What do you see when you enter your school? If you are like many teachers, you see a sea of smiling faces, some that look like yours and others that don’t. This book offers you an opportunity to read and think about those children who may not look or even think like you. The first three chapters in the book build background knowledge about culture, diverse learners, and the achievement gap. The next three examine our inner selves and our inner worlds. The remainder of the book looks at the learning environment and classroom instruction. This book combines the affective and the cognitive, the what and the who of teaching, the external and the internal worlds in which we live and work. Let’s begin with the children you see when you walk into your school.

**Describe the children in your school.**

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**Describe the faculty/staff in your school.**

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_________________________________________________________________
Describe yourself.

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OUR CULTURAL LENS

If you picked up this book, you probably teach a diverse group of children. This chapter will offer you an opportunity to examine your cultural lens and reflect upon how culture impacts our daily lives. Our culture is the lens through which we view the world. By better understanding our own cultural lens, we may better realize the importance of honoring the cultures of each student in our classrooms. In the following chapters, you will find numerous strategies that honor the diverse cultures found in our schools.

We can’t deny that our children are changing in complexion and complexity, and you may find yearly more children in your classroom who don’t look like you or each other. As educators, we have more opportunities than ever to learn about each other and to share our cultural knowledge with our students.

Nearly 40% of U.S. citizens are members of racial and ethnic minorities, with approximately 35 million, or 13% Latino/a/Hispanic, 12% African American, 4% Asian American, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 8% other racial/minority groups. These numbers are reflected in our public schools. In 1998, out of 47 million public school students, almost 40% were children from linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds. Nearly 10 million children come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, and the language minority population will soon outnumber the English-speaking population in more than 50 major cities in the United States (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

What does this mean for you? Are you equipped to teach children whose culture differs from your own? Professionals today must examine their own culture and its inherent values, consider the different cultures and values of their students and the students’ families, and explore how to meet the needs of each student by acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating the culture and value system of the family (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Examining our culture is one place to begin.

Each of us views the world through a unique lens. Each lens is composed of a diverse spectrum that includes many facets of our lives. Think of it as a pair of glasses that allows you to see the world differently from every other person who inhabits it. Every other person wears a lens that colors his or her own view. This individual way of looking at the world is our individual perspective through which we judge events and people around us. Our heredity, environment, and previous experiences comprise our world view.
WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the totality of ideas, beliefs, values, activities, and knowledge of a group or individuals who share historical, geographical, religious, racial, linguistic, ethnic, or social traditions, and who transmit, reinforce, and modify those traditions.

A culture is the total of everything an individual learns by growing up in a particular context and results in a set of expectations for appropriate behavior in seemingly similar contexts.

In their book Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders, Lindsey, Nuri Robins, and Terrell (2003) define culture as “everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you” (p. 41). They state that culture is about groupness because a culture is a “group of people identified by their shared history, values, and patterns of behavior” (p. 41).

Culture provides us with a blueprint of the “hidden rules” (Payne, 2001) of our group, a map for living that offers consistency and predictability in our everyday actions (Lindsey et al., 2003). These hidden rules are known as cultural expectations. Cultural expectations help us keep outsiders outside and insiders controlled (Lindsey et al., 2003), thereby sustaining our group culture. We learn cultural expectations through the process of acculturation.

Acculturation is the process whereby the culture, values, and patterns of the majority are adopted by a person or an ethnic, social, religious affiliation, language, or national group.

I was born and acculturated into a nuclear two-parent family that was White, middle class, small town, midwestern, Catholic, and conservative. These parameters formed the young adult lens I used to view the world.

What was your young adult lens?

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Describe your culture today. Which parts of your young adult lens still describe you (several of mine have changed)?

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CULTURALLY PROFICIENT

We weave in and out of several kinds of cultures during our day. To become culturally proficient in each of these, we may need to widen our understanding of culture (Lindsey et al., 2003). Cultural proficiency is the "policies and practices of a school or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable the person or school to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment" (Lindsey et al., 2003, pp. xix–xx; emphasis added). It is an “approach,” not a theory, program, or silver bullet. This does not mean you must know everything there is to know about others. That is impossible. Rather, it means that “you have the self-awareness to recognize how you—because of your ethnicity, your culture, and your life experiences—may offend or otherwise affect others,” as well as what you offer to others (Nuri Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002, p. xii). Being culturally proficient allows you to use “teachable moments” to share yourself and learn from others (Nuri Robins et al., 2002, p. xii).

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Your school consists of several cultures. You work in an occupational culture and an organizational culture. Your occupational culture, if you are an educator, is education, and educators often share beliefs, dress, and language (jargon sometimes referred to as “educationalese”), in addition to other factors.

Your organizational culture is your district and your school site. Even within your district, you will find school cultures that differ. Elementary, middle, and high school cultures differ. Each school differs from other schools in a district, yet they share some commonalities because they are in the same district. For example, the neighborhoods that surround the schools may be similar, influencing the schools’ culture, or they may vary economically, influencing the schools’ culture. If you teach in an elementary school, you may find more in common culturally with teachers who work in elementary schools in other districts than the teachers who teach at the high school in your district. In one district, teachers may work hours in their buildings at the end of the school day; in another district, teachers may be out the doors as soon as the buses leave (and sometimes before). There is a difference in the “work” culture between the two.

Think about a “coffee/tea” culture. Does your faculty lounge offer coffee or tea to teachers? If so, do you pay for it? Who makes it daily? Which teachers drink it? Who cleans up the drink station? In visiting schools, a substitute may find a wide range of coffee/tea cultures. In some schools, there is free coffee/tea, the staff drinks it, and someone is assigned to make the coffee/tea and clean up the area. In other schools, there is none. Between these two, there are schools where coffee/tea duties are rotated through the staff, the staff chips in to pay for the services, gourmet coffees/teas are available, staff is allowed to take the drinks into their classrooms, and so on. However, substitutes coming into the building need to know the “hidden rules” of the coffee/tea culture at the school if they want to participate in the coffee/tea culture. They may need their own cup or correct change to participate in the school ritual, and if they find themselves without a cup or cash, they may find no one willing to assist their acculturation.
into the school’s coffee/tea culture. Cultural expectations function in much the same way. If we do not know the expectations (hidden rules or codes) of the cultural setting, we may find ourselves unable to participate in the culture.

ETHNIC CULTURE

To many, culture refers to racial or ethnic differences. Ethnic culture results from our ancestral heritage and geography, common histories, and physical appearance (Lindsey et al., 2003). My ethnic culture is White American. Dorothy’s, whose racial history is found in Chapter 5, is Black American. We share an American culture, but our lenses differ in that she views and lives her world as a Black person in this American culture and I live and view my life as a White person in this American culture. However, we share an identical nationality. Nationality means place of origin (Singleton, 2003). For many of us, our nationality is the United States.

What is your ethnicity?
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What is your nationality?
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How does your culture, ethnicity, and nationality differ from your students and colleagues?
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Think about the way you view your world. What factors contribute to the lens you wear as you view the world?

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CULTURAL FACTORS

Below are several major factors that influence the way we see our world and contribute to the many cultures we weave in and out of each day:

• Family
• Gender
• Race
• Age
• Sexual orientation
• Language
• Friends
• Religion
• School
• Geography
• Income of family/social class
• Political views
• Ethnicity
• Electronic media
• Social organizations
• Others

When we interact with our students or colleagues, we bring the baggage of our past experiences, our prejudices, our preferences, as well as those of our families, and other factors that influence the lens through which we view the world. Those we face bring the same.

Examine the list above. Which ones do you share with your students and/or colleagues? For example, your district may be comprised largely of Protestants, and you are Protestant; therefore, you share religion in common with your staff and students.
In which ones do you differ from your students and/or colleagues?
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_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

The more differences you find, the more bridges you may need to build to reach those in your daily work lives.

What have you learned as a result of defining your culture?
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_________________________________________________________________

FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

One effective way to build bridges to cultures that differ from ours is to use a framework of cultural proficiency when we interact with others. Using a framework of cultural proficiency supports our becoming culturally proficient educators. We can embark on a journey to become culturally proficient educators to meet the needs of each student by acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating the culture and value system of the family (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

How do we do this? Even though there is no magic formula, the magic will occur when “faculty use the cultural proficiency model to guide inquiry and response to the issues caused by diversity within themselves and within their schools” (Lindsey et al., 2003, p. xxi). When finding ourselves in a new cultural setting, we must know how to determine what we need to know about the other cultures in an inoffensive manner and know what we need to teach others about ourselves (Lindsey et al., 2003). Consider using the books cited at the end of this chapter to guide your staff in examining the issues of diversity in your school.

We begin this journey by learning about ourselves. A book study is one tool to do that. Professional development that examines cultural proficiency is another. The exercise that follows might be used in a staff meeting or professional development opportunity as a tool to learn about other staff members. Each time I have used this activity with students and adults, the results have been overwhelmingly positive. The result has always been that any two individuals find that they have more commonalities than differences. This exercise underscores our humanity.
Suggested Exercise:

- Pair off with another staff member.
- Use a Venn diagram

- Write your name above one circle of the Venn diagram; your partner writes his or her name above the other.
- Fill out the Venn diagram with your similarities and differences. For example, if you are of different genders, your gender would go in your own circle. If you share gender, your gender would be in the overlapping part of your circles. Fill in your Venn diagrams with as many aspects of your lives as time allows.
- Share with the larger group. You tell about your partner. Your partner tells about you. Share your similarities however you choose. Adults and students find creative ways to share during this exercise as it creates a community of learners.

CULTURAL HOMOGENEITIES

If you are fortunate to have different cultural groups as part of your staff, check for cultural homogeneities. Cultural homogeneities are similarities that exist within cultural groups. For example, Deborah Tannen’s (1990) work in communication styles finds that women’s and men’s communication styles differ because of gender. Each gender possesses its own culture.

You may find that your different cultural groups share cultural homogeneities about which you were unaware. Learning about the cultural homogeneities of other groups in our school setting increases our awareness of culture. Female appearance is one example of where you can observe cultural homogeneities. In some female cultural groups, long fingernails painted in elaborate patterns are the rage; in others, short, unpolished nails are the norm. Tattoos are a popular homogeneity of some groups of young people. Even text messaging is a homogeneity among some groups of young professionals. These are current fads or practices, but it is possible to find cultural homogeneities that span generations and demographic areas. During a diversity workshop, African Americans and an Afro-Haitian (who said she learned the shared
cultural homogeneities growing up in Haiti) found that they shared the cultural homogeneities of some terms unknown to the White participants. These terms included my kitchen for describing a place on their heads and the hawk for describing the wind, as well as others. Two books that offer specific information about cultural homogeneities of Blacks and Whites are the following:

*It’s the Little Things: Everyday Interactions That Anger, Annoy, and Divide the Races* by Lena Williams, an African American who is a 25-year veteran of the New York Times

*Afraid of the Dark: What Whites and Blacks Need to Know About Each Other* by Jim Myers, a White man married to a Black woman, who was the chief writer for a USA Today series on race

If you plan to use these books in a book study with staff, you may want to have a skilled facilitator to lead the groups.

Viewed as an adventure and a journey, the road to cultural proficiency is a lifelong endeavor that may energize your school, both staff and students.

Try the following strategies and don’t forget to share them with your students.

**Level: Elementary/Middle/High School/Adult**

**Subject: Cross-curricular**

- Attend art events given by or about people of other cultures. Great art is found in every culture, and art is a great equalizer.
- Become friends with people of other cultures.
- Live in integrated neighborhoods.
- Enroll your children in integrated schools.
- Read the literature of other cultures.
- Build a culturally responsive learning climate in your classroom that respects diversity.
- Use language daily in your classroom that values diversity so that your students can begin to model your language. For example, talk about the important contributions of cultural groups, such as the contribution of the Africans to mathematics.
- Bring in newspapers and magazines of diverse cultures and have them out and available for students to peruse.
- Read newspaper articles to your class that foster positive portraits of diverse groups.
- Post simple phrases in multiple languages throughout your classroom and school.
- Post role models of diverse people throughout your school.
- Share the poetry of other cultures in your classroom. You could begin class by reading a poem by a culturally diverse poet. Before class, privately ask a student who shares that culture if he or she would like to read it to the class.
• Study a foreign language.
• Ask your students to write about their family customs and discuss them in your classes.
• Ask your students to do the Venn diagram exercise with members of the class.
• Ask your students to bring in a family dish to share on a special day.
• Don’t privilege one culture above another. For example, “privileging” one group occurs when a teacher calls more often on one group of students, uses examples from the lives of one cultural group more than others, and so on. In the 1950s, in the culturally homogenous elementary school classroom, we called these “teacher’s pets.”
• Respect the traditions of other cultures.
• Don’t make assumptions about the rituals or practices of other cultures.
• Always ask yourself how you would feel if the cultural situation were reversed. For example, what if schools decided not to honor Christmas. How would you feel if you were Christian? How would you feel if you were Jewish or Muslim? What if nearly all senators in our U.S. Senate were women? How would you feel? What if your entire central office administration were a different cultural group from yours? How would you feel? Often, we take for granted the cultural dominance of a group without thinking about how it might feel if a different cultural group held that domination.
• Travel, travel, travel—forgo the tours and travel so that you have the opportunity to meet and talk with the locals, wherever you go.

Think about what you have read and reflected upon in this chapter. Are you interested in adopting a culturally proficient framework for your work? If so, what might be your first steps?

This first chapter examined our personal lens in preparation for learning about and understanding the lenses of our students. Since each of us “sees” the world in a unique way, the more we can learn about the cultures of others, the more we can understand the reasons why our students make the choices they make and do the things they do in our classrooms. Chapter 2 includes research on diverse students that directly impacts student achievement.
SUGGESTED READING