

Gloria Ladson-Billings describes **culturally relevant teaching** as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right” (*Dreamkeepers*, 1994, pp. 17-18). There are three pillars to culturally relevant teaching:

- **Student learning** is the focus of any way to think about teaching and culturally relevant teaching is no different. Teachers who engage in culturally relevant teaching will focus on students' academic and social learning as well as their ability to think critically and problem-solve.
- **Cultural competence** enables students (and teachers!) to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture as well as other cultures. Rudine Sims Bishop used the metaphor of "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" where students use a contextual problem as a *window* to view other cultures, a *mirror* in which they see their own culture, or a *sliding glass door* in which they can step into another culture.
- **Critical consciousness** empowers students to identify, analyze, and solve problems in their real worlds, particularly when those problems are related to social inequities such as access to fresh food, health care, or financial systems.

In a mathematics classroom, cultural referents might be using students' own experiences in previous studies of mathematics or real-world situations within their own communities, then bridging to textbook representations of the mathematics. Consider a sixth-grade class that is about to study area and perimeter. Many communities have community gardens where people grow their own food. The teacher could use the cultural referent of a community garden to motivate the need to be able to plan a school garden. What shape will the garden be? How much fertilizer or mulch will be necessary (area)? How much border material or fencing will be necessary (perimeter)? From this culturally relevant context, students engage in rich and powerful mathematics. Then, the teacher uses the concepts and skills developed to bridge to other area and perimeter problems that might be found in a textbook or state/national/international assessment.