What's Culture Got to Do with It?

Understanding the Deep Roots of Culture

Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.

—Cesar Chavez, Mexican American Activist

We often talk about the problem of the achievement gap in terms of race—racial relations, issues of oppression and equity—while ironically the solutions for closing students' learning gaps in the classroom lie in tapping into their culture. But just why and how we use culture to close learning gaps remains vague for many teachers and seems counterintuitive for others who may have been taught not to focus on differences and, instead, be "color-blind." The question—what's culture got to do with it?—is an important one culturally responsive teachers need to be able to answer. In this chapter, we highlight the first practice area of the Ready for Rigor framework: Awareness. Just as students need to have rich background for comprehension and problem solving, teachers need adequate background knowledge and usable information in order to know how to apply culturally responsive tools and strategies. Building background knowledge begins with becoming knowledgeable about the dimensions of culture as well as knowledgeable about the larger social, political, and economic conditions that create inequitable education outcomes. In addition to awareness of how culture is constructed or the
impact of larger social and political forces on learning, teachers also have to be aware of their beliefs regarding equity and culture. Building background knowledge and awareness is one of the critical objectives of the first practice area of the framework.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Culture, it turns out, is the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture. Think of culture as software for the brain's hardware. The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events. If we want to help dependent learners do more higher order thinking and problem solving, then we have to access their brain's cognitive structures to deliver culturally responsive instruction.

So, in this chapter, we start with building our awareness of the three levels of culture.

Levels of Culture

Culture operates on a surface level, an intermediate or shallow level, and a deep level.

Surface culture

This level is made up of observable and concrete elements of culture such as food, dress, music, and holidays. This level of culture has a low emotional charge so that changes don’t create great anxiety in a person or group.

Shallow culture

This level is made up of the unspoken rules around everyday social interactions and norms, such as courtesy, attitudes toward elders, nature of friendship, concepts of time, personal space between people, nonverbal communication, rules about eye contact, or appropriate touching. It’s at this level of culture that we put into action our deep cultural values. Nonverbal communication that builds rapport and trust between people comes out of shallow culture. This level has a strong emotional charge. At the same time, at this level we interpret certain behaviors as disrespectful, offensive, or hostile. Social violation of norms at this level can cause mistrust, distress, or social friction.
Deep culture

This level is made up of tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions that govern our worldview. It also contains the cosmology (view of good or bad) that guides ethics, spirituality, health, and theories of group harmony (i.e., competition or cooperation). Deep culture also governs how we learn new information. Elements at this level have an intense emotional charge. Mental models at this level help the brain interpret threats or rewards in the environment. Challenges to cultural values at this level produce culture shock or trigger the brain’s fight or flight response.

At the deep cultural level, our brain is encoding itself with the particular worldview we will carry into our formative years. Two people from different cultures can look at the same event and have very different reactions to it because of the meaning they attach to the event based on their deep culture. For example, in Eastern culture, the color red means good luck while in most Western cultures red means danger. While every person’s individual culture evolves as we grow up and experience the world, our core mental models stay with us. My grandmother had a saying, “you can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy.” The point is that one’s culture, especially one’s deep cultural roots, is part of how the brain makes sense of the world and helps us function in our environment. This worldview continues to guide our behaviors even when we change our geography. We call these mental models schema.

Think of mental models as parts of an elaborate “tree of knowledge” inside our brains. Schema represent the pieces of inert information we’ve taken in, interpreted, and categorized, based on our deep cultural norms, beliefs, and ways of being. Schema helps us create background knowledge or what researcher Luis Moll and his colleagues (2005) call funds of knowledge, the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Another way of understanding schema is to think of it as a set of conceptual scripts that guide our comprehension of the world. For example, think about going to a restaurant. By just thinking about it, you activated your schema for restaurants. Images, smells, tastes, experiences involving food, how to order, and how to behave in that environment come immediately to mind without any effort. We make sense of the world around us by creating these schema scripts based on our deep culture. They are the brain’s software that directs its hardware.

When talking about culture, people often represent the three levels of culture as an iceberg, with surface culture as the tip of the iceberg, shallow culture located just below the water line and deep culture the largest
part hidden deep in the water. Rather than use the metaphor of an iceberg, I like to compare culture to a tree. A tree is part of a bigger ecosystem that shapes and impacts its growth and development. Shallow culture is represented in the trunk and branches of the tree while we can think of surface culture as the observable fruit that the tree bears. Surface and shallow culture are not static; they change and shift over time as social groups move around and ethnic groups intermarry, resulting in a cultural mosaic just as branches and fruit on a tree change in response to the seasons and its environment. Deep culture is like the root system of a tree. It is what grounds the individual and nourishes his mental health. It is the bedrock of self-concept, group identity, approaches to problem solving, and decision making.

BUT I HAVE 19 DIFFERENT CULTURES IN MY CLASSROOM!

"I have 19 different cultures represented in my classroom. Do I have to learn about the customs, foods, and beliefs of 19 different cultures?" This is the question I always get from teachers new to culturally responsive teaching. The key to understanding how culture guides the brain during culturally responsive teaching lies in focusing on deep culture. Rather than focus on the visible "fruits" of culture—dress, food, holidays, and
heroes—we have to focus on the roots of culture: worldview, core beliefs, and group values. The answer to this question comes from understanding universal patterns across cultures. I call these similarities cultural archetypes. While cultures might be different at the surface and shallow levels, at the root of different cultures there are common values, worldviews, and practices that form these archetypes. The term archetype has its origins in ancient Greek. It comes from the root word archein, which means "original or old" and the word typos, which means "pattern, model, or type." While there might be a number of different cultures represented in one's classroom, when we look closer, we see patterns that unite some cultures. Understanding these cultural archetypes can make culturally responsive teaching more manageable in a diverse classroom. Cultural archetypes give us a starting point.

Cultural Archetypes

There are two cultural archetypes that I think are important for the culturally responsive teacher to know.

Collectivism and Individualism

A common cultural archetype connected with deep culture is a group's orientation toward either collectivism or individualism (Figure 2.2). Collectivism and individualism reflect fundamentally different ways the brain organizes itself. Turns out our brains are wired to favor a communal view of the world. Humans have always sought to be in community with each other because it enhanced our chances of survival. We shared workloads and resources. Over time, our brains became hardwired toward working and living cooperatively. As people moved from rural communities to urban communities, they became less communal and more individualistic. Dutch sociologist, Geert Hofstede found that approximately 20% of the world has an individualistic culture, while the other 80% practice a collectivist culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Most European cultures were rooted in an individualistic mindset, while the collectivist worldview is common among Latin American, Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and many Slavic cultures (Figure 2.3). Collectivistic societies emphasize relationships, interdependence within a community, and cooperative learning. Individualistic societies emphasize individual achievement and independence.

In America, the dominant culture is individualistic, while the cultures of many African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities lean more toward collectivism. Across these communities, how collectivism is expressed varies. What might be acceptable in one
collectivist-oriented community might not be acceptable in another. What does stay the same is the focus on relationships and cooperative learning.

I don’t want to stereotype cultures into an oversimplified frame but to simply offer the archetypes of collectivism and individualism as a way of understanding the general cultural orientation among diverse students in the classroom. We recognize that individualism and collectivism exist on a continuum. Some cultures are individualistic with little or no collectivistic elements, while others might be primarily collectivistic with strong elements of individualism. It is simply a starting point for building on the shared culture of your students.

Review Hofstede’s list in Figure 2.3 and notice the difference between the United State’s highly individualistic dominant culture and the highly collectivist cultures of many Latin and African countries, where our students have their roots. For example, the United States has an individualism index of 91 out of 100, meaning our dominant cultural messages and norms revolve around a self-reliance “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mindset, with a strong focus on competition and self-promotion. On the other hand, a country such as Guatemala with an individualism index of 6 leans more toward a communal culture that downplays self-promotion in favor of promoting harmony and interdependence in the family or workplace above all else. One can see there is a cultural mismatch between the typical American culture that’s focused on individual personal achievement and recognition and the typical Guatemalan culture that puts a premium on being in a positive relationship with others as a foundation for business, learning, and social interaction.
The Cultural Dimensions Index was created by cultural psychologist, Geert Hofstede. Countries are evaluated on a 100-point scale in seven dimensions. One dimension is the level of individualism within a society. At the high end of the scale are extremely individualist cultures (self-oriented, individual effort favored in business and learning, competition over cooperation) while a lower number signals a more collectivist culture (group orientation, relationships essential to business and learning, and cooperation over competition).

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Oral and Written Traditions

Two other important cultural archetypes to keep in mind are written and oral traditions. Some cultures have relied on the spoken word rather than the written word to convey, preserve, and reproduce knowledge from generation to generation. By telling stories and coding knowledge into songs, chants, proverbs, and poetry, groups with a strong oral tradition record and sustain their cultures and cultural identities by word of mouth. The oral tradition places a heavy emphasis on relationships because the process connects the speaker and listener in a communal experience. In contrast, a written tradition does not require much person-to-person interaction or dialogue because thoughts are committed to print.

In addition, an oral tradition makes the most of the brain’s memory systems by using alliteration, movement, and emotion as strong cognitive anchors. Performance-based practices such as dancing and drumming are also used to encode knowledge.

Although most oral cultures now use reading and writing as tools for documentation and communication in formal settings, many still rely on their oral traditions at home and in their immediate communities. This situation reinforces the brain’s preference for processing information through traditional oral methods.

NAMING THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

In addition to recognizing the cultural archetypes operating among culturally and linguistically diverse students, the culturally responsive teacher also has to name and acknowledge the larger sociopolitical context schools operate within. Teacher educators, Villegas and Lucas (2002) identified six characteristics of culturally responsive educators and put understanding the sociopolitical context as one of the most important. The sociopolitical context is a term used to describe the series of mutually reinforcing policies and practices across social, economic, and political domains that contribute to disparities and unequal opportunities for people of color in housing, transportation, education, and health care, to name a few. These unequal opportunities result in unequal outcomes along racial and class lines.

For example, we see redlining by banks that make it nearly impossible for people living in predominately Black communities to get a mortgage because of income, or gerrymandering of political districts to reduce the political influence of communities of color, or the dumping
of toxic wastes in low-income communities that contribute to high cancer mortality rates because there is no access to quality health care. According to Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2013), there are two key components of the sociopolitical context: implicit racial bias and structural racialization. Together they reinforce each other like bookends and hold a system of inequality in place that doesn’t require overt racism or any racist actors at all to maintain it. As a result, inequality doesn’t look like the Jim Crow laws of the pre–Civil Rights era. Instead, it takes the form of seemingly benign institutional practices or structures that reduce and limit opportunities for people of color, poor people, and immigrants.

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape our responses to certain groups. Implicit bias operates involuntarily, often without one’s awareness or intentional control, which is different from explicit racism. It is important to understand that implicit bias is not just overt racism that’s hidden on purpose. Implicit bias is not implicit racism. Why we engage in implicit bias is rooted in neuroscience and related to our brain’s efforts to process large amounts of incoming data by using its shortcut we know as stereotyping. Even educators who have taken an explicit social justice or progressive stance have implicit bias based on their exposure to the dominant culture’s messages and memes over a lifetime. In the next chapter, we will learn more about how the brain does this, but what’s important here to recognize is that implicit bias is directly related to how our brains are wired and seems so “normal” that these bias messages often go unchecked within the larger society (Kirwan Institute, 2013).

The other bookend holding the sociopolitical context in place is structural racialization. If we look at our society as a complex system of organizations, institutions, individuals, processes, and policies, we can see how many factors interact to create and perpetuate social, economic, and political structures that are harmful to people of color and to our society as a whole. Housing, education, and health are just a few areas where distribution of material resources, quality of service, and access still result in opportunity being distributed along racial lines. Understanding structural racialization goes beyond finding intent—proof of racism—within our social, economic, political, and medical institutions. Structural racialization is deeply connected to the relationship between where one lives and how location and geography affects one’s access to education and job opportunities, as well as other quality-of-life factors.

To understand structural racialization, we have to move beyond one dimensional, linear explanations of inequity in society and education.
We have to entertain the idea that a series of seemingly benign or supposed well-intended policies actually create a negative cumulative and reinforcing effect that supports, rather than dismantles, the status quo within institutions. The impact of structural racialization across institutions over time creates a domino effect that leads to unearned disadvantages that obscure the real source of the inequity. For example, prior to No Child Left Behind, school districts across the country were concerned with the fact that, in the United States, African American students were not performing as well as White students on standardized tests. The statement was factually correct. So we designed No Child Left Behind to focus on closing the gap in test scores between Black and White students because we believed we needed to help children of color and English learners better prepare for the test. So “teaching to the test” to cover subject matter content better became the primary focus in many classrooms.

Still more than a decade later the achievement gap persists, especially with regard to students’ ability to do higher order analytical work. Our focus was on helping students become better test takers rather than on looking at the interplay of social and institutional practices that negatively impact African American children so that they didn’t develop the skills to do independent learning or higher order thinking, both of which are needed to excel on standardized tests.

Policy makers were not willing to look beyond that overly simplistic symptom of the achievement gap, test scores. Research findings pointed to the domino effect resulting from the lack of federally-funded quality childcare and preschool for children of color, 0–5 years old living in urban and rural communities. We know quality daycare and preschool experiences contribute to optimum brain growth and rich vocabulary development. Access to quality daycare, child and maternal health services, and jobs that paid a living wage all contribute to children starting school academically and socially ready. The Harlem Children’s Zone, with its comprehensive approach to health, education, and job development, was actually set up as a direct response to the structural racialization that negatively impacted children in that community long before they went to school.

Structural racialization doesn’t happen just outside of school. The school-to-prison pipeline is actually a manifestation of structural racialization. We see it in the way we make staffing decisions in education. Often, underresourced urban schools are staffed by new teachers or teachers deemed “less effective” (Education Trust, 2006). Highly effective teachers are “rewarded” with teaching assignments to high performing schools or
gifted and talented classes. We routinely put the less experienced teachers with the neediest students. No other profession does this. A challenging medical case gets the attention of top specialists and skilled surgeons. It would be considered malpractice to put someone unskilled or new to the profession on a complicated medical case. Yet, in education, we subject our neediest dependent learners to inadequate instruction given their needs, or we allow them to lose valuable instructional time because of questionable discipline practices. As a result, culturally and linguistically diverse students don’t develop the skills, vocabulary, or background knowledge necessary to be ready for rigor.

We see this acutely in the area of reading. By third grade, many culturally and linguistically diverse students are one or more years behind in reading. We know that each year they will fall further behind in both advanced reading skills and content knowledge because of the system’s failure to prevent or close small learning gaps in earlier grades. By middle school, most schools don’t know how to address struggling seventh and eighth graders with basic decoding and low fluency problems in reading.

Over time, because of structural racialization in education, we have seen a new type of intellectual apartheid happening in schools, creating dependent learners who cannot access the curriculum and independent learners who have had the opportunity to build the cognitive skills to do deep learning on their own. Rather than stepping back, looking at the ways we structure inequity in education, and interrupting these practices, we simply focus on creating short-term solutions to get dependent students of color to score high on each year’s standardized tests. We don’t focus on building their intellective capacity so that they can begin to fill their own learning gaps with proper scaffolding.

**SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT VERSUS THE CULTURE OF POVERTY**

Some educators confuse the concept of the sociopolitical context with the popular notion of a culture of poverty. As a part of being aware as a culturally responsive teacher it is critical to understand the difference. I bumped up against this confusion during a monthly seminar my colleague and I were leading for a group of 60 BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support Assessment) support providers at the Santa Clara Office of Education in California. That month’s seminar focused on how to coach beginning teachers to be culturally responsive. I was explaining how signs of
affirmation can show up even in kindergarten classrooms by making sure that there are simple things on hand such as multicultural crayons and construction paper. A hand quickly shot up. A veteran teacher and longtime BTSA support provider said that she thought a better strategy would be to teach “these low-income kids” to mix the crayons instead because they won’t have these special multicultural crayons at home because their parents don’t invest in educational supplies. I was a bit stunned by her comment. After I took a few deep breaths to calm myself, I asked her what she based her suggestion on. She told me she’d learned this from Ruby Payne’s framework for teaching children in poverty. Poor people, she’d learned, are really resourceful because that’s part of their culture of poverty. Several others in the room nodded.

As a learning community, we took some time to unpack the difference between the culture of poverty and the sociopolitical context. Paul Gorski of EdChange (2008) offers an insightful commentary on the myth of the culture of poverty. He suggests that the idea of a culture of poverty reinforces stereotypes of poor families, a disproportionate number who are families of color, as unmotivated, not caring about education, or involved in illegal activities as a lifestyle choice. There’s considerable research that clearly states that people in poverty are not, in fact, lazier, less likely to value education, or more likely to be substance abusers than their wealthier counterparts. Yet, implicit racial bias reinforces the notion of people of color willingly living in poverty or unmotivated to change their circumstances. This view ignores the contributing factors of structural racialization in society that limit a family’s economic and educational opportunities. Culturally responsive teachers acknowledge the impact of the sociopolitical context on children of color and their families.

Here are three key points we need to keep in mind regarding this so-called culture of poverty:

**Poverty is not a culture.** Most families are trapped in poverty and do not willingly embrace it as a way of life. Most poor families experience generational poverty because of the lack of opportunities for moving out of poverty. Most poor families hold down at least one full-time job. We call these families the working poor. In economics, they refer to it as the cycle of poverty—a set of factors or events by which poverty, once started, is likely to continue unless there is strong outside intervention. The cycle of poverty has been defined as a phenomenon where poor families become trapped in poverty for at least three generations (i.e., for enough time that the family includes no surviving ancestors who possess and can transmit the intellectual, social, and cultural capital necessary to stay out of or escape poverty).
It is a condition or symptom of the structural inequities built into our social and economic systems. Poverty for most families is not a lifestyle choice. Poverty doesn’t fit the definition of culture in that it doesn’t have deep cultural roots governed by a cosmology or worldview.

**Coping skills are mistaken for norms and beliefs.** What appears to be a “culture”—norms, beliefs, and behaviors that are transmitted from one generation to another—are more accurately coping and survival mechanisms that help marginalized communities navigate what Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* calls racial and economic caste systems. The experience of African Americans and Latinos living in poverty are no different than the experience of those living through the Great Depression or major military conflicts. The only difference is those experiences were temporary, so the coping mechanisms did not become codified.

**Poor people do not normalize or glorify negative aspects of living in poverty.** Despite images we commonly see in the popular media, behaviors such as drug use, violence, or out of wedlock births are not normalized and embraced as lifestyle choices by poor people. Often these behaviors are an outgrowth of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dr. Victor Carrion and his colleagues (2007) of Stanford’s Early Life Stress Research Program point out that as many as one-third of children living in our country’s urban neighborhoods have PTSD—nearly twice the rate reported for troops returning from war zones in Iraq.

The primary reason I think the idea of a culture of poverty is incompatible with culturally responsive teaching is because it promotes deficit thinking. Deficit thinking defines students and their families by their weaknesses rather than their strengths, suggesting that these weaknesses stem from low intelligence, poor moral character, or inadequate social skills. At its core, the culture of poverty theory says that poor people are responsible for their lot in life because of their individual and collective deficiencies (Collins. 1988). It does not acknowledge the impact of institutionalized racism, structural racialization, skin color privilege, or language discrimination.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MOVING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY**

Understanding culture, recognizing cultural archetypes, and recognizing the sociopolitical context are about laying the foundation for being a culturally responsive teacher. Recognizing how we have created intellectual
apartheid in schools is the first step in knowing how to build intellectual capacity. Getting dependent students of color ready for rigor begins with our awareness of current reality and acknowledgement of our past racial history. This understanding will give us a better context for supporting the social-emotional needs of dependent learners.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

- Deep culture, not the heroes and holidays of surface culture is at the core of culturally responsive teaching. Culture acts as our brain’s software.
- One of the key ways to reduce confusion about how to attend to all the different cultures represented in my classroom is to first identify which cultural archetype dominates—individualism or collectivism.
- The themes of relationships and group interdependence are central to collectivist culture. Collectivist values and practices are expressed differently within different collectivist cultures.
- Culture isn’t the only thing that needs to be considered when planning for culturally responsive teaching. The sociopolitical context also shapes the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- Implicit bias and structural racialization are current realities that undergird life opportunities for families of color. Structural racialization doesn’t require racist actors to be true.
- There are several urban myths about the culture of poverty that have become memes in education.

**INVITATION TO INQUIRY**

- What would you say are the cultural archetypes operating among your students? What cultural practices do you see enacted?
- Become observant about how individualism and collectivism are operating in your classroom or school community.
- How do you experience structural racialization? How do you believe your students experience it? What differences do you notice?

**GOING DEEPER**


• *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances Between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools* (1996) by Guadalupe Valdes
