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**Facts, Statistics, and Theories on Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity
Module 2: Culture and Pluralism**

An overview and extensive PowerPoint display and a disk.

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**FACTS, STATISTICS, AND THEORIES ON RACIAL ETHNIC, AND CULTURAL
DIVERSITY**

MODULE 2: CULTURE AND PLURALISM

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AN OVERVIEW

The purpose of this paper is to provide you, the instructor, with background information on culture and pluralism, and to facilitate the use of the accompanying PowerPoint slide presentation on this topic for classroom use. This paper is based on the literature within the field of multicultural education, primarily the writings of Donna M. Gollnick and Philip C. Chinn (2002).

WHAT IS CULTURE?

There are many different ways of defining culture. Hollins (1997) defines culture as the underlying phenomenon guiding humanity. Hollins cites a definition of culture by Barrett (1984), as “the body of learned beliefs, traditions, and guides for behavior that are shared among members of any human society” (p. 54). Gollnick and Chinn (2002) suggest that culture is a way of perceiving, believing, evaluating, and behaving. In other words, the way an individual views an event, or an experience, is a function of the individual’s culture and how the individual perceives the event through his or her cultural lens.

The manner in which the individual responds to the event is also influenced by the person’s culture. For example, how a young child views school and an education is in part due to the child’s culture. If the culture of the home has taught the child that school is a wonderful place to learn, and to prepare oneself, the student will likely view school in a positive manner and behave accordingly. Teachers with children whose culture places a high value on education will generally have little difficulty in motivating these students. On the other hand, if the parents have had negative experiences in school and communicate to their child that school is a place where they themselves experienced

failure, frustration, and rejection, their child may enter the school experience with less enthusiasm, and an unwilling attitude. Therefore, if culture devalues the educational system, this will impose serious challenges to success in school.

The definition of culture implies an expectation of distinct behaviors and rituals. every cultural group has its unique way of celebrating marriage, the birth of a child, or mourning the loss of a loved one. These are a few examples that illustrate how particular cultural groups may influence the way people view significant events in life.

Characteristics of Culture

Culture has many different characteristics. Culture is (a) learned, (b) shared, (c) an adaptation, and (d) a dynamic system changing continuously (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). A description of these characteristics follows.

Learned. We are not born with our culture. We may be born into a cultural group, but we must learn the accepted behaviors used by the people within a culture. This is evident when we see children of immigrants who are born in their parent's new country, and who adapt quickly and learn the ways of the people in their adopted country. A Vietnamese American student who was born in the U. S. and who is fully acculturated into the American life-style will likely have learned to use American slang and other language idiosyncrasies, wear clothing styles worn by the young people, and listen to popular music. The individual may also use hand and arm gestures while talking, and walk like a typical American teen, rather than like his or her relatives living in Vietnam. These are learned behaviors. They can be learned from observing peers, watching television, and going to the movies among other things.

By learning particular behaviors used by mainstream youth in the United States, children of U.S. immigrants have become a part of the American teen culture. Difficulties can arise however, including peer rejection. If the individual from a different cultural and linguistic background is unable to learn the new culture, isolation from other teens may occur. Furthermore, if the student has a cognitive limitation or other disability, peer acceptance may be difficult or impossible without intervention.

Shared. Culture is shared. It is what binds a group of individuals together. Culture gives the group meaning. People of a particular culture generally understand each other and share common values and behaviors but conflict with expectations of common values and behaviors of a group may occur. For example, as a group, most American Indians hold their elders in high esteem. A young American Indian with a Ph.D. indicated that there was little esteem accorded to him for his educational accomplishments. When he reached the age of 40, however, he would then expect some additional respect from fellow tribal members. If only one or two individuals believe or behave in a certain way, it is probably not representative of a culture. Students from diverse backgrounds may not experience very many shared values from their peers of different cultures, which may promote isolation or peer rejection.

Adaptation. Culture is an adaptation. Gollnick and Chinn (2002) suggest that culture accommodates natural resources and environmental conditions. Adaptation is observable anywhere in the world. Island people (e. g. Japanese) can teach us about adaptation. Because an island is surrounded by water, and typically has an abundance of fish, the islanders may rely heavily on seafood for their diet. Even if the seafood is no longer as abundant, it remains a significant part of the food culture and may be imported from other areas. Another example of adaptation is when individuals build homes out of materials abundant in their geographic area. They also tend to build in a manner that provides optimal comfort, and efficiency, which is congruent with climatic conditions. Therefore, cultural adaptation accommodates geographic location, natural resources and environmental conditions while providing comfort and well-being to cultural groups.

Dynamic. Culture is a dynamic system which changes continuously. It is easy to mark change in music, hairstyles, clothing, and even language. Change may take place for the sake of change, or because of new developments or new information. One can observe change taking place with the advent of new technology. Changes from day to day may be subtle, but we can clearly see others over time in clothing, hairstyles and automobiles. For both men and women, changes in styles are evident when we

look at photos from the past. Even though rock and roll music of the 60's, and rock and roll music of today are identified by the same name, one can listen and observe many differences.

Manifestations of Culture

Culture can manifest itself in several different ways. Among our most common manifestations of culture are our values, non-verbal communication, and language. A description of these manifestations of culture follows.

Values. Values are notions of what is important to you and those in your cultural group. Every cultural group has its own set of values. A cultural group generally prioritizes thoughts, views, and behaviors that are important to it. In some cultural groups, material possessions are very important, and accumulation of certain types of material artifacts may give one status in the culture. Another culture may give status to parents whose children achieve recognition for excelling in the school community.

Furthermore, within a school setting students sometimes find considerable conflict between contradicting values of the family, home, and peers. For instance, the peers may want the individual to party, drink and use drugs, which are incongruent with the values of the home. Conflicts such as these cause turmoil between students' cultural values and desires to be accepted by peers.

Non-verbal communication. Cultural groups often have their own unique non-verbal communication styles. An educator should be aware of what the non-verbal communication is actually relaying to students and parents. Another form of non-verbal communication is contact. For some, a warm, caring embrace by family and friends is an everyday experience. Some cultural groups can be characterized as contact cultures. Other groups are more typically characterized as primarily non-contact cultures. Asians are typically characterized as using limited contact or "non-contact." (There is often bowing and polite handshakes among many Asians.) In general, Asians are less likely to embrace and touch each other than other groups characterized as contact cultures (e.g. French, Latino).

It is imperative the teacher learn the cultural differences among students. A teacher accustomed to patting students on the head will find parents of many Southeast Asian students objecting to this. For some Asian cultures, the spirit of the individual resides within the head, and thus a nonchalant pat on the head is unacceptable.

When being disciplined by the teacher, Latino children may look at their feet or the floor. Looking directly into the teacher's eyes may be considered disrespectful by people from the child's culture. The teacher, however, may have a contrasting cultural view and may feel that the child's refusal to look at her while she is talking is being disrespectful. If the teacher demands "Look at me when I talk to you," the student may become confused or afraid. A teacher accustomed to motioning with her index finger for students to come to her must understand that, in some Southeast Asian cultures, this may be considered obscene and the way one calls an animal. These examples underscore the importance of understanding cultural differences.

Language. Language binds people together. Chinese-Americans, who are born in the U. S. and who speak standard American English, will often find that they have closer bonds with other non-Chinese Standard English speakers than with Chinese speakers from Taiwan or China. Black Americans, Cubans, and Puerto Rican Blacks share a common race and ancestry. Yet, because of the language differences, Black Americans may find little in common with Spanish-speaking Caribbean Blacks because of the linguistic differences. When they do not share a culture of language, an immediate barrier is established.

This may also be true for other groups of people, such as individuals who speak Creole, (a combination of words and phrases from English and other languages.) A Creole speaker may use Hawaiian Pidgin and may not be able to relate to another Creole speaker who uses Louisiana Cajun or another English dialect. Consequently, language and communication are often an essential element in forming cultural bonds between individuals. Individuals with disabilities may also experience language

connections. For instance, many individuals who are hearing impaired use sign language to communicate, and this form of communication creates a unique cultural bond between these individuals.

MULTICULTURAL TERMS

Before we complete our discussion of culture, it would be helpful to recognize some basic terms, such as pluralism and multiculturalism, which are frequently used in the field of multicultural education.

Multiculturalism and *cultural pluralism* are terms frequently used in multicultural education.

They are sometimes used interchangeably by choice or by restrictions for various ethnic and immigrant groups who have not assimilated into the dominant American culture. This has resulted in the *cultural pluralism* that we find in the United States. Some of these groups include oppressed ethnic or religious groups, which have maintained their own unique communities, churches, and social institutions. Contact with individuals outside of the cultural group (cross-cultural contact), may occur in places which are considered to be at a secondary level, such as the workplace, school, or other required social situations. Communities populated primarily by particular groups throughout the country, (Chinatown, Korea Town, Amish communities, and even communities populated primarily by individuals with visual impairments) foster, encourage, and facilitate the preservation and identities of various cultural groups.

Multiculturalism is a movement or a philosophy, which encourages the reflection of gender, race, class, religion and language diversity all of which can be recognized in all aspects of society, especially educational institutions (e.g. staff, curriculum, students). *Multicultural education* is related in philosophy to *multiculturalism*. It is an educational strategy, which encourages the use of a student's background to develop effective classroom instruction. Instruction is designed to support and extend the concepts of culture, diversity, equality, social justice and democracy in school and society. When teachers use multicultural education, students may begin to question inconsistencies present in our country. For example, Chinese laborers built and laid the railroad tracks that connect the Eastern United States to the West. Students may view the celebratory photographs of men driving the golden spike, which joined the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Summit in Utah. The significant event symbolized bringing

together the Eastern United States with the West. A hundred years later the event was re-created at the same location. In the original photographs and in the re-creation of the event Chinese people were not included. Yet it was the Chinese laborers who built and laid the railroad tracks. Cultural pluralism in the schools would help students recognize that while the photographs of the completion of the transcontinental railroad failed to include the Chinese laborers, the ancestors of many Chinese American citizens played a vital role in the development of the United States.

When teachers incorporate cultural pluralism into the curriculum all students learn to recognize the great contributions in the United States made by African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, American Indians and other individuals of color. While there are a few monuments in honor of people of color in Washington D.C. (e.g. Banneker Circle for Benjamin Banneker), most are in obscure places where few tourists see or hear about these individuals. When students have multicultural instruction included in their studies, they have a new sense of appreciation and pride in what people from distinct cultural backgrounds have contributed to the nation.

The macroculture is the universal or core culture in the country. There are aspects of culture that the vast majority of citizens share. In the United States, the macroculture has western European roots, especially White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP). While western European influences remain strong, today the macroculture is not limited to WASP influences. In the United States, the group that has the primary influence on the core culture is now the middle class, composed of individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Because teachers and other educators have considerable influence on what is valued in our society, they have the opportunity to influence their students almost daily. A few examples of the values of the macroculture include:

- Status based on occupation, education, and wealth
- Achievement valued over inheritance
- Work ethic
- Cleanliness

In the U. S., we give high status to certain individuals in occupations, which we hold in high esteem (e.g. medicine). We often give lower status to those in occupations that involve unskilled labor. Individuals with high levels of education are usually accorded a higher level of esteem. Individuals with high incomes or wealth may enjoy high status, though there are exceptions (for example, if the wealth has come through questionable means).

In most instances, we place greater value on the earning of wealth and success through *achievement rather than through inheritance*. If two individuals in a community have equal wealth and one has inherited all from his or her family, while the other has earned through diligence and hard work, they may be accorded differential status. In general, we in the United States place value on the achievements of an individual. In other countries and in some segments of U. S. society, being born into the “right family,” may be more important than earning a significant place in society by education or hard work.

In general, North Americans place considerable value on the *work ethic*. We tend to be resentful of a colleague or relative whom we view as lazy or who doesn't “pull his load.” We expect individuals to be industrious and productive, and there is often a stigma for those who are not.

Cleanliness, another value of the macroculture, is an absolute value for most North Americans. There is little tolerance for those individuals or establishments who are viewed as dirty and unkempt. However, bathing on a daily basis is not a value among some cultural groups. Consequently, some in this country may reject individuals from groups who do not bathe regularly.

Microcultures are sub-societies or subcultures, which exist within the context of the larger society. These microcultures share values, political and social institutions which may not be common to the macroculture. Among the most commonly cited microcultures are groups based on:

- ***Ethnicity:*** While some Americans have little if any ethnic identity, others maintain strong ties to their ethnic group. Throughout the United States there are ethnic enclaves where individuals tend to congregate and live. In major cities, we may find a Chinatown, Little Italy, or Little Tokyo. Although society often ascribes the person's identity to them (e.g. a Korean American student is treated differently by teachers and peers because he looks Asian even though adopted and raised by white parents) ethnic identity should be a matter of choice.
- ***Social Class:*** A child's socio-economic class often has a profound effect on how he or she thinks, feels, perceives and behaves. A person's social class can affect a student's life experiences and access to education, access to health care, and many other tangibles and intangibles.
- ***Gender:*** A student's gender can also have a profound effect on his or her perceptions and behaviors. In almost all societies, male children tend to be accorded a higher status and privilege. Gender socialization brings about different expectations and behaviors from males and females.
- ***Religion:*** The effect of religion on an individual can influence his/her entire perception of life and values. Religious and gender influence is often interwoven, with males sometimes accorded a higher status in the home and in relationships. Some religious beliefs allow only males to assume leadership positions. Religion can provide a blueprint for how males and females interact with one another and each individual's responsibilities in a family setting.
- ***Language:*** Language will often have a more dominant effect on relationships than ethnicity. Individuals from the same ethnic or racial background will often see themselves as very different if the primary language is different (e.g. English speaking Blacks from the Caribbean have little in common with Spanish speaking Blacks from the Caribbean).
- ***Age:*** An individual's age group has a profound effect on the perceptions of the world, and the values held. The teenager and her parents may have little in common with respect to food, music, clothing styles and the type of movies and television they enjoy.
- ***Exceptionality:*** Individuals who are highly gifted or who have disabilities may find greater comfort and acceptance in the company of those with similar exceptionalities. The highly gifted children may seek the company of those in their age group that are also gifted and who share similar interests, or they may find the needed stimulation in the company of older more mature students.

There are many other terms found in the literature related to culture, pluralism and multicultural education. The following are terms frequently used in the multicultural education literature.

Ethnocentrism is the inability to view other cultures as equally viable alternatives to organizing reality (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). An individual who is ethnocentric cannot see the value in the other culture's way of doing things or believing. The ethnocentric individual sees his or her way of doing or

believing as the only valid way. Ethnocentric individuals view their own culture as natural, superior, and correct. Other cultures are often seen as odd, amusing, inferior, and even immoral.

Cultural Relativism can be understood when remembering an old Indian proverb that provides understanding to this term: “Never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” Cultural relativism is an attempt to understand other cultural systems in their own terms in the context of their own cultural beliefs (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). To understand where the other individual is coming from, we must first look at the situation through his or her perspective. When individuals make an attempt to see events or situations from the cultural perspective of the person from another culture, they can better appreciate why people may behave as they do. As an example, many individuals in the United States have dogs in their homes as pets. Often these pets are viewed and treated as family members. Consequently, we are usually appalled when we learn that individuals from other cultural groups eat dogs. Yet we should understand that some cultural groups look down on us for treating animals like family members.

Anglo Conformity is a model that has consistently been used with culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). It is used in an attempt to bring these students into conformity with mainstream cultural values. It requires the student to give up the language and the values of the home in favor of the behaviors and the values of the dominant group.

Because of the efforts (directly and indirectly) to Anglicize students in the schools, thousands of individuals have given up the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of their homes. As adults, some lament the fact that they are no longer able to carry on a conversation in Italian, Chinese, or Spanish with grandparents or individuals of their same ethnic background. As children, they felt the need to assimilate to the point of giving up their family culture. Teachers who understand a child’s need to gain acceptance through acculturation can assist the child in doing so, without losing the culture of the home. They can help to instill pride in bilingual and bicultural skills with the ability to speak and function in more than

one cultural group. Having these skills would have personal, social, and even vocational advantages in today's diverse society.

Melting Pot is a term still used today. Some individuals view the more perfect American as the blended model American. The term originated with Israel Zangwill's 1906 play, "The Melting Pot," which viewed America as a divinely inspired crucible. In this crucible, all ethnic groups would be blended together and emerge as "model Americans." Ironically no individuals of color were included in Zangwill's cast of characters, as these blended Americans were viewed as European, (e.g. Irish, German, etc.), with no representation of African Americans, American Indians, Asians or Latinos.

While some individuals fantasize an American melting pot, we have in reality a very diverse nation, with many different ethnic, linguistic, and social class groups. Walking along the cosmopolitan streets of New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles, the various languages we hear and the features of the people we see serve as a constant reminder of the Nation's diversity.

We live in interesting times as our country is becoming increasingly diverse. To function and navigate well in today's classrooms, educators will need to equip themselves with an understanding of issues related to diversity. There are four modules in this series. The first addresses the changing demographics in the United States. The second addresses culture and pluralism. The remaining two address race and social class as a function of culture.

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Other Important Resources for Culture and Pluralism

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Recommended Websites

National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME)

<http://www.nameorg.org/>

This is the official website of the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), which is the leading organization in the country (and perhaps the world) addressing issues in multicultural education. The website has many links to articles, resources, publications, and other areas relevant to multicultural education. The organization has many state chapters, and an annual conference, which can be accessed on the website.

University of Southern California Center for Multilingual/Multicultural Research

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/>

This website has many useful links, including links to Asian American, African American, Native American, and Latino/Hispanic resources. There are links to articles, and audio/video materials including, but not limited to a video portion of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Population Reference Bureau

<http://www.prb.org/>

The Population Reference Bureau website is an outstanding source for a wide range of demographic data. The organization has many outstanding publications, which are related to demographics and diversity. Their materials can be purchased or received by subscription membership. Information may be found on the website.

American Demographics

<http://www.demographics.com/>

This is the website for American Demographics, a monthly subscription journal (\$69 annually), which provides articles on important demographic issues. The website does provide some articles, links and data, but tends to focus more on business demographic trends. However, much of the publication is useful for educators and those involved in multicultural issues.

U. S. Census Bureau

<http://www.census.gov/>

This is the official website for the United States Census Bureau. It contains demographic data, projections, links and a wealth of information from poverty statistics to ethnic census data. This site is updated regularly and has a wealth of valuable information.