understand parents’ hopes, concerns, and suggestions.</li> <li>• Conduct needs assessments and surveys (in the parents’ first language) of what parents expect of the school community.</li> <li>• Send letters home (in home language) to keep parents informed about the FoodCorps program offerings, and include opportunities to engage with hands-on learning opportunities.</li> </ul>  |

Source: FoodCorps has adapted some of this text from “Teaching Diverse Learners” from The Education Alliance at Brown University