



Foreword by **Yvette Jackson**

Culturally Responsive Teaching & **THE BRAIN**

Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor
Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

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Skim/Review 21-24²/₃

Read/Discuss 24²/₃ - 28¹/₂

What's Culture Got to Do with It?

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*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 **rappor**t 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.

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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

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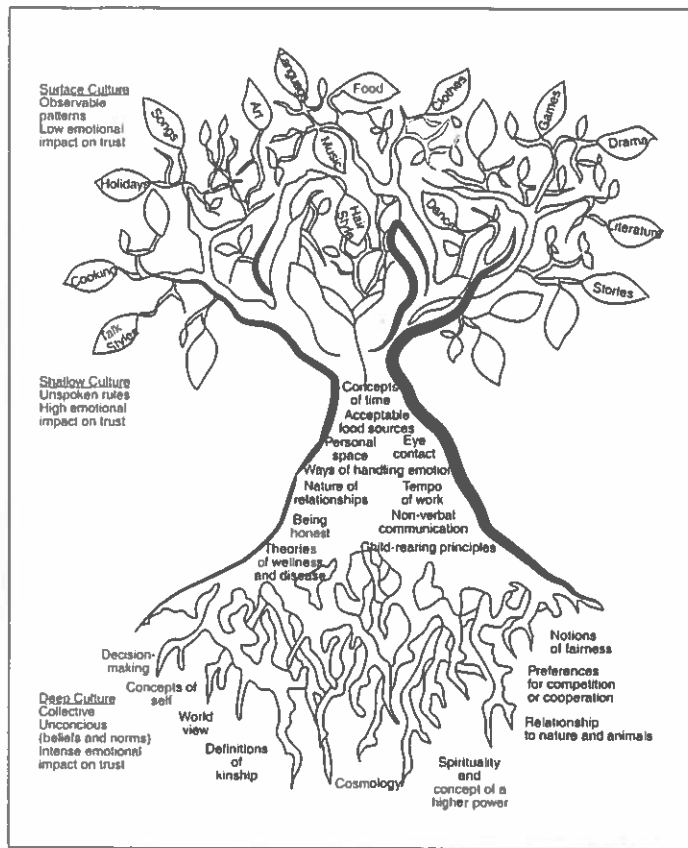
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Figure 2.1 Culture Tree



Source: Illustration by Aliza Maynard.

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

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

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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

Figure 2.2 Features of Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

Individualism	Collectivism
Focused on independence and individual achievement	Focused on interdependence and group success
Emphasizes self-reliance and the belief that one is supposed to take care of himself to get ahead	Emphasizes reliance on the collective wisdom or resources of the group and the belief that group members take care of each other to get ahead
Learning happens through individual study and reading	Learning happens through group interaction and dialogue
Individual contributions and status are important	Group dynamics and harmony are important
Competitive	Collaborative
Technical/Analytical	Relational

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.

Figure 2.3

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Country
United States
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Czech Republic
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Hungary
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Argentina
Japan
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Jamaica
Brazil
Egypt
Iraq
Kuwait
Lebanon
Saudi Arabia

Source: Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences*. New York: Sage, 1980.

Figure 2.3 The Individualism-Collectivism Continuum

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).

Country	Score	Country	Score
United States	91	United Arab Emirates	38
Australia	90	Turkey	37
United Kingdom	89	Uruguay	36
Netherlands	80	Greece	35
New Zealand	79	Philippines	32
Italy	76	Mexico	30
Belgium	75	Tanzania	27
Denmark	74	Ethiopia	27
France	71	Kenya	27
Sweden	71	Portugal	27
Ireland	70	Zambia	27
Norway	69	Malaysia	26
Switzerland	68	Hong Kong	25
Germany	67	Chile	23
South Africa	65	China	20
Finland	63	Ghana	20
Poland	60	Nigeria	20
Czech Republic	58	Sierra Leone	20
Austria	55	Singapore	20
Hungary	55	Thailand	20
Israel	54	El Salvador	19
Spain	51	South Korea	18
India	48	Taiwan	17
Argentina	41	Peru	16
Japan	41	Costa Rica	15
Iran	41	Indonesia	14
Jamaica	39	Pakistan	14
Brazil	38	Colombia	13
Egypt	38	Venezuela	12
Iraq	38	Panama	11
Kuwait	38	Ecuador	8
Lebanon	38	Guatemala	6
Saudi Arabia	38		

Source: Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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 be able 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

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