

Cultural Understanding

Background

Culture is an integral part of our identity. Our culture influences all aspects of our lives. It dictates how we interact with society and how we perceive ourselves and our surroundings. There are tangible and intangible elements to every culture. The tangible elements of culture include clothing, food, music, arts and crafts, and festivals. The intangible elements of culture include the values of the society, a person's/community's world views, and a person's/community's attitudes concerning life processes. The tangible elements are the ones that are most easily recognized and obvious to outsiders of a culture. However, these may be less important than the intangible elements that may more deeply define individuals and how the individuals perceives themselves and their role in society. The tangible elements are the external aspects of the culture, while the intangible elements are the internal aspects of the culture.

Most newcomers to Canada experience several stages of cultural adjustment. The four stages of cultural adjustment include (1) enthusiasm and excitement of being in a new country and a new culture, (2) withdrawal and loneliness mixed with feelings of isolation and homesickness, (3) re-emergence and adjustment in accepting the new culture and gaining a better understanding of the culture, and (4) achievement and a renewed enthusiasm of being in the culture as the individual feels acceptance and is able to accept aspects of the new culture. Individuals may jump from one stage to the next, or sequentially pass through each stage. The length of time at each stage varies for each individual; yet for most individuals the first year after their arrival in a new culture is the most difficult.

Many students who are new to Canada struggle to find a balance between fitting in with their new cultural surroundings and maintaining their cultural identity. Conflicts arise when the new culture and the home culture are significantly different from one another. Families might experience confusion, conflict, and helplessness over the wide disparity between what they have always believed and what they experience in the new culture. These feelings are defined as culture shock.

Symptoms of culture shock

- Homesickness
- Boredom
- Lethargy
- Withdrawal
- Irritability
- Hostility toward people
- Irrational anger
- Excessive sleeping
- Depression

Stages of Cultural Adjustment

Stage One: The Honeymoon -- Enthusiasm/Excitement

The individual

- feels positive about the new culture that he or she is now in
- feels overwhelmed
- is fascinated and curious about this new culture
- is an observer and is hesitant to confront the culture

Stage Two: Hostility -- Withdrawal/Loneliness

The individual

- begins to interact with the culture
- finds the behaviour of the people unusual and unpredictable
- starts to dislike the culture
- feels anxious and uneasy about the new culture
- begins to withdraw
- starts to criticize the culture and the people

Stage Three: Humour -- Re-emergence/Adjustment

The individual

- begins to understand the behaviour of the people around him or her
- starts to feel more comfortable living in the new culture
- regains his or her sense of humour

Stage Four: Home -- Achievement/Enthusiasm

The individual

- enjoys being in the culture
- functions easily in the culture
- prefers certain cultural behaviours to that of his or her own culture
- adopts certain behaviours

Teachers' Role in the Process of Cultural Adjustment

Schools and, in particular, teachers can help with a student's cultural adjustment by creating a learning environment that is respectful of their students' cultures. This environment should allow individual students to express their views and to continue to have a voice on a range of opinions and ideas. The important role of the teacher in the acculturation process cannot be understated. Teachers help students make the difficult transition from one culture to another. Often teachers spend more time with students than parents do, and can see changes in behaviours that family members cannot or do not recognize. What happens in a student's mind and heart is a result of the drastic changes that are occurring in their lives. These occurrences have a direct influence on their ability to cope with life and succeed in school.

Teachers

- are models of appropriate behaviour. By modeling behaviour and setting limits, the teacher exemplifies acceptable behaviour.
- need to take the time to understand who their students are. Teachers need to become aware of the problems that their students are facing and the adjustments that they are making.
- need to learn more about the cultures, religions, and family patterns that profoundly influence their students. By doing so, the teacher will be better prepared to understand why and how their students perceive the world.
- need to learn about resources in the community, such as knowing whom to turn to when danger signals arise or when access to important information is needed.
- need to recognize that they are important members of a team and that there are many valuable resources in the community.

Annotated Bibliography

Ahearn, C., Childs-Bowen, D., Coady, M., Dickson, K., Heintz, C., Hughes, K., et al. (2002). *The Diversity Kit: An introductory resource for social change in education*. Retrieved January 22, 2007 from The Education Alliance at Brown University, Teaching Diverse Learners Web site: http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/diversity_kit/index.shtml

Part two of the *Diversity Kit*, entitled “Culture,” highlights the importance of the teacher’s awareness of the student’s culture and cultural identity. The fourth chapter in this section, entitled “Culture, Family, and Community,” explores how to cultivate collaboration with families and communities in order to support the learning of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Brown, S. & Eisterhold, J. (2004). *Topics in language and culture for teachers*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

This is an introductory language and culture text designed for pre-service teachers. The book explores the interrelationship between language and culture and the influence culture has on a person's behaviour, communication, ideas, views, and beliefs. The authors focus on the implications culture has in a classroom context.

Coelho, E. (2004). *Adding English: A guide to teaching in multilingual classrooms*. Toronto, Ontario: Pippin Publishing.

Adding English provides a vivid and descriptive account of the social, educational, and psychological factors that surround learners and educators in multilingual classrooms. Coelho brings a sensitive and detailed perspective to a multidimensional issue that is often relegated to a unidimensional status, with language being the sole focus. This text provides educators with strategies that can be implemented in almost any classroom situation.

Coelho, E. (1998). *Teaching and learning in multicultural schools: An integrated approach*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

The book outlines approaches and strategies that schools and teachers can adopt to provide educational experiences meeting the needs of all learners in culturally diverse schools and classrooms, especially those in areas in which new immigrants settle.

Corbett, J. (2003). *An intercultural approach to English language teaching*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

This book presents intercultural language education to English language teachers. It provides insight into how teachers can equip their students with the skills to be cultural observers, and into how to understand the cultures of other people. It also provides a guide on how to conduct and analyze interviews for cultural exploration and on the assessment of intercultural communicative competence.

DeCapua, A. & Wintergerst, A. C. (2004). *Crossing cultures in the language classroom*. Jackson TN: University of Michigan Press.

Topics discussed in the book include introduction to culture, more on culture, culture shock, nonverbal communication, societal roles, and pragmatics. Each of the six chapters ends with three useful sections: Questions for Study and Discussion, Practice: What Activities Show Us, and Further. The goals of this book for the teacher educator are to expand cultural awareness, to acquire an in-depth understanding of what culture is and its relationship to language, and to comprehend and implement observations of cultural similarities and differences.

Finders, M. & Lewis, C. (1994). "Why some parents don't come to school". *Educational Leadership*, 51(8), 50-54.

Too often, parents' social, economic, linguistic, and cultural practices are represented as serious problems, rather than as valued knowledge. Some parents do not feel comfortable in the teachers' domain. Schools can help by clarifying how parents can help, encouraging them to be assertive, developing trust, building on home experience, and using parent expertise.

Flaitz, J. (2006). *Understanding your refugee and immigrant students: An educational, cultural, and linguistic guide*. Jackson TN: University of Michigan Press.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first one occupies almost two thirds of the book and focuses on the educational and cultural backgrounds of Brazil, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Cuba, Egypt, Haiti, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, People's Republic of China, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The second part provides some detail about the linguistic features of the languages adopted in these countries.

Genesse, F. (1994). *Educating Second Language Children: The whole child, the whole curriculum, the whole community*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Educating Second Language Children is based on the work of leading researchers in elementary education. Going beyond classroom instruction, Genesse addresses the role of the school, family, and community and how important they are in terms of newcomer students and a successful education.

Lange, D. L., & Paige, R. M. (Eds.), (2003). *Culture as the core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.

This book presents the issue of integrating culture into the second language classroom. The authors argue that culture is the core of language learning/acquisition.

Law, B. (2000). *The more than just surviving handbook: ESL for every classroom teacher*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Portage and Main Press.

This resource book directs educators with ideas on how to marshal their wealth of pedagogical knowledge and skills and the resources of the school and community to assist ESL students "more than just survive" in Canadian schools.

Lee, E., Menkart, D., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Beyond heroes and holidays: A practical guide to K-12 anti-racist, multicultural education, and staff development*. Washington, DC: Teaching for Change.

This textbook contains classroom lesson plans, staff development activities, reflections on teaching, and an extensive resource guide for K-12 educators who want to go beyond the "heroes and holidays" approach to multicultural education. It features the work of leading scholars, including Jim Cummins, Christine Sleeter, Beverly Tatum, Sonia Nieto, Peggy McIntosh, Luis Rodriguez, Lisa Delpit, and Louise Derman-Sparks.

Park, F. W. (2001). *FINE forum e-newsletter: Teacher talk*. Retrieved, August 6, 2006, from <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/fineforum/forum2/teachertalk.html>

Frederick Won Park shares his strategies for reaching out to diverse families and preparing student teachers to support families.

Steinbach, S. (Producer/Director). (1999). *Voices of experience: Cross cultural adjustment* [Video]. Davis, CA: The Seabright Group.

This 38-minute video relates the stories of more than a dozen international students and business people who had lived in the United States for about one year. Stories of culture shock, personal change, and homesickness are told, along with how adjustments were made in their new situations. Other topics include teaching styles in the American classroom, eating habits, manners, lifestyles, expression of affection in public places, cohabitation, individuality, communication patterns, punctuality, safe vs. dangerous environments, traffic laws, and informality.

Summary of the DVD Chapter

The DVD chapter on cultural understanding addresses the following topics:

- Parents' views on the differences between home culture and school culture
- Immigrant families' experiences and process of adjustment upon arriving to Canada
- Additional hardships and challenges faced by refugee families
- Concerns parents have about their child's schooling in a new culture
- Fears that children will be caught in a cultural divide
- The school's role in providing an atmosphere of understanding and cultural sensitivity
- The school's role in recognizing their students' ethno-cultural backgrounds
- Collaboration between parents and educators to understand cultural factors unique to each community

Questions to consider before viewing

- What are some concerns that newcomer families might have when their children are immersed in Canadian culture?
- What aspects of their culture might newcomer families particularly want to retain when they move to Canada?
- How might schools aid newcomer families in their adjustment to a new culture?

Questions to consider after viewing

- What did the newcomer families feel was most important in aiding their cultural adjustment to Canada? Why did they feel this way?
- What was done by schools featured in this DVD to promote cultural understanding?