

Sheets, R. H. (2005). *Diversity pedagogy; Examining the role of culture in the teaching-learning process*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

CHAPTER 1

STUDENT LEARNING AND CULTURE

Cultural diversity is strength — a persistent, vitalizing force in our personal and civic lives.... It is then, a useful resource for improving educational effectiveness for all students. Just as the evocation of their European American, middle-class heritage contributes to the achievement of White Americans, using the cultures and experiences of Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Latino Americans, and African Americans facilitates their school success (Gay, 2000, p. 14).

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are the single most important resource in any classroom. As a result, few professionals hold as much potential and responsibility for improving the schooling experiences of children as teachers in classrooms. Students' success or failure and acceptance or rejection often depend on the ways teachers behave in classrooms. Complex, interpersonal teaching-learning events require teachers to create **equitable** (fair and impartial) learning conditions.

The purpose of this chapter is to help teachers recognize the critical connection between culture and schooling. The first part, student learning and culture, examines culture as a socialization process, discusses the power of culture, and explores how culture is sustained and maintained in a society. This is followed by classroom applications.

STUDENT LEARNING AND CULTURE

The word culture generally conjures different ideas about what it means in peoples' mind. Understanding a concept such as culture may be challenging due to its complexity and to the tendency to personalize or simplify its meaning. In this section, three aspects of culture are discussed: (a) its role in the socialization process, (b) the powerful influence it has in children's human developmental processes, and (c) the ways that it is maintained and sustained. These views of culture can help teachers acknowledge its significant role in the teaching-learning process.

CULTURE AS A SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

Anthropologists use the term **enculturation** to describe the process of being socialized to a particular culture. The **socialization process** can be defined as the ways human infants, born without any culture, acquire the **cultural knowledge** of their parents and caregivers. During this transmission of culture, children gain the cultural knowledge of their social group. **Cultural knowledge** includes the language, values, belief systems, and **norms** (concepts of appropriate and expected behaviors). The ways children display and internalize the cultural knowledge learned in their homes and communities influences the development of self and establishes a sense of belonging (Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota 1993).

Pai and Adler (2001) define culture as:

[Culture is] a system of norms, standards, and control mechanisms with which members of society assign meanings, values, and significance of things, events, and behaviors; culture includes patterns of knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as material artifacts produced by human society and transmitted from one generation to another (p. 245).

Some scholars maintain that adults, in a purposeful and systematic manner, impose on their children culturally determined ways of seeing, feeling, and acting (Barrett, 1984; Geertz, 1973). As a result, the knowledge and responses learned by children in their socialization process are not spontaneous in nature; rather, they are deliberate and intended. For example, children by the age of 2 or 3 speak a particular language and share the complex norms and belief systems from their homes that guide their thinking and behavior. Children do not choose to speak Navajo if reared in a Vietnamese speaking home anymore than they can determine which modes and styles of communication and etiquette to emulate.

Kluckhohn (1949) describes the socialization process as a blueprint with distinct cultural patterns, which determine certain predictability of cognitive and social actions. In the classroom, it can be assumed that some of the students' skills and competencies learned in their cultural group will differ from the behaviors and skills of their teachers who may be socialized in a different cultural group. Some teachers may not be aware of this cultural mismatch. Differences in teachers' and students' cultural strengths, norms, and values can be problematic in classrooms that operate with a single culture model.

Vignette 1.1 and 1.2 demonstrate how diverse cultural norms may produce various assumptions and expectations among teachers, parents, and students.

Vignette 1.1

Mothers and Children

In Ms. Nelson's kindergarten classroom, some of the Chinese American mothers come to school every day at lunch time. They bring hot lunches and hand-feed their five-year old children. In another kindergarten classroom, Mexican American mothers walk their children to school. When the bell rings they enter the classrooms with their children. They walk children to their tables and help them take off their jackets off. They hang their children's jackets and book bags on the hooks, generally located in the back of the room, before leaving the classroom. When parent-teacher conferences were held in early October, a European American mother proudly told her child's teacher that Elizabeth could tie her own shoes when she was 4-years-old.

Issues for Consideration:

Note that some families may value interdependence while others may promote independence. How are cultural customs evident in the behaviors of these mothers and children consistent with or in possible conflict with traditional school norms? How would a teacher's cultural perspective influence the ways they judge the behaviors and competencies of the children and parents in each of these incidents?

Vignette 1.2

Excused or Unexcused Absences

In a Texas high school, a 15-year-old girl is allowed by her parents to miss a day of school to get her hair done and prepare for her *Quincienra*, a cultural rite of passage. In a middle school in the Midwest, a Jewish American 10th grader asks permission to make up a test which falls during a Jewish holiday. Since there is a no make-up test policy, and this student is absent on the day of the test, he loses 20 points. An upper middle-class European American mother explains to the teacher that she will take her 4th grade child out of school for a 2-week family vacation in Europe. The teacher approves of this absence since she believes it is a valuable experience.

Issues for Consideration:

What criteria should be used to judge an absence legitimate? Should one absence be considered more valid than another? Who should decide? Should schools have general attendance policies?

In the classroom, most teachers are able to detect differences in home rearing practices displayed in the children's behavior. It is this skillful observation of student behavior that provides teachers with

important cultural information. Teachers who succeed with culturally diverse children are able to recognize diverse children's cultural strengths and skills. They use this cultural knowledge to make learning events more meaningful. These teachers encourage children to openly display and apply their cultural knowledge to new learning.

The Power of Culture

Cultural anthropologists describe the enormous power culture exercises over people's behaviors because it determines which norms to apply when organizing thoughts and shaping beliefs (Barrett, 1984; Pai & Adler, 2001). To belong to and receive recognition, approval, and acceptance from their group, individuals learn to make decisions that maintain the groups' values and norms. Through repeated social interactions with members from their group, children practice and acquire their groups' competencies, skills, values, and attitudes. They learn to control their behavior and to participate in the maintenance of their group norms. Geertz's (1973) definition points out the powerful force of culture:

Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns — customs, usages, traditions, habits clusters — as has been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms — plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”) — for governing of behavior (p. 44).

Given that culture frames people's **habits of the mind** (automatic, internalized thinking routines) and ways of understanding the world, students who are required to engage in unfamiliar habits of mind from another culture in the classroom find themselves having to do things that do not fit with what they know, or forming opinions that do not match the beliefs they hold. Psychologists call this inconsistency **cognitive dissonance** — discord between behavior and belief (Festinger, 1957; Fiske, Kitayma, Markus & Nisbett, 1998). When faced with these contradictions, an attitude change takes place to accommodate the behavior and individuals' attempt to cognitively justify performing a behavior that violates their beliefs and values.

Festinger (1957) considered the human need to avoid dissonance as basic as the human need for safety and the need to satisfy hunger. Since people require psychological consistency, the tension and discomfort created by dissonance motivates them to (a) reduce the importance of the dissonance beliefs, (b) add more consonant beliefs to outweigh the dissonance beliefs, and (c) make efforts to avoid distressing feelings by changing either the behavior or minimizing the dissonance beliefs. According to Festinger, the intensity of the dissonance depends on the importance of the issue and the degree of discrepancy between the belief and the behavior. Since dissonance theory applies to all situations involving attitude formation and change, it is considered especially relevant to decision-making and problem solving. The situations in Vignette 1.3 and 1.4 show how dissonance in schooling events causes children to expend emotional energy, which may at times interfere with learning.

Vignette 1.3

Status of One

Jason, an African American 9th grade student is enrolled in an honors mathematics class. He is the only African American student in the class. He feels uncomfortable and excluded by his classmates. His friends are in other math sections. Dissonance exists between his beliefs that he has signed up for the section that he belongs in and that this class should be comfortable.

Dissonance can be eliminated by deciding that he can handle the discomfort because the class is only 50 minutes long and he has friends in his other classes (reducing the importance of the dissonant belief) or by focusing on the class strengths, such as it is part of his college preparation coursework, he can handle the level of difficulty, and his parents are proud that he is in this class (thereby adding more consonant beliefs). Dropping the class and enrolling in a different math section could also eliminate the dissonance, but this behavior is more difficult to achieve than changing the belief that he should feel comfortable in this class.

Issues for Consideration:

In this case, the teacher is not aware of the discomfort experienced by Jason. Jason remained in the class. How are the same classroom conditions different for Jason? Is it the teacher's responsibility to notice, minimize, and eliminate student discomfort? What happens to children when stressful situations accumulate? Why are events of this nature easily ignored? What are some of the signs that the student might exhibit that you, as teacher, would most likely notice?

Vignette 1.4***Sharing a Bread Roll***

In the school's lunchroom, Ana, a 5-year-old Mexican American girl quickly hides her bread roll in her pocket but feels uncomfortable and fears being caught. The lunch monitor often takes the roll away from her and throws it in the trash as she files out to lunch recess. There is a rule that food cannot be removed from the cafeteria. Her parents are proud when she brings something home to share with her 4-year-old brother, and her little brother is delighted with the daily treat.

Dissonance exists between her beliefs that she should share with her brother and that this culturally approved practice should be comfortable. Dissonance could be eliminated by deciding that she can handle the discomfort because some of the time she is not caught (reducing the importance of the dissonant belief) or by focusing on her parents' positive response and little brother's reactions to the roll she brings home every day (thereby adding more consonant beliefs). Eating the roll and not bringing it home to her brother could also eliminate the dissonance, but this behavior is more difficult to achieve than changing the belief that she should share with her brother.

Issues for Consideration:

In this case, the teacher was aware of the situation. She met with the cafeteria cook. Ana was given a baggie for the roll. The roll was put in the teacher's box by a cafeteria student helper. When Ana returned from lunch recess, she put the baggie with the roll in her book bag to take home. Do you think that events taking place outside the classroom affect children's learning in the classroom? How can you as a teacher become aware of what happens in other places, such as the lunchroom or the playground? Do you think it is your responsibility to know what happens to children during the school day when they are not in your classroom?

Cognitive dissonance often takes place in school settings where children have to reconcile and make sense of the customs from another culture which conflict with their own knowledge or opinion about oneself and the world. They may have to resolve conflicting beliefs and values. Changes in beliefs might take place when students have conflicting beliefs because they are required to work independently and competitively, use unfamiliar communication styles, assume conflicting gender roles, maintain a relationship with teachers who they believe dislike them, or interact with the teacher in ways that differ from the ways they interact with significant others from their culture. Repeated demands to function in the unfamiliar habits of mind from another culture places children outside their psychological comfort zone. It is often experienced without the benefit of teacher assistance. The arduous cognitive task and exhausting psychological stress involved is rarely acknowledged. Some students learn to engage in unfamiliar habits of mind and succeed academically; others who do not overcome this barrier are often unsuccessful in school.

The Maintenance of Culture

In societies composed of multiple cultural groups, such as the U.S., a dominant cultural group generally surfaces. The dominant cultural group uses available societal institutions, such as universities, public schools, government, and the media, under their control to maintain and sustain its position and to

establish acceptable societal norms and values. In the U.S. members of the dominant group are part of the **mainstream culture** and they are identified as the **majority group**. Individuals with membership in the various other groups are identified as part of the **minority culture**. Since they are perceived as having different characteristics, traits, and abilities, they are considered non-mainstream and may be viewed as disadvantaged.

To succeed socially, academically, politically, and economically, individuals from groups identified as minority must learn how to function in the dominant, mainstream culture. The dominant group expects minority group members to adapt. For most people, this adaptation involves change through a process of acculturation or one of assimilation. **Acculturation** refers to the changes that occur when individuals from the minority group adopt and accept the dominant cultural groups' norms, values, and behaviors. However, these changes are often made under certain conditions, in specific settings, and for particular purposes. For example, some Bilingual (Spanish/English) teachers will choose to speak English in the staff room even when they know that some staff members speak Spanish. They will carefully determine when and to whom to speak Spanish. These individuals are aware of the value of Spanish and will most likely make sure their children learn both Spanish and English. **Assimilation**, on the other hand, is the change that takes place when minority group members adopt the dominant cultural groups' norms, attitudes, and values and reject or distance themselves from their own cultural group. In this case, native Spanish speakers cease using Spanish in all public settings. The children of these individuals are likely to experience native language loss because their parents might consciously promote an English only orientation. They might believe that being monolingual English speakers ensures better performance in school, provides access to more economic opportunities, and results in speaking English without an accent. Both acculturation and assimilation for individuals from minority groups requires **decision-making** (a judgment and choice) and attitude change. Generally, assuming attitudes and displaying behaviors contrary to one's personal cultural values, norms, and worldviews involve some degree of discomfort.

In the United States the dominant, mainstream culture is European American, middle-class, and Protestant. The racial group is White. The social and economic status is middle-class. Individuals from this group dress in particular modes, use certain communication styles, speak English, prefer specific foods, sanction selected holidays, display distinct cognitive and social skills, and hold cultural values that are perceived as normal. Some of this group's cultural values include: individualism (self-reliance and autonomy), freedom (personal, intellectual, and political rights), equality (all citizens are entitled to economic, legal, political and social equality), justice (a sense of fairness, legal and personal), competition (success is based on individual achievement), and diversity (protection of and full participation of diverse groups) (Adams, 1988; Hollins, 1996). While most mainstream U.S. citizens claim to uphold these beliefs, at times, the equitable (fair and impartial) application to all citizens is influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity, social class, economic status, and sexual orientation. Nonetheless, these values are perceived to be part of the national culture, and as such are evident in school practices.

It is also important to note that many European Americans, such as those who have experienced generational poverty and substandard schooling, new immigrants, and individuals with diverse religious affiliations, do not necessarily experience a mainstream socialization process. Individuals from these groups do not automatically possess the same styles, skills, behaviors, values, and norms of the dominant culture. However, since they inherit racial markers (skin color, facial features, hair texture) the process of acculturation or assimilation, for some, when and if chosen, historically has been less problematic. Additionally, some individuals who share the same race as the dominant culture may choose (or not choose) to identify with the dominant group because they may be excluded or feel excluded by the dominant group or believe that they have not had equal access to opportunities. For example, some females, people with ability differences, those who come from poverty, gay and lesbian individuals, and White persons who identify with minority groups may not enjoy the same advantages as mainstream European American people.

One might ask, “Why does a democratic country with a population as diverse as the United States continue to be dominated by a single cultural group?” How is this cultural supremacy maintained and sustained? An important factor contributing to the dominant status of the European American culture in the United States has been the institutionalization of that culture. European American culture is pervasive in the governmental structure, workplace, schools, and media. For example, although there are multiple styles of communication and hundreds of languages spoken in the United States, consider the ways in which a particular style of communication and a specific world language is institutionalized. The mainstream culture determines the appropriate way of social, business, and academic discourse. There is an established code of etiquette that determines the proper volume, tone, and level of intensity, acceptable eye contact, appropriate physical distance, correct grammar, and allowable accent. Depending on the level of annoyance and embarrassment that people who do not follow these communication norms cause, they may be considered rude, uneducated, ignorant, or boorish. Thus, talking too loud, too soft, too fast, being too emotional, standing too close, or speaking with certain types of accents may be considered inappropriate or offensive. This social disapproval is a way people from other cultural and economic backgrounds are discouraged to engage in their own cultural patterns of communication.

In terms of language, English is the *de facto*, and in some cases the *de jure*, language in the United States. American English is commonly referred to as Standard English. Bilingual individuals are discouraged to publicly use their heritage language except when permission is given for economic, entertainment, or political convenience. Speaking in a language other than American English may be suppressed or prohibited in classrooms, faculty rooms, and work places. The rise of the English Only movement in the last decade, aimed at eliminating bilingual programs, suggests that language differences may be perceived as a threat to the dominant culture (Gonzalez & Melis, 2001).

The **privatization** (restricted, furtive, and at times, forbidden public use) of the cultural knowledge of people from ethnic groups of color, given the elevated status of the European American culture has real implications for school practices and student achievement outcomes (Sheets & Hollins, 1999). Vignette 1.5 (Tyson, 1999) exemplifies what happens in classrooms when children’s cultural knowledge is excluded or included in the teaching-learning process.

Vignette 1.5

No Little Red

I asked him why he appeared not to be interested in the stories I read to the class. I will never forget his reply: “There ain’t no Little Red in my hood, and I catch one of ‘dem little piggies, I’m gon’ have a Bar-B-Que.” ...[When] contemporary realistic literature and the ways in which the tying of this literature to events in the boys’ lives [was used]...the boys begin to discover and supplement the fictional information with factual information. They begin to scrutinize and interrupt the information through cause and effect, hypothesizing ideas and predictions, inferring or deciphering character traits bringing personal insight and their own experience to their literary interpretations (Tyson, 1999, p. 156).

Issues for Consideration:

In this classroom event, Tyson (1999) describes what happened in a classroom when the cultural content in the children’s literature selections did not acknowledge the cultural knowledge of some of the students in the classroom. Some fifth-grade African American male children did not engage in lessons. Tyson describes the changes that took place academically when a more culturally inclusive literature was chosen. Other than the changes in content selection, what other changes do you think took place?

Along with the curricular content, the quality of teacher-student interpersonal relationships, the types of instructional methods, and the emotional and physical nature of the classroom context generally benefit children who have been socialized in the European American culture. The ability to: stand quietly in line, receive directions all day from a single adult, raise hand and wait to be called upon before

speaking, work independently and competitively in a classroom with 20 other same-age children, be responsible for only self, and go to the bathroom at a specific time may appear strange for children who come from homes with large extended families, who live in a social context where people freely talk and move about, where they are responsible for the family unit, and where they have access to four or five caring adults as well as older siblings and cousins. Vignette 1.6 describes Benjamin's experience.

Vignette 1.6

First Week of Kindergarten

Benjamin is raised in a traditional Chinese American family home with his mother, father, paternal grandmother and grandfather, one uncle, and two older cousins. After a week of kindergarten, he was asked how he liked school. Benjamin remarked, "Well, we just have one teacher. Nobody can talk [ex]cept the teacher." Since he was expecting to learn how to read, he added with disdain, "We don't even read."

Issues for Consideration:

Do you think Benjamin expected school to be different than what he is experiencing? Why do you think Benjamin used we instead of I? What do you think of his observation of unfamiliar restrictive talk, and his observation that there was only one adult in his classroom?

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

The myriad of factors contained within the personality, heritage, intelligence, experiences, and commitment of teachers cannot be minimized in the teaching-learning process. It is important to understand how one's personal **cultural knowledge**, shared systems of meaning acquired by observation, imitation, or instruction from members of one's cultural group, guides our behavior. Likewise, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that acquiring knowledge of cultural groups that differ from self is needed to enhance and develop the types of pedagogical tools needed to teach diverse students. Competent teachers acknowledge the connection between culture and learning and understand that the journey from novice to expert teacher is developmental. This process requires reflection, knowledge, time, hard work, and sustained commitment. The following suggestions may provide a starting point.

Examining Personal Thinking Habits

Critically examine and become attentive to how your personal thinking habits influence classroom decisions. For example:

1. Acknowledge how you are dependent on your internal and external judgments, as well as influences from the judgments of others, when making decisions regarding your capabilities to teach and your students' ability to learn. Examine your patterns of thinking and make changes when necessary. Develop habits of mind to guide culturally inclusive teaching decisions.
2. Become aware of how you respond to differences in students' appearances, values, and behaviors. View diversity factors, such as ethnicity, language, gender, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation, as part of the norm and consider them as important as factors such as time, age, grade level, social skills, and academic ability when planning instructional events.

Observing Student Response to Instruction

Consistently interpret how your students respond to the classroom climate, instructional strategies, and curricular content. For example:

1. Adapt instruction in anticipation of the subsequent social and cognitive steps students need to acquire new knowledge.
2. Use cultural knowledge from multiple perspectives to create classroom conditions that uphold the entitlements of more students to a quality education. Competently envision how students may connect curricular content to prior cultural knowledge and experiences.

Assuming Responsibility for Pedagogical Knowledge

Professionally and realistically acknowledge what you do not know and assume responsibility to learn what you need to learn to develop into an expert teacher. For example:

1. Realize that teaching is a profession not a job; and, therefore requires tenacity, courage, and heart to develop the confidence and skills to teach students equitably. View teaching as a life-long, honorable profession, and identify the knowledge, skills, and experiences you will need to develop from a novice teacher to an expert teacher. Acknowledge the complexity of the teaching-learning process, the intensity of the never-ending work, and the issues of low pay and low status affecting early teacher drop-rates without either minimizing or romanticizing these concerns.
2. Identify areas of pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. Develop a plan of action to acquire the knowledge needed to obtain a high level of effectiveness to help you create conditions that enable more students to achieve desired social and academic outcomes. Learn how to teach yourself cultural content knowledge of other groups, from these groups' perspectives, to help you create and evaluate instructional resources and implement effective instructional strategies.

CONCLUSION

Positive outcomes for some students may depend on the teacher's ability to conceptualize the role of culture and apply it in the teaching-learning process. Teachers who strive to be culturally inclusive realize that students are able to develop and demonstrate high levels of competency without sacrificing any aspect of identity. They understand that students' out-of-school-learning, thinking, and problem-solving skills learned by their participation in ordinary cultural practices and rituals have value. These competent teachers also realize that cultural differences require instructional accommodation.

The ability to recognize and respond to students' cultural knowledge, to be able to discern the cultural nuances students disclose and to know how to adapt instruction appropriately, may possibly be some of the most important factors in the teaching-learning process. Perhaps it is this skill that potentially separates the competent from the well intentioned, the expert from the novice, and the gifted from the ordinary. While some teachers may develop this skill instinctively, *all teachers* can acquire proficiency through conscious awareness of personal habits of mind and sharp observational skills. Teachers' recognition of the knowledge, competencies, and behaviors children acquire in their upbringing and their willingness to utilize these characteristics in the classroom, establishes teaching-learning conditions that potentially benefit more students.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Hollins, E. R. (1996). *Culture in school learning: Revealing the deep meaning*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
Pai, Y., & Adler, S. A. (2001). *Cultural foundations of education* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.