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Country Physical Education:

Considerations for Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Rural Communities

THOMAS N. WILSON

From the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor of the Southeastern Atlantic Coast to the bluegrass-filled mountains of Appalachia, to the Creole/Cajun parishes of Southern Louisiana to the Dine (Navajo) Nation of the rocky Southwest, and the agricultural communities of the Midwest, the rural communities of the United States are rich with culture. Across academic disciplines, the use and implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) has been explored, often within urban, suburban, and notably diverse communities. Although rural communities tend to be homogenous in culture, their unique characteristics are no less valuable for or impactful on students than those present in suburban and urban heterogeneous communities. A culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical approach promotes student engagement and favorable learning outcomes (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). As such, physical education professionals who work there should consider the cultures represented in rural schools and communities when planning lessons and adaptations for students. This article aims to serve as a resource to help inform and guide general and adapted physical education practitioners working in rural communities by addressing the following questions: (1) Where and what is rural? (2) What populations live in rural communities? (3) What is culture? (4) What is culturally responsive pedagogy? (5) Why is it crucial to implement culturally responsive pedagogy in rural physical education classes? (6) How can culturally responsive pedagogy be implemented in rural physical education classes? and (7) What special considerations should be made for students in rural physical education classes?

Where and What is Rural?

In the United States, the definition of the term *rural* has differed over the decades with respect to the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (USDA ERS) definitions. The most recent definition by the U.S. Census Bureau is "Rural is what is not urban — that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In contrast, the USDA ERS (2023) offers a more parameterized and functional definition, describing rural broadly as being *nonmetro*, defined by the following three criteria both individually and in combination: (1) open countryside; (2) rural towns (places with fewer than 5,000 people and 2,000 housing units); and (3) urban areas with populations ranging up to 50,000 people that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas). Lastly, Brown and Schafft (2011, pp. 11) defined the everyday essence of the term *rural* as being:

characterized by low population density, small communities, and a strong sense of social cohesion, where social relationships are often more personal and community-focused compared to urban areas. These regions are typically economically reliant on agriculture, forestry, or mining, and have limited access to services like healthcare and education.

Who Lives in Rural Communities?

Rural communities are filled with unique ethnic and cultural groups, many of which are part of the 574 federally recognized Tribal Nations (Indigenous/American Indian; Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2023). Today, 21.5% of the Native American/Indigenous population

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lives in rural areas, which is the highest percentage per populous compared with any other racial or ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Many other rich and distinct cultures were foraged and preserved in rural communities over the past 300–500 years since the arrival of European colonists and the West- and Central-African people they trafficked during the transatlantic slave trade, which is also reflected in the racial demographics of U.S. rural communities, with 18% of White Americans and 9.9% of Black or African Americans having the second and third highest percentage of population in rural communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In addition to the longstanding cultural and ethnic groups in rural communities, rural communities across the United States are diversifying in terms of race, ethnicity, language, religion, heritage, and culture. In 2018, racially and ethnically minoritized individuals made up 22% of non-metro (rural) populations, with those who identify as Hispanic or Latine representing the fastest-growing population (Population Estimates Program, 2018).

In 2020, residents living in rural areas comprised 20% of the U.S. population (Economic Research Service, 2022). The largest rural populations are in Texas (4,744,808), North Carolina (3,474,661), Pennsylvania (3,061,630), and Ohio (2,798,349), whereas Vermont has the largest percentage, with 64.9% of its population residing in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The number of rural residents declined during the 2010s and then increased dramatically during 2020–2021, correlating to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2022). Moreover, the number of persons age 18 years and younger in rural communities is decreasing nationally, but they still represent approximately 14% of the U.S. rural population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; USDA ERS, 2022).

What is Culture?

Culture is a term that has varying meanings and definitions across academic, occupational, and social groups. A common analogy and definition of culture used in anthropology and sociology comes from Geertz (1973), who stated, "Culture is the set of shared meanings and symbols through which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their actions" (p. 89). Simply put, culture is the way that a group of people lives life (Hodge et al., 2012). Another aspect of culture to consider is *cultural norms*: the collection of accepted and or standard values, rules, beliefs, customs, expectations, and behaviors among a given group (Graham et al., 2022).

What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?

Culturally Responsive Teaching by Geneva Gay (2018), a noted African American scholar in education, was built on the seminal work of Gloria Ladson-Billings' CRP, which was derived from her landmark study in which she observed a diverse group of teachers successfully teaching predominantly African American students in a low-income urban community (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings defined *culturally responsive pedagogy* as "a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specially committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Simply put, CRP is a teaching approach that seeks to center and infuse students' culture into lessons instead of expecting them to reject their own to conform to the cultural norms of their teachers or cultural expectations of the school system that are antithetical to their own. Similarly, Gay's CRP

emphasizes incorporating students' cultural references into all learning experiences.

The following seven primary components of CRP are noted by Gay (2018):

1. **Cultural knowledge**, which denotes having a deep understanding of students' cultural background;
2. **Cultural relevance**, which means connecting students' culture and context to instruction;
3. **Cultural caring**, which refers to a genuine commitment to students' overall success and wellness, which involves acknowledging and valuing students' culture;
4. **Cross-cultural communication**, which is effective communication with students, including acknowledging and validating linguistic and cultural differences;
5. **Cultural congruence in the classroom environment**, which requires creating an atmosphere that reflects and honors the cultural backgrounds of students;
6. **High expectations**, which is having and communicating high expectations and providing support for all students regardless of culture; and
7. **Social justice orientation**, which means empowering students to identify social inequities and advocate for change.

For the purpose of this article, these seven components will be discussed individually and in combination with how to implement culturally responsive pedagogy (discussed later in the article), with suggestions for best practices and considerations for rural communities in mind.

Why Implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Rural Communities?

Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Implementing CRP in physical education offers numerous benefits for students, including increased engagement, a stronger sense of belonging, and improved academic and social outcomes. Research consistently shows that when students see their cultural backgrounds reflected in the curriculum, they are more motivated to participate and demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy in learning (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). In physical education, this perspective can translate to a greater willingness to engage in activities, improved peer relationships, and a deeper connection to movement-based learning. Additionally, CRP fosters inclusivity by ensuring that all students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, feel valued and represented, ultimately reducing disparities in participation and achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Beyond engagement, CRP also supports the development of social-emotional skills, including cultural awareness, empathy, and cross-cultural communication. When teachers incorporate students' lived experiences into lessons — such as by integrating diverse movement traditions, games, and physical activities from various cultures — students gain a broader appreciation of their peers' backgrounds while also strengthening their own cultural identity (Banks, 2019). Moreover, embedding CRP into physical education has been shown to enhance classroom climate by promoting respect for diversity and fostering a more collaborative learning environment (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). By naturally



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integrating cultural themes into instruction, educators can create a space where students feel both affirmed and challenged, leading to more meaningful learning experiences and lifelong physical activity habits.

Physical Education and Healthcare

Whereas physical education is often associated with and discussed within the context of the U.S. education system, it is also an integral part of the U.S. public and community health and healthcare systems (Sallis & McKenzie, 1991). Goodman et al. (2014) define *community health* as a multisector and multidisciplinary collaborative enterprise that uses public health science, evidence-based strategies, and other approaches to engage and work with communities, in a culturally appropriate manner, to optimize the health and quality of life of all persons who live, work, or are otherwise active in a defined community or communities. Physical education professionals provide services to children and youth in their schools and local communities to prevent injury and diseases related to physical inactivity, thus making them and their services part of the public health and healthcare system. Moreover, in fall 2022, 49.6 million students were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools



(National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Thus, when done properly, physical education, especially in the public school system, serves as a health and physical activity intervention for most U.S. students during their K-12 educational experiences.

Social Determinants of Health and Rural Communities

Rural communities are filled with rich cultures, heritages, tight-knit families, and social networks. Unfortunately, there are systemic and structural (e.g., classism, racism, ableism, infrastructure) barriers that negatively impact people in rural communities and their health (Maganty et al., 2022). These barriers can be explained by social determinants of health — such as economic status, race, gender, disability, ethnicity, family history, parent education level, and childhood environment — which are factors that increase individuals' or populations' likelihood of developing a particular disease or health condition (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). Due to social determinants of health, rural populations are at a higher risk for diseases and conditions associated with physical inactivity (e.g., type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, chronic lower respiratory disease, stroke, and heart disease) compared with metro (urban and suburban) populations (Logan & Castaneda, 2020). The risks for the mentioned health disparities in rural communities are higher for

Black/African American, Native American/Indigenous, and disabled residents compared with their respective counterparts who are either White or without disability (Kegler et al., 2022). As noted in the previous section, public school physical education should promote lifelong physical activity and overall health and should be tailored to specific populations. Thus, it can provide a form of free healthcare to youth in rural communities.

How to Implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Cultural Knowledge and Cultural Relevance

Gaining cultural knowledge is the first step in implementing CRP in rural physical education classrooms. According to Gay (2018), *cultural knowledge* is the culmination of students' values, languages, traditions, experiences, and histories, which impact their views on life and their approach to learning. The knowledge gained can then be used to bring the students' community into the classroom, bridge harmful gaps between students' home and school cultures, or lessen the cultural mismatch (Gay, 2018). *Cultural mismatch* is when a student's home or family culture differs from that of their school or program (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Physical education teachers can lessen cultural mismatch by becoming culturally competent and fluent (Hodge & James-Hassan, 2014). Seneca Nation (Bear Clan) member and social work scholar Terry

Cross described *cultural competency* as the process of responding respectfully and effectively to people of various cultures, especially those distinct from the dominant or mainstream culture. This approach includes, but is not limited to, aspects of language, traditions, religion, ethnic background, religious background, music, dance, foodways, and values (Cross et al., 1989). Cultural competency is gained through getting to know students and their communities. Moreover, Hodge and James-Hassan (2014) explained that cultural competency and fluency means a teacher has the ability, knowledge, and willingness to work effectively and justly in cross-cultural situations.

Because public school physical education is a form of healthcare, a public health approach may be beneficial in learning the community's culture and health/physical activity needs. When conducting a community needs assessment, public health professionals recommend creating a team of informants and key stakeholders from a community to help understand the community's background, values, and needs (D'Alonzo, 2010). In the case of gaining cultural competence and fluency in the rural community they serve, physical education teachers should consider forming a team of school and community members to inform them of the culture, including but not limited to seasoned school administration in the community, the local parks and recreation department, parents, religious leaders at local places of worship (e.g., church, temple, mosque, synagogue), the school guidance counselor, and most importantly, students. By intentionally spending time and collaborating with community stakeholders, educators can gain greater insight into their students' interests, community values, and aspects of culture most relevant to the students. As cultural competencies improve, physical education teachers can more strategically tailor and incorporate aspects of the students' culture into lesson plans, teaching cues, curriculum-based activities, instructional strategies, and more.

Cross-Cultural Communication and Cultural Congruence in the Classroom

Cross-cultural communication is essential for establishing a respectful and effective learning environment, particularly in culturally diverse rural communities. According to Gay (2018), *cross-cultural communication* involves recognizing, validating, and integrating students' linguistic and cultural differences into the learning process. In rural physical education classes, where students may come from tight-knit, ethnically homogenous, or linguistically diverse backgrounds, physical education teachers must be sensitive to these variations and adapt their communication strategies accordingly. This sensitivity can be demonstrated through verbal and non-verbal interactions that reflect an understanding of the students' cultural norms and practices. For instance, understanding nonverbal cues, such as gestures or eye contact, which may carry different meanings across cultures, can enhance communication and rapport with students (Gay, 2002).

Cultural congruence in the classroom refers to creating a learning environment that aligns with the cultural backgrounds of the students (Gay, 2018). In rural physical education, this approach may involve organizing activities and lessons that reflect the values and traditions of the local community. For example, in rural areas with strong agricultural or Indigenous traditions, physical education teachers could incorporate outdoor activities that connect with students' everyday experiences or cultural heritage, such as traditional games or movement activities. Ensuring cultural congruence also

means respecting students' familial and community values in how physical activities are structured and assessed. By fostering an environment that acknowledges and celebrates students' cultural identities, physical education teachers can help students feel more valued and engaged in their learning experience.

High Expectations and Cultural Caring

Setting high expectations for all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, is another fundamental element of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). In rural physical education settings, students may come from communities with limited access to educational or extracurricular resources, which can impact their confidence and academic performance. However, physical education teachers must avoid the tendency to lower their expectations based on students' socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. Instead, they should hold all students to high standards while providing the necessary support to help them meet the expectations. By communicating high expectations, teachers convey belief in students' abilities, fostering a growth mindset and encouraging perseverance.

Cultural caring involves showing a deep commitment to students' overall success, which includes recognizing and validating their cultural identities (Gay, 2018). In rural communities, where relationships between teachers and students often extend beyond the classroom, cultural caring can be expressed through an understanding of students' personal and familial contexts. Physical education teachers can demonstrate cultural caring by incorporating activities that not only address physical fitness but also promote students' cultural well-being and self-worth. For example, allowing students to share their cultural traditions related to physical activity or health can help create an inclusive classroom where students feel respected and understood. By fostering a caring environment, physical education teachers empower students to take pride in their cultural backgrounds while striving for excellence in their academic and personal lives.

Social Justice Orientation

Social justice is an integral part of CRP. According to African American physical education scholar and social justice advocate, Samuel Hodge (2014, p. 193):

social justice in physical education refers to the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities, with particular emphasis on the inclusion of individuals from marginalized or underrepresented groups, such as students with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and those from lower socioeconomic background.

Rural communities tend to have less post-secondary education, lower economic status, and less access to adequate healthcare compared with their counterparts in metro (urban) areas (Irwin et al., 2021; Reilly, 2021; Richman et al., 2019). From the largely Irish and Scottish American-led coal mining labor unions of the early to mid-1900s in Appalachia to the African American-led Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the rural and southern United States, to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation as recent as 2016, residents of rural communities across the United States have been fighting against social injustice. Whether or not systemic barriers and citizens' valiant efforts to combat them are covered in the mainstream media or discussed in

Table 1.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Strategies
in Rural Physical Education

Theme	Instruction
Music	Survey and incorporate students' preferred music into classes (e.g., warm-up and activities).
Art	Create and display inclusive bulletin-board content that celebrates and relates to students' culture and community background.
Language	Appropriately incorporate students' language and dialect in instruction (e.g., teaching cues and multilingual verbal and written instruction).
Norms and Social Justice	Co-create inclusive and fair classroom rules and expectations with students, with their local cultural norms in mind.
Values	Integrate local and cultural values such as respect, perseverance, and community engagement into instruction and games.
Rituals	Recognize and incorporate regional festivals, traditions, and culturally significant events into lesson themes.
Spirituality	Acknowledge various belief systems and holidays celebrated within the students' respective communities.

textbooks, these histories and current events still profoundly impact today's youth (Echo Hawk et al., 2019; NCES, 2023; Tausen et al., 2024). As such, being aware of and acknowledging ongoing systems of oppression in rural communities (e.g., classism, racism, sexism, ableism, and xenophobia) enables teachers to create equity-centered approaches to their lesson planning and instruction, and students to engage in critical thinking skills while also helping them to be advocates and productive members of their communities. Showing awareness and care about the students' personhood, family life, and cultures; what is happening within their communities; and the impacts it has lets students know that you are invested in them and in what is important to them. To help further translate these principles into practice, Table 1 highlights concrete strategies for applying CRP within rural physical education settings.

Special Considerations for Rural Communities

While rural communities share some characteristics with respect to familial values, occupations, economic status, and social determinants of health, rural communities are unique regarding their culture. They are not "one-size-fits-all" (Marietta & Marietta, 2020). As such, not all cultural knowledge or tools are transferable from one rural physical

education classroom to another. With the variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups that are represented in rural communities, it is important to take the time to know the history and culture of each community you work in, as cultures can vary from one group to another, even within a given county or township. Additionally, lifelong physical activities that adults in the community engage in, linguistics, geographic location, and overall environment should be considered to help students connect with the world around them. Lastly, physical education teachers need to consider what biases or prejudices they may have about rural communities and the specific racial, ethnic, and cultural groups who reside in them.

Summary and Conclusion

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a powerful educational framework that enhances the learning experience by acknowledging and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into teaching practices. Students live in a wide range of rural communities across the United States, each with its own cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic context (NCES, 2023). In rural physical education settings, where health disparities are often more pronounced, CRP offers a unique opportunity to promote health equity and academic success (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Physical education professionals in rural communities have the opportunity to play a pivotal role in addressing these disparities by embracing culturally responsive strategies that honor students' cultural identities, build strong student-teacher rapport, and engage students in meaningful, culturally relevant activities (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Implementing CRP in rural physical education requires educators to be mindful of the unique cultural, economic, and geographic challenges the communities might face. For example, access to resources and opportunities for physical activity may be limited, making it essential for physical education programs to adapt and provide inclusive, culturally relevant, and responsive opportunities for all students (Hastie, 2017). Educators must also be conscious of the cultural norms and values of the rural communities they serve, ensuring that students feel valued and respected in the learning environment (Gay, 2010).

By integrating CRP into rural physical education, teachers can empower students to develop lifelong physical activity habits, contribute to community well-being, and address health disparities that disproportionately affect rural populations (Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). This approach not only benefits students academically but also fosters a more inclusive and equitable educational experience for all. Physical education, when grounded in culturally responsive practices, becomes a tool for social justice, promoting physical, emotional, and social well-being for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In conclusion, applying CRP in rural physical education is essential for fostering student engagement, addressing health inequities, and promoting overall community wellness. As educators continue to embrace CRP, they will not only enhance students' learning experiences but also contribute to the long-term health and vitality of rural communities (Gay, 2010; Hastie, 2017). The integration of CRP in physical education serves as a critical step toward creating more inclusive, supportive, and healthy learning environments for all students, regardless of their cultural background or geographic location.

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