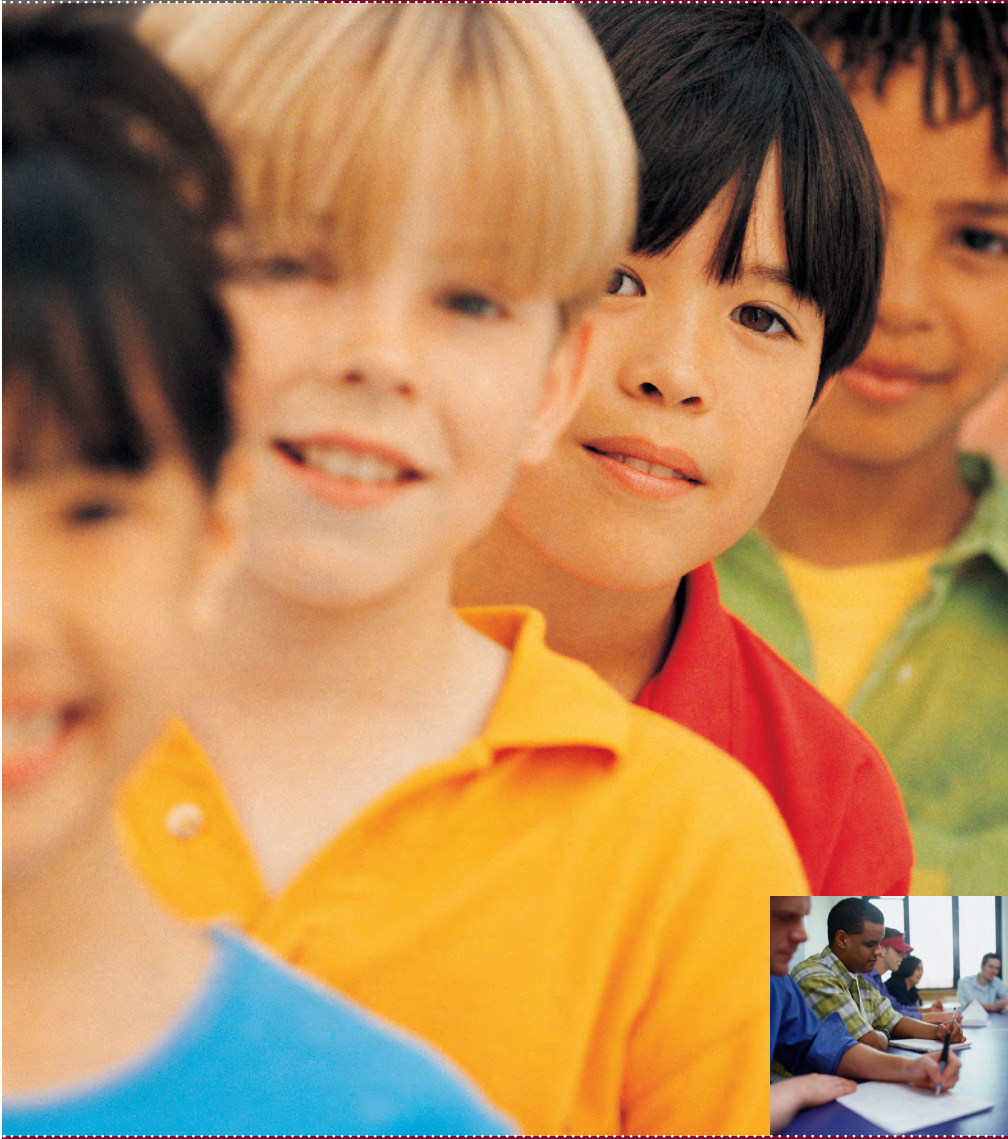


ON POINT



# Understanding Culture



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR  
URBAN SCHOOL  
IMPROVEMENT

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### ***THE MISSION OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT***

is to partner with Regional Resource Centers to develop powerful networks of urban local education agencies and schools that embrace and implement a data-based, continuous improvement approach for inclusive practices. Embedded within this approach is a commitment to evidence-based practice in early intervention, universal design, literacy and positive behavior supports.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), of the U.S. Department of Education, has funded NIUSI to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation's urban school districts. NIUSI's creation reflects OSEP's long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.

ON POINT SERIES

# Understanding Culture

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*This OnPoint is the first in a series of three OnPoints that explore issues around culture and teaching. This OnPoint describes the way in which NIUSI defines culture and how to think about educational settings and scenarios from the point of view of culture. The second OnPoint in this series focuses on teacher's identity. The third OnPoint addresses how classrooms are enriched by the funds of knowledge and assets that children and their families bring with them from their homes and communities.*

*In urban centers, almost two-thirds of the students are neither European-American nor middle-class. Recently, New York City guesstimated that more than 350 languages and dialects were represented in their school system. Diversity and multiculturalism must be more than rhetoric. Urban students need to be surrounded by adults who live, speak and act with respect for the diversity of heritages and experiences that children bring to school. For many, but not all teachers, who are predominantly European-American and middle class, this ability must be learned because they lack the heritage, multicultural background, and life experience to engage in such boundary blurring vernacular. One example of the mismatch between teachers and students may be in the five most frequently teacher-cited behavioral problems found in classrooms: aggression, defiance of authority, disruptive behavior, goofing off and poor conduct. These behaviors, are culturally and circumstantially bound and can stem as much from cultural miscommunications as they do from within child problems. As Lisa Delpit has said, our schools*

*are teaching "other people's children" and they are unprepared for the complexities of the task. Please be aware that we understand that urban teachers face extraordinary circumstances in the course of their daily work and that they are, like the students they teach, in the heart of social and political circumstances that require response to keep all students safe and engaged. While the sociocultural dimensions of schooling loom large in this OnPoint, they are not the only factors in improving school results for students.*

*Ensuring that students in urban schools have prepared, thoughtful and culturally responsive teachers is essential to building a system that will work today, tomorrow and for the foreseeable future. Urban students need urban educators who understand how to link school curriculum to life success. An important part of this effort is to acknowledge that students of color and ethnic diversity see few role models in schools, hear an unfamiliar language touted as superior to theirs, and feel that many of the lessons of school diminish and do not acknowledge contributions from their heritage. We can change this by engaging educators now in a deep and sustained discourse and action around culturally responsive practices.*

*In this article, we use anthropological definitions of culture, particularly as we define the elements of culture, and combine that viewpoint with psychological perspectives as we discuss the formation of cultural identity. Finally, the sections on cultural responsiveness rely on research from work in both education and counseling fields related to multiculturalism and relating to other cultures.*

***Culture:***

The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to interact with their world and with one another.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

Understanding culture is critical for educators because our individual cultural orientation is present in every interaction. Too often, we make assumptions about a person's beliefs or behaviors based on a single cultural indicator, particularly race<sup>1</sup> or ethnicity, when in reality, our cultural identities are a complex weave of all the cultural groups we belong to that influence our values, beliefs, and behaviors. Usually, when people talk about culture, there is an assumption that we are talking about the "big four"- African American, Native American, Asian American, and Hispanic/Latino American, but we ALL are members of cultural groups, and develop cultural identities based on those memberships and influences. Cultural identity development is an ongoing process, as we are exposed to more and different sets of beliefs and values, and may choose to adopt ones that were not

<sup>1</sup> While we do not believe that race is an accurate indicator of differences among groups of people, and particularly that race is not equivalent to culture, we understand that in the United States, race is a political and social construct that is used to classify and, too often, marginalize people. Thus, when we use the term "race" in this document, we are not using it to define a group of people according to biological characteristics, but in the political context of United States history.

part of our original upbringing. Cultural identity is constructed within the individual, but continually influenced by the interactions among and between people in society. Cultural identity is informed by socio-cultural and historical perspectives that interact with psychological and intrapersonal characteristics so that all are present in learning.

Often, culture is thought of as the foods, music, clothing, and holidays a group of people share but it is actually much larger than just those visible traditions. Culture is a combination of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior patterns that are shared by racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups of people. Culture refers not only to those that we are born into (racial or ethnic groups), but also those that we choose to belong to, such as religious or social groups.

Culture is not static; it is dynamic. We often move between cultures. A person may grow up on a rural farm, but choose to live in an urban environment. Similarly, one might grow up in a poor family, but become more affluent as an adult and interact with others who are also more affluent. Another cultural shift occurs when children grow up in families in which gender roles are pre-determined, but enter the workforce and adjust their ideas about what are acceptable roles for men and women. Similarly, many young adults are exposed to different political beliefs and values as they move through college, and change their views from those with which they were raised. These are only some examples of the many



cultural shifts that occur. These shifts are notable because the contexts in which people find themselves create the opportunity for changes in values, feelings, beliefs and behaviors. Individuals who “shift” cultures often find themselves adopting new customs while retaining elements of their previous cultural experiences.

Culture is broader than race and ethnicity. Gender, class, physical and mental abilities, religious and spiritual beliefs, sexual orientation, age and other factors influence our cultural orientations. Since individuals are a complex weave of many cultural influences, it is impossible to define any person by a single cultural label. As the examples on page 9 show, within group differences are as significant as between group differences in individual cultural identity development. Further, cultural histories are filtered by experience and psychological characteristics, making each person unique.

Unless we make a conscious effort to learn about and understand the idea of culture and cultural influences on identity development, we may assume that our own beliefs and values are normal, privileging our own cultural identities at the expense of those who hold different beliefs or values. The purposes of this article are (a) to define and understand the different factors that impact our cultural identity development, (b) to gain a perspective on the ways that others may differ; (c) to understand difference as something to celebrate and learn about rather

than to reject, by becoming culturally responsive, and (d) to understand culture as not a static element, but as an ongoing evolution as we grow and develop over the course of our lifetimes.

## WHY DOES CULTURE MATTER?

As educators, we are committed to ensuring that all children can learn and achieve to the best of their ability. Misunderstandings about the role of culture in behavior, communication, and learning often lead to assumptions about the abilities of children to be successful in school. An awareness and understanding of the role of culture in the classroom, and the different values and behaviors that may accompany culture can remove unintentional barriers to a child’s success.

## WHAT ARE ELEMENTS OF CULTURE?

Sociologists and anthropologists have identified many basic elements that are present in our cultural interactions. These elements interact with each other and result in patterns of behavior that are shared. Because these elements intersect with the experiences, the histories, and the psychological makeup of each individual, no one person can be pigeon holed by their “race”, ethnicity, gender or any other single feature. It is in the mix of these features that individuality and group belonging are



developed in unexpected ways by each person. Cultural, historical, experiential and psychological characteristics react with the contexts in which an individual finds themselves, further complicating our attempts to put people into specific boxes or categories. By understanding each of the following characteristics, we hope that you will have a richer understanding of how each element plays out in everyday life.

### *Consider this ...*

Have you ever been in a meeting and noticed how people participate in the discussion? Or thought that someone was not engaged in a conversation because they did not interject comments throughout? Or been frustrated at someone “interrupting” you? Think about how these situations might be indicators of cultural norms.

**LANGUAGE** *Language includes not only spoken and written words, but also non-verbal communication forms such as the use of eyes, hands, and body.* In the United States, English is the predominant language. However, many members of our society speak a language other than English. Additionally, we all use different levels of language in our everyday interactions. Language can be formal, technical, or informal, dependent upon the situation and people we are involved with. One might use formal English when speaking publicly, use technical language at work, and speak informally to friends and families. Other differences in language may include using slang or dialects in place of formal language. Different cultures may be

distinguished by the rules used while speaking. For example, in some cultures each party in a conversation must wait their turn, and that turn will be signified by a pause in the conversation on the part of the current speaker. In other cultures, parties to a conversation do not wait for their “turn” to speak, but insert support or verbal explanations and questions throughout.

### *Have you ever noticed ...*

That some stories have a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end, but others don't? What assumptions do you make about someone based on their style of story telling?

Another important element of language and culture is in the method of telling stories. Some cultures tell events in very linear fashion while others proceed in a more circular manner, interspersing details with interesting observations or comparisons.

### *Think about ...*

How do you feel when someone doesn't make eye contact with you? Or sustains eye contact over a long period of time? What assumptions do you make about that person?

Hand gestures, body language, and eye contact are influential in our understandings of language and culture. In some cultures, eye contact is seen as disrespectful; in others, it signifies honesty. Some cultures keep their hands close to their bodies while speaking; others use hand gestures to punctuate their conversation.





### *Have you ever noticed ...*

Watch how people talk to each other. See how many different ways that people use their hands when they are talking.

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS TIME** *Being early, on-time, or late.* Orientation towards time is very different across different cultural groups. For some, schedules and appointments are priority; for others, what is happening at the moment matters more than future events. Likewise, some cultures stress punctuality; lateness is a sign of disrespect. Other cultures don't mind when people are late, and the norm is that a set meeting time is only an approximation.

### *How do you feel ...*

about being late for appointments? What if someone else is late for an appointment with you?

**SPACE/PROXIMITY** *Accepted distances between individuals within the culture; appropriateness of physical contact.* Shaking hands is seen by some as a very personal action, not to be shared by strangers; others may see it as a customary and appropriate way of greeting. Similarly, in some groups, hugging and kissing upon meeting are standard forms of greetings; other people may be extremely uncomfortable with this level of contact. Rules for physical contact may be based upon gender or upon the relationship between the people involved. Rules also govern how closely people stand when conversing. In some cultures,



people stand very closely together; in others it is considered rude to invade a person's private space, so they stand further apart.

### *Think about ...*

What is your "comfort zone" when thinking about physical space or contact? If someone stands close to you or touches you when they are talking, how do you feel?

**GENDER ROLES** *How a person views, understands, and relates to members of the opposite sex; what behaviors are appropriate.* It is common in many cultures for there to be different rules governing the behaviors of boys and girls; some of these rules will be explicit, some only implicitly understood by in-group members. Many cultures believe that girls should be nice, quiet and reserved, while boys are allowed to be assertive, aggressive, and loud. Other rules that may govern the behavior of boys and girls relate to expectation for future roles- if it is assumed in a culture that girls will marry and stay home to raise children, there may be unspoken rules about the appropriateness of education for girls.

### *Have you ever thought about ...*

Consider what you know about different gender roles. Have your ideas about gender roles changed from those that you were taught as a child?

**FAMILIAL ROLES** *Beliefs about providing for oneself, the young, the old; who protects whom.* The age at which a person is expected to become autonomous varies between cultures. In some, children move out of the home and



care for themselves in mid to late adolescence, and in others it is acceptable for a person to live with his or her parents throughout life.

Different standards also exist for caring for elderly members of families. Some groups will take an elderly parent or family member into their home, while others will place the family members in provided care, such as nursing homes.

### **Think about ...**

Your beliefs about when children should move out of their parents' home, or what the relationships between people who share a home should be. Do you know any families in which multiple generations share the same home? What might be the advantages of that living arrangement? Why do most middle-class members in our society NOT share homes?

**TABOOS** *Attitudes and beliefs about doing things against culturally accepted patterns.*

In some cultures, there is a strong taboo against "telling" on members of your group, especially to outsiders. Discussions about politics, religion, sexuality, or family issues may be similarly taboo.

Another issue is directness: some cultures feel that it is improper for people to ask direct personal questions, whereas others are more comfortable with it. Almost universally, breaking culturally accepted standards makes people uncomfortable. The key is to know and understand the cultural taboos of specific cultures.

### **Consider this ...**

Do you know someone who never talks about their personal life at work? Do you have a co-worker who tells all the details of their personal life? How do you feel about these people? Are you more comfortable with one than the other?

**FAMILY TIES** *How a person sees themselves in the context of family; who is considered part of the family, roles within the family, responsibility towards family members.* While some groups value the individual achievement of members, others value the collective actions of the family or group; group members may feel obligated to place the needs of family or community above their own personal needs or goals.

### **Think about ...**

Make a list of your family members. Who did you include? Who did you leave out? Did you list all of your aunts, uncles, and cousins? Does your list only include parents, grandparents, and siblings? How do you think about your responsibilities to each of these individuals? Would you delay going to college to help out an aunt who needed childcare in order to work? Would you move to a different city to help with the care of an elderly relative? Do you feel obligated to work in the family business instead of pursuing your own career dreams?

**GROOMING AND PRESENCE** *Cultural differences in personal behavior and appearance such as laughter, smile, voice quality, gait, poise, and style of dress, hair or cosmetics.* Presence includes one's posture and eye contact; in some cultures a person's place in



society dictates their acceptable presence. Accepted standards also vary within cultural groups by age.

Grooming styles also vary by culture. In some cultures, it is considered not only appropriate, but also important to cover flaws and accentuate positive features with clothing, grooming, dressing, and makeup. In other cultures, such behavior would be considered bold and inappropriate.

***Have you ever noticed ...***

Think about your first impressions upon meeting a new person. What assumptions do you make about a person who is dressed in a tailored suit, with carefully styled hair? What assumptions do you make about someone who is dressed in bright colors with dramatic make-up? Or someone who dresses in torn jeans and t-shirts, with un-styled hair?

***LIFE CYCLES*** *Criteria for the definition of stages, periods, or transitions in life; levels of autonomy at different stages.* The age at which children are seen to be mature enough to handle adult responsibilities varies significantly across cultural groups. In many cultures, adolescents are seen as old enough to be responsible for themselves, and even for other members of the family.

***What if ...***

A parent believes that a child becomes an adult at age 15? What does that mean for the way that child interacts with other adults? What might that mean about the parents expectation regarding their responsibilities in the child's life?

***AUTONOMY*** *Beliefs about the priority given to individual needs in relation to group needs.*

This category shows the dichotomy between individualistic and collective cultures. Individualistic cultures support the individual; personal gains and achievement are worthy goals. Collective cultures support the group, whether that group is family, friends, social class, town, religion, or nation. An individual works to advance the needs and goals of the collective culture; acting otherwise would be considered selfish.

***Have you ever noticed ...***

How people are introduced? Consider the two examples, and think about what the differences in the two styles might mean about the values held by the person doing the introduction. "This is Mary-she graduated from UCLA and is an attorney with the public defenders office." "This is Oscar- he is my neighbor Ruby's son, and went to school with my daughter."

***STATUS OF AGE*** *Accepted manners toward older persons, peers, younger persons.*

Some cultural groups will show a general respect for all members of that culture, regardless of age. Others treat respect in a

***Think about ...***

How younger members of your family interact with older members. Do you use the phrase "yes sir" or "yes ma'am" when addressing elders? Is it acceptable for children to have opinions and question adults? Should children be "seen and not heard"? Are children included in adult conversation at the dinner table?



more hierarchical fashion: younger members are given little respect, which has to be earned, whereas older members are generally respected.

**EDUCATION** *Purpose of education, kinds of learning that are favored, methods of learning used in home and community.* For some, the purpose of education is to prepare students for college; for others it may be to prepare students for the job market. Some families may see the obligation to teach students as solely with the school, others may view the responsibility as shared between school and family. Some people view learning as the transmission of knowledge from experts to novices, other people base learning on an apprenticeship approach, in which beginners learn by working with people who are more experienced.

***Have you ever thought about ...***

What is the purpose of education? What messages do you receive from your family or community about the importance of education? What forms of education are valued? Which are not?

## WHAT IS INDIVIDUAL CULTURAL IDENTITY?

Many theorists<sup>2</sup> foreground the issue of race in conversations about cultural identity development, and talk about stages of identity development that are based on individual reaction to identification as a member of a

minority group that has been marginalized. In these theories of identity development, it is the individuals' identification with the socially constructed racial or ethnic group that is the focus, and the understanding of the individual of the impact of that group membership on their life choices and chances, especially in relation to the dominant group in society. A focus on race/ethnicity as the primary influencer of individual cultural identity development has led some to focus on creating "checklists" that attempt to describe how a particular group of people will act or what they will value. This method of defining individuals in relation to a single group does not account for within group differences, the fluid nature of identity development, or the multiple contributing factors that make up an individual's cultural identity. It also leads to negative stereotyping; in that all members of a racial or ethnic group are presumed to hold a static set of beliefs and values. As an example, many people believe that African-Americans are a distinct racial and cultural group that all hold similar values and have common characteristics. Consider the following examples that illustrate the importance of other influences beyond racial group membership, keeping in mind that the range of differences shown in this example exist in all racial, ethnic, and socio cultural groups.

1. Fred is a 65 year old African American male, who was born in the South during segregation. His parents had seven children, and were poor farmers in a rural area. He completed school to fifth



<sup>2</sup>Cross, Helms, Sue and Sue



grade, and has continued to farm in the same area as his extended family. He has been married for 45 years, and has four children and twelve grandchildren. Fred likes to hunt and fish, and attends the local Baptist church.

2. LaShonda is 21 years old, and has her own apartment in the same housing project she grew up in. She and her three brothers were raised by their mother, who struggled to keep them clothed and fed by juggling minimum wage jobs and state benefits. LaShonda knows very little about her father, other than that he is a white man who had a short relationship with her mother. LaShonda dropped out of high school at 15, when she had the older of her two children. Two of her brothers are currently in the system, as is the father of her youngest child. LaShonda is working on her GED, and hopes to go to nursing school someday.
3. Shamala is 43 years old, and immigrated to the United States from Africa five years ago to escape the military regime in his country. He owned his own newspaper at home, but now works two jobs, and shares an apartment with three others, while saving money to bring his wife and children to join him in the United States. Shamala dreams of having his family with him, so that they can open their own business and their children



can get a good education. He has become a citizen of the United States.

4. Sarah is a 28 year old African American female, born in an east coast city and raised by her mother, who taught at the local elementary school, and her father, who worked for the United States Postal Service. Sarah is an only child, but has close relationships with both sets of grandparents. She graduated with honors from high school, and received a scholarship to a prestigious law school. She currently works as a corporate attorney with a nationally known law firm in a major metropolitan area. Sarah loves live music and theatre, and is a practicing Buddhist.
5. Raheem is a 32 year old Black male, raised in an urban environment in large city in the North. His parents were members of the Black Panther movement, and joined the Nation of Islam after he was born. His parents are well known activists, and are leaders in the arena of civil rights. Raheem has been attending protests and marches since infancy. He attended college, with a major in political science and Black studies, and is currently working on his Ph.D. in political science while teaching in the African American studies department at a local community college. His dissertation topic is "The Use of Racial Profiling by Urban Police Departments".

Fred, LaShonda, Shamala, Sarah and Raheem may appear to share a racial heritage<sup>3</sup>, but other cultural factors have influenced their values, beliefs, and behaviors in ways that leave minimal similarities between them. Think about how their political, career, family, religious, economic and other life experiences are likely to have shaped their identities and values beyond their membership in the demographic group “African American”. Reflect on the elements of culture described on pages three to seven, and think about the similarities and differences in beliefs or values they might share. What might you expect each person to value in relation to education? Family? Religion? Gender roles? We may have expectations about groups of people based on physical characteristics of race, ethnicity or gender that do not in fact accurately represent all or even most of the people within that group.

## HOW IS INDIVIDUAL CULTURAL IDENTITY DEVELOPED?

Many factors contribute to the formation of each individual’s cultural identity. For some individuals, race/ethnicity may be a primary

<sup>3</sup>Our use of the term “racial heritage” refers not to a biologically based factual heritage, but to the assumption of racial similarity constructed in the United States to refer to people who share a similar skin color, hair texture, or physical features attributed to the political category “African American”. We assume that a majority of citizens of the United States would think that these five people share a racial heritage based on physical factors.

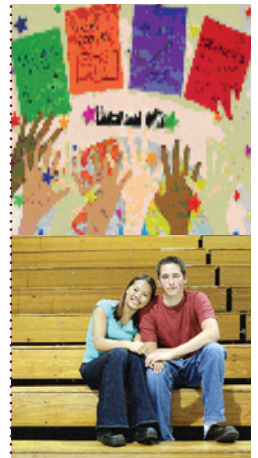
contributor, while different factors may influence others. As we talk about individual cultural identity development in this section, we are foregrounding the possible factors that may influence the identity development of an individual as a cultural being. As an example, we can consider the concept of race, which is commonly defined as a biological fact, with specific genetic characteristics. The Human Genome Project (<http://www.nhgri.nih.gov/10001772>) has shown that there is truly no such thing as race- all individuals in our world have similar DNA, and there are no specific genetic markers attributable to any one race of people. Race is a political and social construction, with historical significance as it has been used to justify the enslavement, extermination, and marginalization of specific groups of people. Indigenous Americans , African Americans, poor immigrants, and non-English speakers all have stories to tell about their experiences with discrimination based solely on assumptions made about them because of their supposed membership in these groups.

Ethnicity is a similar construct. Ethnicity is defined as identification with a racial or national group, which might make sense when talking about a citizen of Italy or Vietnam- it makes less sense when we use ethnicity as a way of categorizing individuals based on their ancestry or physical characteristics. Identification with an ethnic group should come from the individual-not from society as a whole. As we think about the history of immigration in the United States, we should be aware that everyone in this country comes

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*The Human Genome Project has shown that there is truly no such thing as race ... and there are no specific genetic markers attributable to any one race of people.*

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from an “ethnic group”, and yet we only require individuals who are not white to check an ethnicity box for demographic purposes. How many generations must a family live in the U.S. to simply be identified as a U.S. citizen? Who gets to choose what ethnicity an individual identifies with? Why is the ethnic background of each citizen not valued? During world war II, citizens of the United States who had ancestors from Japan were broadly defined as Japanese by the government, deemed to be a threat to national security, and relocated to holding camps. Many of those relocated did not identify themselves as Japanese- they self identified as U.S. citizens.

A significant contributor that is often overlooked in our definitions of culture is religion or spirituality. The United States was founded on the idea that individual choice and expression of religious beliefs is an unalienable right<sup>4</sup>; these beliefs and practice contribute significantly to our cultural identity. Given that culture is a combination of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavior patterns, and that for many, religion is the primary source of these, it seems that religion must play an important role in our individual conception of ourselves as cultural beings.

Economic class distinctions play a significant role in our cultural identity development,

<sup>4</sup>We must remember, however, that at the time the United States was founded, Native Americans and Black Slaves were not considered to be protected by these rights- women were in large part excluded from these protections also, along with men who did not own property.

even though some would say that the United States is not a class based society. The life experiences of individuals in poverty differ significantly from those in the middle class, and from individuals in the wealthy class. Perceptions about the privilege, power, self-determination, opportunity, and the ability of the individual to exert control over life choices are impacted greatly by the obvious and not so obvious opportunities afforded based on membership in a given class.

Family status has a significant impact on individual cultural identity development. There are limitless family types in which individuals may be raised: traditional (biological mom, dad, and kids), single parent, step parent (blended), foster, grandparent, adoption, same sex. Attitudes and beliefs about culture are impacted differently in all of these situations; many are socially constructed as we get our ideas about what is normal or desirable from others in our society.

Our ideas about gender are also impacted by society, as we develop understandings of the roles of women and men, our own gender identity, and the values and beliefs associated with gender. Ideas of gender are complex and interdependent upon our membership in other cultural groups; many groups have well defined gender roles, others may be less obvious. Gender roles are one area in which people change their identity over time. A child may be raised in a household that has very defined gender roles, but then leave home and experience a greater flexibility of roles and



adopt those values. Sexual orientation adds further complexity to our ideas about gender and identity. To be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered impact the ways we are treated, and the values and beliefs we hold.

Each individual is born with or develops a unique set of personality traits; a person may be introverted or extroverted, passive or aggressive, optimistic or pessimistic. These personality traits add complexity to whatever roles, norms or values might be attributed to any specific cultural group. What does it mean for an individual who is born into a community that is typically seen as shy, quite and reserved to have an outgoing, extroverted personality?

In some cultures, divergent social or emotional characteristics may be seen as a deficit or disability. Similarly, in other cultures, the ability to use and manipulate language is highly valued. Individuals in these cultures may be devalued or disabled by their lack of linguistic skills. Thus, in essential ways, the interaction between individual abilities and capacities and cultural values results in socially constructed labels of “gifted” or “disabled.” The complexities of this phenomena play out in the kinds of disability labels that become part of government or community school policy in various societies. In the United States, we know that students who receive a particular label in one community or school district may not be labeled in another community or school district. This same phenomena can be viewed internationally. There are some

individuals who have complex and compromised abilities that impact their physical, intellectual, linguistic and social/emotional functioning. These individuals are likely considered disabled in many contexts and cultures. Thus, individual and cultural features interact to create ability or disability.

Distinct cultural differences also emerge based on the region of the United States that we are raised. Our values and beliefs are influenced and interpreted by the people we interact with; and rules of communities differ across the regions of the United States. For example, people from the South are considered to value social interaction, tradition, and hospitality highly, whereas people from the West are thought of as independent and adventurous. Living in urban, rural, or suburban environments also impact the values and beliefs we hold, as they influence the elements of culture that we are exposed to. Membership in a political organization or identification with a political ideology also influences cultural identity, particularly as we define ourselves in relationship to our responsibility to other members of society.

An ambiguous but important influencer of our cultural identity development is the news media and pop culture. What we see on TV or in magazines influences our beliefs about ourselves and others; in subtle and explicit ways the media influences our values. Our images of ourselves, including what is appropriate behavior, dress, and





criteria for success are also influenced by pop culture. Consider the roles available to women and men as portrayed on television in the 1950's and today. In the 50's, women were portrayed as housewives or secretaries; today women are attorneys, doctors, police, and nearly every profession imaginable. Likewise, images of men used to focus only on men as "tough guys", emotionally controlled; today, men are portrayed in ways that allow for a broader range of emotion and sensitivity. Popular culture creates new cultural groups with shared values and beliefs on an ongoing basis. In the 70's, many youth identified with values of peace and love that crossed racial and ethnic lines. Today, hip-hop culture allows youth to find commonality in their expression of beliefs and values.

Some influences on our individual cultural identities are always changing. Levels of education, types of employment, current life roles, and personal interests can change in subtle or radical ways our view of the world. Consider the potential changes in values, beliefs, and behaviors of an individual who comes from a working class background but

completes college and enters the corporate world, or the changes an individual might make as they transition from single college student to married adult with children. Additionally, career choices can put us into a group of people that share a set of values and beliefs based on occupation- think about the cultural similarities shared by police officers, social workers, teachers, lawyers, doctors.

Our views of ourselves in relation to our personal interests and memberships in social groups can often form the core of our individual cultural identity. Chosen affiliations or hobbies such as athlete, outdoorsman, cowboy, biker, artist, or environmentalist can influence our cultural identity development. We develop our individual and cultural identity as we define ourselves in relation to our environments, in our relationships with others, and in our participation in groups. We explore alternatives, make choices, and decide what we believe in, based on the experiences we have and our interactions with others. Thus, our identities are often a combination of the beliefs, values, and experiences we have been exposed to and shared with others.

## PRINCIPLES

- There is no checklist of behaviors or beliefs that describes a particular culture
- Every student should be understood from his/her unique frame of reference
- All students are a dynamic blend of multiple roles and identified cultural groups





## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BECOMING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE?

*These are varied and dependent upon the individual, but the following are common:*

- Increased level of comfort with members of different cultures
- Increased knowledge of own culture
- Increase in freedom to explore other ways of being
- Discovery of passions and interests that complement current interests
- Increased capacity to teach members of diverse cultures
- Increased resources and knowledge

## WHAT IS CULTURAL RESPONSIVITY?

Cultural responsivity refers to the ability to learn from and relate respectfully to people from your own and other cultures. It includes adjusting your behaviors based on things that you learn about other cultures. It requires openness to experiencing and thinking about things from other points of view.

Cultural responsivity is not something that you master once and then forget; it is not about changing others to be more like you. It is about cultivating an open attitude and acquiring new skills, and it involves exploring and honoring your own culture while learning about and honoring other people's cultures. Developing the ability to be culturally responsive is a life-long journey that is both enriching and rewarding.

## HOW DO PRACTITIONERS BECOME CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE?

### 1. *Develop cultural self-awareness.*

Think about the different factors that have influenced your own cultural identity development. How have these factors influenced your beliefs and values? Have your beliefs and values changed over time? Why and how? Be aware of cultural values that you hold and understand that others may hold different values.

### 2. *Appreciate the value of diverse views.*

Think about friends or acquaintances that have different values than yours. Can you understand their point of view? Can you accept that their values are different from yours without judging them to be wrong?



Think of a specific belief that you hold, then list what other perspectives of that belief might be. Can you identify advantages to holding the other perspective?

**3. *Avoid imposing your own values.***

As you become familiar with the values that you hold, and identify the differences in values that others hold, think about how the choice you make are based in your values and beliefs. When observing or interacting with others, and something makes you uncomfortable, resist the urge to make a judgment about the person or behavior; instead, make a conscious effort to understand the perspective they may be coming from.



**4. *Resist stereotyping.*** List as many stereotypes as you can think of, including both “positive” and “negative” examples (Asians are good at math, gay men have an eye for fashion, blondes are dumb, Blacks are natural athletes, women are emotional). Think about people you know who fall in these groups. Consider the accuracy of these statements. Identify groups that you belong to. Do the stereotypes accurately reflect the way you see yourself?

**5. *Examine your own teaching for bias.***

Make a list of all the students in your class- then, write a sentence or two about each students strengths and challenges. Review your list and look

## INDICATORS OF CULTURAL RESPONSIVITY

- Awareness of and sensitivity to personal cultural heritage/s
- Value and respect for differences between cultures
- Awareness of the role of cultural background and experiences, attitudes, and values in creating unconscious and conscious bias that influence communication and connection with others
- Acknowledgement of personal competency and expertise
- Comfort with differences that exist between self and students in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and beliefs
- Sensitivity towards potential negative emotional reactions toward others that may cloud interpersonal connections
- Willingness to contrast own beliefs and attitudes with those of culturally different people in a non-judgmental fashion
- Awareness of personal stereotypes and preconceived notions about individuals with differing experiences, cultural orientations, language and abilities.



for patterns. Do you identify boys more frequently as behaving poorly but as curious? Do you identify girls as being good communicators but poor at math? Are there similarities in your perceptions of students from similar ethnic, economic, or family backgrounds? What might these patterns mean about your unconscious beliefs?

6. **Build on student strengths.** Instead of focusing on what students can't do or don't know, identify a few strengths for each student in your class. Think about how you could use that strength to increase their success in other areas that are more challenging.
7. **Discover your students' primary cultural roles, incorporate culture into your teaching.** Make conversations about culture a part of your daily interactions with students- take opportunities to discuss values and beliefs, to understand behaviors, to develop activities that explore the similarities and differences between students.
8. **Learn what you can** from others by visiting their celebrations, reading information about other cultures, talking with members of that culture
9. **Accept your own naiveté** as a culturally responsive individual-

forgive your mistakes, we all make them and can only continue to learn from them

10. **Remember that this is a journey, not a destination;** it is a life long process to learn about and appreciate our own and others cultural values and beliefs.

## WHAT ARE RESOURCES THAT YOU CAN USE TO INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER CULTURES?

1. **Visit your local library or bookstore.** Browse through the children's book section and look for stories from other cultures. Ask your librarian or bookstore owner for recommendations of authors in your favorite genre that are from other cultural backgrounds than yours. Check out the biographies and autobiographies of people from different cultural backgrounds. Look for novels that explore the difficulties of moving from one country to another, of overcoming hardships, of growing up in non traditional families.
2. **Explore the internet.** Do searches on topics of interest to you. Look for websites that contain information about different cultures, or that focus on culture and teaching. Search for websites about identity development and learning styles. Find websites that





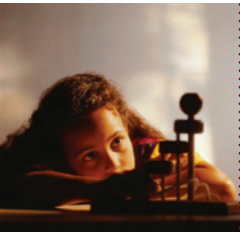
offer classroom activities designed to explore culture and discover student strengths.

3. **Attend local cultural celebrations.** In your hometown, or while traveling, seek out opportunities to explore your own and other cultures by participating in street fairs, festivals, or other cultural celebrations. Enjoy the art, demonstrations, and foods. Read about the traditions depicted in various scenes. Ask questions about

the history of the celebration.  
Observe people.

## CONTACT LOCAL CULTURALLY BASED ORGANIZATIONS.

Look in your local yellow pages for organizations with a specific focus on culture or diversity. Call them. They may have activities that are ongoing, they may be able to set up a presentation for your colleagues or students about their organization.



## SOME WEB RESOURCES

- [www.urbanschools.org](http://www.urbanschools.org)
- [www.nccrest.org](http://www.nccrest.org)
- [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org)
- [www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-index.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-index.html)
- [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/index.html](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/index.html)
- [www.proteacher.com/090031.shtml](http://www.proteacher.com/090031.shtml)
- [www.education-world.com/a\\_lesson/archives/soc\\_sci.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/archives/soc_sci.shtml)

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# Student Art



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## GREAT URBAN SCHOOLS:

❖  
Produce high achieving students.

❖  
Construct education for  
social justice, access and equity.

❖  
Expand students' life opportunities,  
available choices and community contributions.

❖  
Build on the extraordinary resources that  
urban communities provide for life-long learning.

❖  
Use the valuable knowledge and experience that  
children and their families bring to school learning.

❖  
Need individuals, family organizations and communities to  
work together to create future generations of possibility.

❖  
Practice scholarship by creating partnerships  
for action-based research and inquiry.

❖  
Shape their practice based on evidence of what  
results in successful learning of each student.

❖  
Foster relationships based on care,  
respect and responsibility.

❖  
Understand that people learn in different  
ways throughout their lives.

❖  
Respond with learning  
opportunities that work.



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