

Applying the Seven Principles

These seven principles of culturally responsive teaching serve as a guide for interacting with children.

Principle 1: Honoring and Respecting Cultural Experiences

This principle encourages teachers to examine their practices, routines, and learning activities and ask, “How do I let each child know that I see them for who they are?”

To do this, teachers are encouraged to pay attention to the full individual that arrives in front of them. A child is not just their age, assigned gender, or attire—the child is all of the community and cultural influences that have shaped their experiences before entering the learning space. Honoring the cultural experiences of each child means recognizing the different strengths, needs, behaviors, languages, and preferences of the children in your learning space.

For example, some individuals feel most successful when they can work with others cooperatively. Some prefer to work alone or even competitively. Many young children prefer to learn when they are actively physically engaging and doing something with their hands or their bodies. Some tend to watch before joining in. Some like to hear steps explained one at a time; others prefer to explore and experiment and figure it out. Certainly, some learning experiences lend themselves to different approaches naturally, and all children should have opportunities to explore learning in all these different ways, but discovering strengths and preferences is an important part of any early learning experience.

Think about the difference between someone who brings home a kit to build a piece of furniture and first lays out every nut, washer, screw, and stick of wood before opening the instructions and carefully reading through every step to be sure they understand the undertaking, in comparison to the person who opens the kit and begins assembling in what they feel is a logical way. Both will end up with a completed project. Refraining from declaring one the “better” way or deciding one is the “right” approach honors the style of each individual.

In the classroom, incorporating the different cultural approaches children bring from their home experiences is how teachers honor those cultural connections. Imagine a 4-year-old, Amelia, raised in a household where the instruction-following approach is how everything is done. Amelia’s family follows a very strict schedule with rules and expectations about how and when things occur. Amelia enters the classroom of a teacher who encourages free exploration and expects that the children will just dive in and start experimenting. There are few, if any, directions, expectations regarding how to use materials, and rules related to when things should be done. To Amelia, this is overwhelming and confusing. The teacher’s approach and expectations clash with her own experience, and she feels pushed to do something that feels wrong or even unsafe.

Following this principle means offering multiple ways to approach activities and problems, as well as accepting multiple ways to do things and multiple answers or solutions. When you incorporate ways of doing things that feel comfortable to different children, you are being culturally responsive.

Riley, who is almost 4 years old, ties on an apron in her preschool’s play kitchen and immediately begins shooing the other children out: “Go. Get. All of you. Out.” Rhiannon, who had been playing happily, suddenly gets sad and says, “I don’t want to leave. I was here first.” Riley is insistent: “Go, go, go. Everybody out of my kitchen! Get!” Ms. Barber wonders why Riley is making Rhiannon leave, and her first impulse is to tell Riley, “No, Rhiannon can stay. She was there first.” Instead, she decides to use the cultural humility approach she has been learning. She tells Rhiannon to wait while she figures something out and then approaches Riley. “Riley, can you tell me why everyone has to go?” Ms. Barber asks. Riley responds by saying, “You too. Get! I’m ’bout to start cooking, and I don’t need no extra bodies gettin’ in my way. Now go on. Out!”

Ms. Barber realizes that Riley seems to be mimicking someone she may have seen in a kitchen before and responds. “Oh, well, you must need to have a lot of space to do your cooking! What if we move your pots and pans over here to this table? Then you can have all that room to cook with nobody in your kitchen, and Rhiannon and the others can continue doing the dishes and rocking the baby,” Ms. Barber says. Riley considers the broad table and nods. Together, the teacher and other children move the cooking equipment for Riley, and Rhiannon returns to her play in the kitchen. Within minutes, Riley is bringing dishes back to the play kitchen to serve to all her friends.



Following children’s interests and adapting the curriculum in response is another way teachers can connect to children’s cultural experiences. For example, children might notice the birds outside the classroom window and begin talking about offering them food. Their teacher responds by sharing books about birds and discussing children’s ideas for making bird feeders. The teacher takes an extra step to wonder aloud what the children see birds doing around their homes, eliciting the children’s cultural experiences to help guide the curriculum.

Try This

- › Use animated oral storytelling (that is, changing the tone and tenor of your voice to reflect joy, sadness, or enthusiasm) to share something that happened in place of a picture book once in a while.
- › Invite the children to act out a story or song with their whole body rather than retell it with a felt board or fingerplays. Encourage them to jump, crawl, hop, roll, or whatever the character in the story is doing.
- › Provide opportunities for children to create their own rules for a game so that they have a choice to compete or work together.
- › Offer collections of materials or items that can be used in multiple ways (loose parts) alongside more close-ended materials that have one way to use them so children can explore, experiment, and make their own choices about how to use the materials.
- › Try singsong call-and-response chants as attention-getters or for transitions, and use music, bells, bongos, lights, or timers for others. For example, an excerpt from an East African call-and-response song is “Che Che Kulay.” The teacher says “Che Che Kulay” and points to a body part, and the children repeat the phrase, imitating the teacher’s action.
- › Invite children to share something they do at home to signal time is up, or ask families for things they do regularly at home (for example, a special song, meditation technique, or wind-down signal).

Principle 2: Building Culturally Inviting Relationships

This principle is all about building positive, meaningful, supportive relationships with each and every child. It requires each teacher to move outside of the idea of “me” and “other” and fully embrace all the many ways each person is alike and different. Being personally culturally inviting means that you focus less on the novelty of any one child’s obvious difference from yourself and instead revel in the idea that everyone is different in many delightful ways. Enjoy exploring what makes each child who they are. When holidays that are special to children and families come up, ask what they mean, how they celebrate, and how you can extend the holiday into the classroom. Learn about what is important to the children by immersing yourself in their communities and experiences. Visit places of worship, community fairs, local parks, supermarkets, and museums in the community you serve. When children know that you genuinely like them, they are more comfortable, confident, and willing to share their authentic selves.

Children are very aware of who they are and how they are alike and different early in life. Even at young ages, children strive to fit in. They ask their parents to straighten their hair, wear different clothes, or fix different foods, all to assimilate. When children feel they belong, just as they are, they are more comfortable and willing to share these unique aspects of themselves more readily.