CHAPTER 2

The Nature of Culture, the Nature of People

There is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture.

Edward T. Hall (1990)

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we will
• define culture.
• establish how culture shapes our lives.
• identify what areas of life are influenced by culture.
• describe how children reflect their culture in the classroom.

KEY CONCEPTS

• culture
• socialization
• cultural identity
• cultural diversity
• race
• stereotype
• cultural values

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FROM BARBARA’S JOURNAL

Today, I brought in some apples and cut them up for my children as a snack. At 10 o’clock I asked everyone to come to my desk and take a piece. Aisha hesitated but finally approached me and said, “It’s Ramadan, and my family says that you can’t eat during the day.” I looked at her and just patted her head. What is Ramadan? I know it’s a very special time for Muslims, but I really don’t know what Aisha meant. I decided to talk to one of my colleagues while the children were on break. My colleague Marisa did not know for sure what Ramadan was either, but she knew that Said, who is in her second-grade class, did not eat during school time. I decided to check out Ramadan on the Internet and find out more. I also thought that it would be a good idea to get some more information about the cultures of my other children and find out about their customs and holidays. I have planned a unit on holidays already, but I am afraid it may not include what will be relevant to them. That I must know more about the reality of the children in my group, and their cultures, is clear. It will be the only way to appropriately plan and teach.

CULTURE, THE MAGIC WEB OF LIFE

Have you ever asked yourself why you are the way you are? Why you act the way you act? Why you believe in what you believe? Why you speak the language you speak? Why you eat what you eat? The answer is culture, a critical factor in everything we do, say, believe, and are.

The concept of culture has been a focus of discussions among social scientists, educators, philosophers, and people in general for generations. Many learned and famous people have searched hard and debated long trying to define the meaning of culture. No one seems to be able to agree on one definition. However, everybody acknowledges that we all have a culture.

Culture is a part of each individual because it is a part of every society (Geertz, 2000). No one can claim to be exempt from having a culture. This condition is inherent to human nature. Whether aware of it or not, “everybody has a culture” (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Individuals begin to assimilate culture from birth. As early childhood educators, you have probably noticed the different ways your children respond to experiences and interpret events and reality in the classroom. This may be even more evident at times...
when your interpretations diverge from the children’s interpretations. These variations are largely rooted in their individual cultural patterns.

**The Need for Guideposts: What Culture Does for Human Beings**

Imagine a world with no rules. Think about how it would be if there were no directions to guide our existence, no principles to tell us what is right or wrong, no frames of reference to give us clues as we confront things never encountered before. Those are the problems we would face if there were no culture.

Culture provides a framework for our lives. It is the paradigm humans use to guide their behavior, find meaning in events, interpret the past, and set aspirations. From very early in life, we learn to follow and apply the recognized guidelines of our society, sometimes without even being consciously aware of them. For a child, cultural guidelines are discovered through daily interactions with others, observing, and modeling some of the behaviors learned from families and adults. Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) says that when the child enters into a group, the child does so as a participant of a public process where meanings are shared. This participant status entitles the child to learn the ways of the group. Learning makes the child a member of a group. These “ways of the group” are what we call culture. As social human beings, we all belong to a group, and all groups have culture.

**We All Have a Culture**

Social scientists—sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists—believe that culture demarcates all manners people use to interact in the context of society. Culture is needed by humans to survive in a social group. Bruner (1990) affirms that “the divide in human evolution was crossed when culture became the major factor in giving form to the minds of those living under its sway.” Clearly, as humans strive for survival, the need for an organizing pattern becomes a necessity. This is what makes culture a thing shared by all social groups.
There are many ways to describe and define culture. For Freire (2000), culture encompasses all that is done by people. Hernandez (2001) says that culture refers to “the complex processes of human social interaction and symbolic communication.” Arvizu, Snyder, and Espinosa (cited by Hernandez, 2001) describe culture as an instrument people use as they struggle to survive in a social group. The definition used throughout this book identifies culture as the ways and manners people use to see, perceive, represent, interpret, and assign value and meaning (see Figure 2-1) to the reality they live or experience (Banks, 2007; Lynch & Hanson, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Looking at Life Through Our Cultures

*Todo es del color del cristal con que se mira.* (Everything depends on the color of the glass you look through.)  
*Pedro Calderón de la Barca* (1600–1681), *La Vida es Sueño*

Culture is a glass prism through which we look at life. Like a prism, culture has many facets. Early childhood educators need to be cognizant and aware of these various angles that help explain the behavior, reactions, and manners of children in the classroom.

Some of the key aspects of culture that contribute to understanding and responsively planning experiences for young children and their families are the following:

- **Culture defines the accepted behaviors, roles, interpretations, and expectations of a social group.** Every social group has norms and principles that reflect agreed meanings. For example, in Nepalese society, it is accepted “to pop in and stare at the strange [Westerner] at great length, without thinking twice about it” (Murray, 1993).

- **Culture is present in visible, tangible ways.** Culture also exists in abstract ways that are not physically perceived by the eye. For example, we see the sari dress of an Indian woman and a child’s toy truck and recognize them for what they are. However, we do not know why the Indian woman is smiling or why the child is hugging the toy. These reactions are rooted in inner feelings that are not readily visible.

- **Culture offers stable patterns to guide human behavior.** Although stable, culture is also dynamic as it constantly responds to the various influences in the surroundings, affecting changes whenever necessary. An example of this is seen in the concept of a child. Today, a child is considered an individual with unique characteristics and rights, whereas in the past, the child was not valued as a person (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2004).

- **Culture is acquired through interactions with the environment.** The major settings where this occurs are the family and the school. One of the most evident aspects of
culture acquisition is how, through interactions with parents and family members, children learn the language of their group. Cultural expectations also help children to build knowledge about their cultures. Some of the early research conducted by Mead (2000) in New Guinea revealed that the education of 6-year-old Manu children included mastering swimming and canoeing, skills usually associated with older children, because those skills are essential for survival in the Manu society. In Africa, children as young as age 5 learn to take care of younger siblings. Culture was also found to be the critical factor influencing attachment and socialization patterns during the early childhood years (Gardiner and Kosmitzki, 2005; Harwood, Miller, & de Lucca, 1997).

- We begin learning the patterns and shared meanings of the group we belong to at birth. This knowledge increases and changes as we grow and develop, both individually and as a member of society. Think about how a 5-year-old interprets a birthday party and compare it with the reactions of a 2-year-old. Compare the ideas held about single parents in the 1950s with those of today.

- Culture influences different aspects of life (Banks, 2007). Nothing escapes the power of culture. Notice, for example, how you dress yourself and how you decide what appeals to you as beautiful in contrast to what you label as not beautiful.

- Cultural differences also exist among people of the same culture. Within a same group, differing lifestyles and values are not uncommon. Experiences, including personal and historical circumstances, shape people’s views. For instance, ideas and practices concerning child rearing held by urban parents probably differ from the views held by parents in rural areas. Even people belonging to a same family may exhibit differences in terms of their behaviors and ideas.

- Culture gives people identity. Sharing ideas, values, and practices gives humans a sense of being part of an entity. There are various factors that make people feel they are members of a group. Having a gender, age, religion, and family background are among the basic factors that provide a sense of identity. Additional traits that define someone’s unique persona are derived from experiences and interactions with others within and outside one’s cultural group.

**Cultural Dimensions**

The influence of culture is so powerful that it covers every aspect of behavior. As Hall (1990) says, “[t]here is not one aspect of life that is not touched and altered by culture” (emphasis added). This includes personality, how people dress themselves (including shows of emotions), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved, how their cities are planned and laid out, how transportation systems function, and how economic and government systems are put together and function.

Hall’s ideas remind us that culture can be exhibited in visible ways (that is, with our body movements, our gestures, and the physical distribution of our cities) and invisible ways (such as how we think and how we solve problems). This premise suggests
another relevant feature of culture: the twofold way in which we exhibit its influences and effects. Visible to the eye are dress codes, eating patterns, and even the games played by children. Other things remain invisible to the eye, but are perceived through actions. Examples of the invisible culture may be seen in emotional reactions to events such as happy occasions or death and in ideas about how to welcome guests into one’s home.

Whether visible or not, culture provides patterns to interpret life. We use them every day. Like the skin that covers our bodies and gives us our external individual identity, culture is always with us (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). As a classroom educator, you

**FIGURE 2-2 Cultural Levels in the Community and the Early Childhood Classroom**

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**Material Culture:**
*What we see, hear, and experience*

- Language— accents, intonations
- Dress—colors, garments, materials, dress codes
- Food and eating—items, preparation, eating habits
- Personal decorations—jewelry, body decorations, head coverings
- Utensils and tools—cooking utensils, living utensils
- Artwork—styles, colors, use of materials, folk art
- Music—instruments, practices, sounds
- Construction—buildings, home decorations
- Household utensils

**Nonmaterial Culture:**
*What is invisible to the eye but perceived through interactions*

- Ideas
- Values
- Beliefs
- Feelings and emotions

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have probably experienced times when you could easily identify the cultural patterns followed by your students; however, other times, you have probably been unable to do so. This occurs because culture presents itself in ways that are either materially or non-materially expressed (see Figure 2-2) (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2005; Hernandez, 2001). Differences in values and customs are readily visible in the most familiar settings. The incident described in Snapshot 2-1 (later in this chapter) exhibits a cultural misunderstanding that could occur anywhere.

The presence of culture transcends all that we do. The material and the nonmaterial sides of culture are constantly working together. You and your children display them in the classroom through your actions and interactions. Usually, we can easily note differences in others when they are visible or, to a lesser extent, when they are not observable but perceived. Also, we can more easily observe differences in others, although we often fail to detect our own patterns of divergence. This is the result of our own culture being so embedded in us that we forget it exists. It also happens because we consider our ways the most appropriate formula for responding to the environment. To further understand how culture is seen in our classrooms, consider the findings of a kindergarten teacher who took a cultural inventory of her children. As you read Figure 2-3, Culture

FIGURE 2-3 Culture in Action: Ways Young Children Exhibit Their Culture in the Classroom

**Verbal Skills**
- Language use
  - English language learners (ELL) may show linguistic code-switching.
  - Native language is dominant.
- Oral expressions
  - Linguistic expressions
  - How they address adults
  - Use of questions
  - Voice accent and inflection

**Emotions**
- Expressions of fears and feelings
- Expressions of love and friendship
- Reactions to stories
- Reactions to conflict (while at play, in the playground, during classroom activities)

**Other Factors**
- Ways of dress
- Preferred food
- Comments about family activities (special events and holidays)
- Expressing preferences
- Sharing pictures and objects from home
Ms. Allen believed that her child-care center was the best facility for young children. Every effort had been made to follow developmentally appropriate practices. Recently opened in a suburban area, the center was enthusiastically received by the parents in the community. The children seemed very happy. The staff, hand-picked by Ms. Allen, was excellent.

One morning, Ms. Allen was surprised to get a call from a very irate Mrs. Garcia, who informed her that she was moving her 4-year-old daughter to another school. Only a week before, Ms. Allen had personally registered the bright-eyed child and had a pleasant conversation with Mrs. Garcia, who then seemed very impressed by the school. Ms. Allen could not understand the reason for the parent’s sudden anger or her actions.

After getting off the phone, the very puzzled Ms. Allen asked if anyone in the office was aware of an incident involving the Garcia girl. Her secretary informed her that the child’s mother called the day before and complained that in her child’s classroom they were doing things that were indecent, “especially for a girl.” But, the secretary had been so busy this morning that she had forgotten to mention the conversation to Ms. Allen. “This can’t be true,” said Ms. Allen and went to see the teacher to learn more before calling back Mrs. Garcia.

Ms. Morton, the teacher, told Ms. Allen that Mrs. Garcia visited her daughter’s classroom the day before and saw the children’s bathrooms, which made her “very irate.” Ms. Morton tried to explain that the absence of doors was a safety measure. Despite her efforts to elaborate further, Mrs. Garcia took her child and left very annoyed. “I really don’t know why,” Ms. Morton said. Ms. Allen thought for a moment and said, “I do, I do.”

An Indecent Practice

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In Action, highlight the similarities between her findings and yours. Diller and Moule (2005) warn that in order to provide responsive experiences, it is essential to become aware of the children’s behaviors. These provide insights about their experiences that are shaped by their cultures. Teaching that is developmentally appropriate depends on the teacher’s ability to respond to the child’s individual and cultural realities. Consider, for instance, the experience of the child-care center director in Snapshot 2-1. Without a doubt, the bathroom facility was designed to provide for the safety of the children in the center; however, from the parent’s perspective, not having a door to provide for her daughter’s privacy was a violation of her cultural principles, both at the overt and covert levels. Gaining awareness about the interplay of various cultural worlds gives the early childhood educator an opportunity to create environments sensitive to children and to their realities.

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At birth, we begin to acquire the ways of those with which we live and interact. We
learn about our culture and the cultures of others as we interact with people. Because
every individual’s environment has a culture of its own, we come in contact with many
different cultural patterns. Perhaps the best place to see these differences is in the class-
room. You probably have noticed already that the children you teach have unique ways.
This is easier to see in the context of their interactions when they begin to share their
thoughts and feelings.

To help you “see” the many cultures that characterize your children, do the fol-
lowing exercise. Select a story to share with the children; for instance, choose any of
Verna Aardema’s stories or any of the Jafta books by Hugh Lewin. If you want, present
an issue for children to ponder and react to. Before sharing the story or issue, write down
what is, in your opinion, the central message, point, or moral of the story. Then, share
the story or the issue and ask the children to offer their interpretations. Here is where the
fun part begins. As you listen to their comments, see how many different ideas are given.
Compare their answers with your own. You will find that your students, despite their
young age, have an exciting variety of views. Charting their comments will give you ad-
ditional opportunities to learn how their answers reflect their cultures. This beginning
experience will make you aware of two important facts: (1) everyone has a culture, and
(2) culture influences our views.

Culture Establishes Patterns of Life

“Who are you?” said the caterpillar . . . Alice replied rather shyly, “I hardly know,
sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I
think I must have been changed several times since then.”

Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

You probably would have answered like Alice if you found yourself in her won-
derland. When Alice went down the rabbit hole, she left behind the rules and roles
that gave meaning to her life, and she entered a world of unfamiliar ways. We have
encountered similar experiences. For instance, how many times have you been in a
place where you could not understand what others were doing or saying? Only when a
familiar action is observed or expression is understood does the situation make sense.

Everything we do responds to patterns learned through and from experiences with
families, individuals, and people from our own social group. In social groups, everyone
tends to follow a similar frame of reference that gives meaning to life routines and expe-
riences. This pattern gives sense and direction to our actions and behaviors, which is the
essential role of culture. A system of rules, culture serves as the framework people from
a group use to make decisions, see and interpret reality, and perceive one’s role in the
family and society.
Experiences reflect how the members of a group use their frames of reference or scripts. These frameworks are made up of the following:

- values
- beliefs
- shared meanings and interpretations
- rules

Explaining when and why the social patterns of a group were established is difficult. The origins are found in events experienced long ago by elders who, in turn, established ways and ascribed their meanings. Recognizing the need to perpetuate one’s traditions, each generation has the responsibility of delivering the message from one generation to the next. How we came to learn and follow social patterns is a result of the social environment in which we were born and live.

**Culture as a Main Influence in People’s Lives**

Underlying our behavior is a set of complex ideas that individuals in our particular group use to interpret experiences and generate actions and behaviors (Spradley & McCurdy, 2003). These are rules, values, beliefs, and principles that, when followed, provide coherence and integrity to human existence. The members of the group know each of these structures or schemes. Despite how unusual rules might look to an outsider, for its members, they are logical. In fact, when practiced, they grant a sense of identity to the collective group (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2005; Hernandez, 2001). Cultural schemes are used to define the behavior parameters as well as the needs and aspirations of the group. Practices are also based on the particular interpretations that the group has made of life events. For instance, this is what Milo, the character in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, discovers during his encounter with a magical child:

Milo turned around and found himself staring at two very neatly polished brown shoes, for standing directly in front of him... was another boy just about his age, whose feet were easily three feet above the ground...

“Well,” said the boy, “in my family everyone is born in the air, with his head at exactly the height it’s going to be when he’s an adult, and then we all grow toward the ground.”

... [Milo said] “In my family we all start on the ground and grow up, and we never know how far until we actually get there.” (Juster, 1961/2000)

“What a silly system,” was the child’s reaction to what Milo considered a logical growing style, probably the same comment you would have made had you been part of the boy’s culture group.

Trying to understand the rules, beliefs, and values of other cultures while using our own values is not always effective. Each culture needs to be observed and under-
Many common elements are shared by different cultures. Perhaps one of the most characteristic is the need to celebrate. Celebrations can happen for a variety of reasons. They can also be observed in many ways, all of which are understood and shared by those who belong to the cultural group. In simple terms, celebrations are happenings that people observe because of the significance they have in their lives. Celebrations become holidays when they are observed by an entire religious group or when they hold national relevance. For early childhood teachers who want to discover more about the cultures of their students, learning how and why celebrations occur opens doors to cultural understanding. In the classroom, you may want to explore the celebrations observed by children and their families. Begin by brainstorming with children about what a celebration is. A good storybook to use is *Birthdays Around the World* by Mary Lankford and Karen Dugan (Harper-Collins, 2002). Information about the holidays and celebrations families observe can be obtained by sending home a letter with these two questions:

- What are the three most important celebrations or special days for your family?
- What are the holidays your family observes?

Take time to analyze the answers. They will give you not only a glimpse of the students’ cultures but also an idea of what families consider important. With the information gathered, engage the class in creating a mural depicting the holidays and special days they celebrate. You may want to involve students in further exploration of the topic. This can even become the target of an interesting thematic unit. To help you build a thematic unit, here are some essential points that will help you focus on the cultural aspects:

What Constitutes Cultural Aspects in Holidays and Celebrations

1. **Meanings:** Why is it observed?
   - religious
   - personal
   - national or patriotic
2. **Ways in which it is observed:** How is it observed? What do people do?
   - When does it take place? (time, season, dates)
   - What do people do? (external or physical aspects)
     - colors and symbols
     - decorations
     - traditions (such as gift-giving, food, music)
3. **People involved:** Who participates?
   - adults; children
   - all
4. **Places, locations:** Where do activities take place?
   - home
   - community
   - school

stood from the perspective of its members. More precisely, the ideas of different cultures cannot be fully equated (Spradley & McCurdy, 2003). For example, individuality, prized in U.S. culture, is not equally valued in other cultures. Lynch and Hanson (2004) remark that in traditional Asian cultures, social orientation is focused on the collective
“we” rather than on the individual. Awareness of values and visions of others contribute to our appreciation of diversity.

What we do and plan in early childhood classrooms is influenced by our cultural beliefs and values. Lewis (1991) reports how the view of responsibility varies in Japanese schools and how it influences classroom practices in nursery schools. During her study, Lewis observed how 5-year-olds were given responsibilities at an age when, in the U.S. context, the child is still guided by teachers. As their “brother’s keepers,” Japanese children were granted the authority to control the behavior of their peers and were held accountable for chores and tasks expected to be carried out by the group. Sanctions for activities or routines not followed emerged from the peers and not the teacher, for she was to remain a conflict-free benevolent figure.

Examples abound of differences in the interpretation of reality. Each interpretation reveals what is logical and correct in a particular culture. Knowledge of these interpretations helps the early childhood educator establish positive interactions and avoid misinterpretations. Take, for example, the extended use of baby language commonly employed by Hispanics in their communication with young children. This practice is not encouraged in the culture of the United States because the members of this group believe that adult language should be used from infancy. Another illustration pertains to visiting Native American families for the first time. Guests should ask for a place to sit, rather than assume any place is acceptable (Joe & Malach, 2004). Although special practices might differ from ours, we must always remember that they are part of what gives members of a particular culture a sense of identity.

**A Sense of Identity: Being a Part of the Group**

*In our society, elementary school children learn far more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some of the mere aspects of their knowledge are never taught in a systematic way. They are acquired as part of their culture through interaction with teachers and peers.*

*James Spradley and David McCurdy (2003)*
Have you ever stopped to consider what prompts you to say “I am . . .”? Are you aware of what saying what you are means? Ask a 5-year-old what she is and see how quickly she states her identity. Even if the answer is, “I am a girl,” that child is establishing herself as a member of a gender group. This sense of identification reveals an awareness of a group in which the individual participates and discloses another trait of culture: a sense of identity.

Many factors determine cultural identity. These factors vary according to one’s individual characteristics, experiences, and affiliations. Your identity may be influenced by gender, age, profession, ethnicity, language, and other factors. This leads us to affirm that, in fact, we all belong to many more groups than we may be aware of. Some of the elements influencing our individual identity may be any of the elements in Figure 2-4 (Banks & Banks, 2006; Gollnick & Chinn, 2005).

The interplay of a multiplicity of variables—age, family, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, educational experiences, individual characteristics, and others—is what makes us who we are. Garza and Lipton (cited by Hernandez, 2001) state that because individuals are defined by more than just one cultural influence, “everyone is multicultural to varying degrees with [the] specific characteristics of each individual being unique.”

Can you describe the cultural schema of these young Eastern European women who arrived in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century?
A MYRIAD OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES: THE ESSENCE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Many factors make us who we are. A cultural identity, as you have seen already, is based on numerous elements, each having varying degrees of influence on a person’s individuality. You have also learned that ethnic or cultural descent is not the only element that defines a cultural orientation. People might share some similar traits, like a culture of origin or religion, but they probably have values that diverge to various degrees from those of others. You as an individual represent many ideas and influences, all blended into who you are. They are your unique experiences and will not be like those of others. As you constructed your reality, you processed every bit of it according to your

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56  Part I  Foundations for Multicultural Education in Today's Early Childhood Classrooms

[Image]

**LITERACY CONNECTIONS...**

Using Children's Literature to Learn About Cultures

Learning about cultures is an exciting adventure. Today, you can obtain information about most cultural groups, which makes it easy for early childhood educators to create appropriate classroom environments where children can learn about each other’s cultures. Classrooms where the children’s cultures are represented also send the message that the various cultures are valued and welcome.

Sharing experiences through books is an excellent way for young children to find out about their own culture while learning to appreciate the cultures of their peers.

The following selection of books is suitable for preschoolers (ages 3–4) and kindergartners.

own mental schemes. If, as an early child educator, your ideas about education or about parenting differ from those of your colleagues, it is because you are the sum of your particular experiences. This is an example of diversity on a personal level.

**Cultural Diversity Factors**

Diversity is found in every single individual because each person is a composite of cultures. We also observe diversity in our communities. The society of the United States is one of the most complex reflections of social and cultural diversity. This comes as a result of the multitude of different nationalities and ideologies representative of the immigrant nature of this nation. Today, the term *cultural diversity* is freely used whenever we talk about the cultural spectrum found in our communities.

Often, the term *cultural diversity* is narrowly defined. Cultural diversity entails many more factors than the place of origin (where you or your parents were born or came from) or language. In the social context, cultural diversity describes the variety of social factors that, either singly or interactively, exert influence on an individual’s behavior. Some of these key social factors are nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, gender, exceptionalities, gender orientation, and age (see Figure 2-5). Knowledge about how diversity factors contribute to shaping the character and ways of an individual helps educators to better understand children’s behaviors and learning characteristics (Banks & Banks, 2006; Copple, 2003). In the early childhood classroom, this knowledge provides the foundation for designing a sound developmentally appropriate program. How to respond to those variables in the context of your classroom is presented in the third part of this book.

Many scholars believe that concepts about diversity are socially constructed categories (Banks & Banks, 2006). In fact, these concepts are ideas or representations of physical, cultural, or social traits that individuals might possess. For instance, the social class category is very hard to define concretely, because it entails areas that are exclusive to those said to belong to it. Today, many of the attributes used to profile certain social groups are now also found across other social

*Cities and towns throughout the United States reflect the multiplicity of people’s ethnic roots.*
groups (Banks & Banks, 2006). For this reason, we caution educators to carefully use terminology when describing children and families.

**Cultural Diversity Defines the “American Way”**

Today, debate still continues on the accuracy of the term *diversity* when describing people and communities in the United States. Some claim that we all are simply Americans. Others say that cultural diversity will endanger the future of the nation. These
comments usually reflect the fact that some people are still unclear about the significance of diversity.

Diversity has been the common denominator of the United States since its inception. As you saw in Chapter 1, people from many different countries came to forge the nation we feel so proud of now. Decades ago, when the founders—the poor, the idealists, and the persecuted of the world—came to this part of North America, they faced many physical, personal, and social adjustments. One of their major tasks was to adapt to their new social reality and become Americans. In this effort, newcomers laid aside their own cultures and blended into a common culture and framework. This is known as the process of acculturation. This concept is commonly described using the

• **Universal:** All human beings are alike in their needs and rights.

• **Ecological:** The place where humans live on the earth determines the way they will respond and relate to their natural environment.

• **National:** Depending on the country where they were born, individuals will have characteristics that identify them (language, world views, and so on).

• **Regional:** Based on the region where humans live, they will develop area-specific cultures.

• **Racio-ethnic:** All people have distinct racial and ethnic characteristics.

Source: Adapted from Baruth & Manning, 2004.

Even though they share a common Hispanic background, these children are diverse in their own ways. Teachers need to be aware of using only one variable when addressing children’s needs.
metaphor of the “melting pot,” in which people dissolved their individual cultural identities and adopted the patterns of the mainstream culture.

Today, the concept of the United States as a “melting pot” where everyone becomes a mainstream kind of American has been challenged by the view of society as multicultural. The idea of a salad bowl is preferred over a melting pot by those affirming that it is possible for people to be productive members of American society while maintaining their own individual cultural heritage. To support this position, we find many examples derived from the stories of immigrants in communities everywhere who have integrated and adopted American lifestyles and still uphold their heritage.

Being a teacher in today’s classrooms requires an understanding of the magnitude and significance of new social directions that have emerged out of the increasing presence and nature of diversity. More than ever before, professionals must understand the impact of life in a socially and culturally diverse society on early childhood practices. There is an added responsibility to meet the needs and expectations of young learners and their families. Current social realities also place demands on early childhood professionals to become more cognizant about their own cultures as well as the cultures of children they teach. This understanding is instrumental in setting an atmosphere of mutual respect for social and cultural diversity in our classrooms.

The classrooms of the United States are settings where the country’s future is being forged. Preparation for the real world in our society now entails giving children the skills needed to interact with others. This has special meaning in an increasingly diverse society. As early childhood professionals strive to create the best environment for children, including and infusing the realities of society will prove to be the key elements. Teaching the whole child must include considerations of the child’s cultural background.

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**LET’S TALK AND REFLECT… Culture and Identity**

Culture plays an important part in the development of young children’s identities and shapes their views of the world. Various environments also play essential roles in that process.

- How does the social and cultural environment of the community influence the children’s concept of “self”?
- What messages are sent in the classroom regarding the differences in gender and exceptionalities? How do they influence children’s emerging sense of self and sense of others?
Talking about Race and Ethnicity

Probably no two concepts are more misunderstood than race and ethnicity. Both tend to be included in discussions about culture. The important issues are the relevance they have to culture and the meaning of each term.

Ethnic groups share common histories, customs, values, lifestyles, religions, and languages. In the United States, some ethnic groups have preserved their identities, whereas others have been integrated into the mainstream culture or have merged with other racial and ethnic groups. The particular preoccupation with race in the United States makes it even more difficult to define ethnic groups in absolute terms. For example, Asian Americans can have several different religions, be of different races and lifestyles, and hold totally different values.

The same is true of race. Race is a term used to describe the physical characteristics of a large group of people with somewhat similar genetic history (Campbell, 2004). The definition of race as defined by genetic characteristics was important in the European-dominated United States from its inception. Today, the definition of race has become more of a sociopolitical category than a biological phenomenon. The danger to our democracy is not ethnic identity or race, but racism, the oppression of a group of people based on the color of their skin (Campbell, 2004). As mentioned earlier, racist concepts evolve out of personal interactions and experiences in the environment. Prevention of racist ideas needs to take place early in life. Early childhood educators have the responsibility to eradicate racism among young children by addressing inappropriate comments and behaviors in the classroom in developmentally appropriate ways that will help clarify and thus erase what may be the emergence of erroneous concepts about others.

What Is Ethnicity?

Central to the idea of culture is the concept of ethnicity. Ethnicity is defined by three factors: nationality, ancestry, and religious affiliation. A member of an ethnic group might share some or all of these characteristics with other group members (Figure 2-6). Ethnic groups are usually described as people with a common cultural tradition and a clear sense of identity. Ethnicity, thus, becomes the set of features that historically has characterized a particular subgroup in the context of a larger dominant culture (McGoldrick, 2003). At the personal level, ethnicity becomes the sense an individual has of commonality with family and others of the same group to which he or she belongs (Feinstein, cited in McGoldrick, 2003). The family plays an instrumental role in a person’s acquisition and development of a sense of ethnicity, serving as the initial source and reinforcer of ethnic characterizations. The impact of ethnicity on people is such that it identifies them within the spectrum of a society. Examples of ethnic groups found in U.S. society are the Amish, African Americans, and Jews. These three groups are good examples because they represent some of the differences you may find when defining ethnicity.
Although the Amish have all three basic elements of diversity (religion, ancestry, and nationality) and the African Americans possess two (ancestry and nationality), the Jews, affiliated through their common religious tradition, may only have one. Regardless of what element establishes the character of an ethnic group, we all belong to one. Baruth and Manning (2004) add another interesting dimension to the concept of ethnicity: the role of self-perception and of outsiders’ perceptions about the individual. They assert that ethnicity is a “dynamic and complex concept [that] refers to how members of a group perceive themselves, and how, in turn, they are perceived by others” (emphasis added).

Subjective perception can lead to very distorted views about individuals and social groups. For example, consider the child who perceives breaking apart a brand-new toy as an exploration, while the parent may interpret the action as misbehavior. Similarly, practicing hand movements with a marker on a living room wall has a different meaning to the child than to an adult. When subjective perception is applied to ethnicity, we find that we do not agree with how others see us. For example, you might see yourself as part of an ethnic group, and yet people might not consider you as part of that group.
The same can happen when people see you as part of an ethnicity that you do not perceive yourself as being a part of.

Divergences in ethnic perception commonly occur in connection with non-European American groups. Examples of this involve people from the Caribbean region as well as Hispanics. During graduate courses on multiculturalism, we have found repeatedly that non-European American students’ ethnic perceptions of themselves differ from those assigned to them by the mainstream society. More specifically, a student born in Barbados was shocked to find herself defined as “black,” when in her country she was not classified that way. She found that her ethnicity was being designated by the color of her skin rather than by her ethnic heritage. Similarly, it was traumatic for light-skinned Hispanics to be denied the designation of “white” because of their heritage. One student commented that, for her, it was particularly disappointing to find that her color was commonly used to describe her, whereas her nationality was given a second place.

One of the authors of this book remembers witnessing how a dark-skinned teacher born in Trinidad was once questioned by her colleagues when she refused to identify herself as an African American. Using solely the parameter of color, the teacher’s colleagues were unable to acknowledge her Caribbean ethnicity. Similar misconceptions are common among Asian Americans, whose ethnicities are usually compounded into one

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Children become aware of their differences and similarities at a very young age.


**Race: A Controversial Concept**

Race has been used to establish differences that led to unfair separation of human beings in our global society. It has also been similarly used in U.S. society. The term *race* has been synonymous with color, so whenever color is the sole attribute used to define an individual, it can become a dangerous tool. Banks (2007) warns that nothing has had a more destructive effect on humankind than ideas about races. Montague affirms that it is, in fact, “man’s most dangerous myth” (cited in Baruth & Manning, 2004). The term *people of color* has been coined to depict non-European groups. Some educators disagree with this terminology because of the misleading connotation given to color. We agree that *people of color* emphasizes only one irrelevant characteristic of a cultural group. We (as well as many others) prefer the more inclusive term *culturally diverse*.

Race is defined as the phenotypical characteristics that designate a group. It basically refers to the biological features common to a human group. Different from ethnicity, race describes characteristics that individuals cannot easily change. These physical characteristics are transmitted from one individual to another.

**In Action . . . Can You Define Your Ethnicity?**

Clarity about your own roots is critical when trying to understand and teach children from various cultures. To establish your ethnic affiliation, ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I define myself?
- How do I know that I belong to that group?
- How did I receive my ethnic identity?
- How do other people consider me? Are they in agreement with my view?
- What things do I do that identify me as part of that group?
The concept of race has its origins in anthropology, where it was used to describe the physical characteristics (eyes, skin color, size of head, and so on) of people (Hernandez, 2001). From this anthropological perspective, scientists identified humans according to racial groups. Today, however, even in the scientific sphere, categorizing human beings by such closed attributes is difficult. With the high incidence of interracial marriages, it becomes challenging to apply strict descriptors to define the children of diversity. Just think how you would define some of the children in your classroom who are a combination of many racial groups. Take the case of a 3-year-old living on the East Coast, whose father is Italian American and whose mother is half Asian and half African American. Racially, it would be a hard task to label the child. You would need to get a formula to determine the physical racial proportions, which, at the end, would yield no significant information about the child as an individual. Unfortunately, some people persist in using race labels. Applied as a social descriptor of people, race turns into a misleading concept. The pronounced emphasis on a physical aspect, such as color, contributes to rendering inaccurate images of people. This becomes especially evident because it ignores the social and traditional heritage embedded by culture in every individual.

There are still many implications to the meaning of race in society. Gollnick and Chinn (2005) point out the following:

- **Race as a concept still carries a strong social meaning in our country as well as in many other societies.** This is despite the extensive movement of people from one geographical region to another and the high incidence of interracial marriages.
The concept of race contributes very little to cultural understanding. Race seldom correlates with cultural groups defined by nationality, language, or religion. The racial identity of people does not necessarily correspond to their nationality.

The persistent use of racial, ethnic, and language categories in public and governmental documents provokes more confusion about the U.S. population. The use of racial and ethnic indicators has proven to be not always effective when trying to assign individuals to a category. An individual could belong to several categories at the same time; therefore, tallying inclusive categories is difficult.

The current racial designations of the major ethnic groups are portrayed in Figure 2-7. They include whites and blacks who declared themselves to be of one race as well as the Hispanic or Latino population. The categories such as Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander also contain other subcategories of other ethnicities. Demographically, the United States is now considered the most racially diverse country in the world. After looking at these numbers, you may want to consider the cultural implications of the United States’ racial profile.

A New Demographic Paradigm, Multicultural People

Today, the demographic profile of the United States includes a new and growing population group whose existence was acknowledged during Census 2000. For the first time, individuals were able to declare their multiracial and multiethnic heritage by selecting the “multicultural” category. Racially, these individuals are described as people born from parents with different racial and/or ethnic roots. Although interracial families have long existed, they were not officially acknowledged and recorded as a distinct group until 2000. Until then, people with mixed-race heritage were defined as “third culture” (West, 2003). Socially and demographically, the members of the “multicultural” category present a different paradigm in racial composition that describes the ever-increasing pluralistic nature of communities across the nation. Enrollment of multiracial children is already a stable trend in most schools that is projected to grow in the future (National Association of School Psychologists, 2004).

FIGURE 2-7 Racial Profile of the Population of the United States, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White (excluding Hispanics/Latinos)</td>
<td>211,460,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics or Latinos</td>
<td>35,305,818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>34,758,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>2,475,956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10,242,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders</td>
<td>874,414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prejudice and Racism: The Plagues of the Past and the Present

Sadly, the world is full of old prejudices.

Doris Bergen (2003)

Any discussion about race and ethnicity must acknowledge the presence of prejudice and racism in society. Unfortunately, neither is a stranger to the United States. Sadly, U.S. history includes numerous instances in which people were victims of unfair treatment because of their differences, and many more will occur unless actions are taken to prevent unfairness.

Prejudice has caused more destruction in the world than any war and is the essence of racism and bigotry. Prejudice is based on holding negative views about others and is not supported by solid evidence. The dislikes manifested by those who are prejudiced are based on poor or inadequate knowledge.

Sometimes, those who hold prejudices are not aware of their own feelings (Kehoe, cited in Hernandez, 2001). Dislikes of others are often demonstrated through attitudes and nonverbal condemnation. Victims of prejudice have been subjected to subtle, covert disparagement, such as a condescending smile or a mocking look, which wounds and often permanently stigmatizes them. Kehoe (cited in Hernandez, 2001), in an analysis of prejudice, found key points that alert educators to its sources. Some of Kehoe’s findings are included in Snapshot 2-5.

Sadly, prejudice has proven not to be a stranger in U.S. schools and classrooms. Racial slurs and hate crimes are only the more overt forms of prejudice. Statistics show that incidences of hate crimes have increased during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The subtle forms—for instance, the patronizing ways in which culturally diverse families are often treated—are as damaging and offensive as the more tangible ones.

Post–September 11 society has made many more aware of the culturally diverse nature of people. In some cases it has led to prejudice and discrimination against things
and individuals unknown to us. This need for more security sometimes results in more racism and greater prejudice against the individuals and groups that are perceived as threatening. Since September 11, incidents against ethnic groups have increased to an alarming level, making the fight against intolerance imperative. Because many adults openly exhibit their feelings and convey their biased views in the presence of children, early educators need to be aware of such information being brought into the classroom. Children may repeat adults’ disparaging remarks while they role-play, talk with their peers, or react to stories. Early childhood educators have a responsibility to address such incidents in appropriate and antibiased ways. This will prevent the formation and reinforcement of prejudiced behaviors.

The Classroom as a Culture of Peace

The best weapon against violence and prejudice is peace (UNESCO, 2000). Peace can be defined as a feeling of harmony and well-being. Tolerance and bias-free attitudes are avenues that lead to peace. A culture of peace begins when adults and children together share and participate in activities as equals. Peace is also found in places where violence is openly rejected and where people are free to express their views and exchange ideas.

Learning tolerance occurs through the interactions with individuals we encounter at home, in school, and in the community. These settings are major places where bias-free behaviors can be learned. For young children, the classroom can become the most powerful bias-free place where they can acquire knowledge about socially acceptable tolerant behavior. Routine activities and interactions characterized by equal treatment for all and by rejection of unfairness promote a culture of respect that leads to peace. Taking time to clarify derogatory and prejudicial comments made by children is a critical step in eradicating prejudice. Because teachers exert an influential role in the behaviors and attitudes of young children, responding and intervening appropriately in prejudice-inspired incidents is essential. As a teacher with this goal, you can do the following:

- Be sure that comments made in the classroom regarding actions of people from diverse backgrounds do not convey criticism.
- Be aware of many different messages your own body language communicates to young children. Remember, they can read you!
- Remember to respond to children’s actions clearly and within the context of their actions, and make sure that children understand your responses.
- Acknowledge children’s bias-free and tolerant behaviors in real context and through vicarious experiences, such as reading of multicultural books and shared children’s stories.

As multiculturalists and early educators, the need to prepare children to successfully live in and embrace a culture of peace is a priority. The hope and seed for peace and successful life in a diverse society is found in every classroom.
LITERACY CONNECTIONS... Suggested References for Building a Culture of Peace and Tolerance

You may want to review some of the following titles that provide ideas and strategies for supporting tolerance and peace in early childhood classrooms.


*Children’s books recommended for ages 3–6

SNAPSHOT 2-5 Facts About Prejudice

- Individual differences in temperament cannot be attributed to race.
- Prejudice and stereotypes are learned, not innate. They are learned in the family and in school without conscious intent.
- Generally, individuals do not realize how prejudiced they are.
- Those prejudiced against one ethnic group are likely to be prejudiced against others.
- Individuals who are not directly competing with minority group members tend to be less prejudiced toward them.
- As a group’s character becomes more distinctive, a consensus develops regarding stereotypes associated with that group.
- Stereotypes resist change. However, social and economic conditions, especially of the kind that modify relations among groups, can alter stereotypes.
- Prejudice is a predictor of discriminatory behavior.
- There is considerable agreement within a society about specific stereotypes assigned to particular groups.

Stereotypes

One of the most damaging ways prejudice is expressed is in the form of stereotypes. A stereotype is an oversimplified, generalized image describing all individuals in a group as having the same characteristics in appearance, behaviors, and beliefs. Although there may be a germ of truth in a stereotype, the image usually represents “a gross distortion, or an exaggeration of the truth, and has offensive, dehumanizing implications” (Council on Interracial Books for Children, in Saracho & Spodek, 1983). The effects of being stereotyped are damaging to the individual and to those who witness it. As found by Kehoe (cited in Hernandez, 2001), stereotypes are learned usually in the context of the family and, unfortunately, in schools. Actions to prevent and stop stereotyping are the responsibility of all educators, particularly during the early years because of the inherent vulnerability of young learners. Developing an antibias curriculum, like the one developed by the staff at Pacific Oaks College in California, is a good way to start (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Familiarizing young children with action-oriented multicultural activities that promote understanding and tolerance is not only recommended but essential.

Racism is a crime many often reject but refuse to stop. It continues to be a “prevailing social practice” (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Hernandez (2001) states that racism is found in those individuals exhibiting behaviors and actions that reflect (a) the conviction that physical, psychological, and intellectual characteristics are inherited and distributed differently among humans and (b) the belief of being racially superior to other racial groups. Throughout history, many individuals and groups have been victimized as a result of these tenets. The latest are among the recently arrived non-European Americans (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

As we strive to offer children an education that will empower them to become successful members of society, early childhood educators must realize that the key to unum is in their hands. Prejudice and racism must be eradicated for the United States to enter strong and triumphant into the new century. Old ideas about superiority of some racial and ethnic groups have poisoned the minds of many and must be abandoned. As an early childhood educator, remember that change begins with the child. The battles to eliminate prejudice and racism are to be won in your classrooms, and you as teachers are the champions we look to.

Overcoming Unfairness and Discrimination: Legislative Landmarks

Today’s society still faces the challenge of overcoming discriminatory practices in spite of the many laws and landmark legislation that have been passed to protect the rights of all members of U.S. society. Early childhood educators need to become cognizant of many legislative mandates and laws that directly influence young children in their classrooms. Many state and federal statutes exist that not only protect young children’s rights to equal educational experiences but also address the diversity of needs and characteristics of young children.
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The passage of the 1960s Civil Rights Act created fertile ground for recognizing the rights of every citizen regardless of his or her characteristics and conditions. Furthermore, the Act acknowledged and reaffirmed the individual rights of culturally diverse people and gave way to additional efforts that directly impacted early childhood education. Among these laws is the historic PL 94-142 of 1975 that established the rights of individuals with disabilities to receive educational services according to their needs. This transcendental legislation impacted the social framework of the nation and began to erase the unjust and discriminatory treatment of children and adults with disabilities. The rights of individuals with disabilities were expanded further by the enactment in 1990 of PL 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and later on by the amendments passed in 1997 that defined early childhood intervention.

LITERACY CONNECTIONS... Using Literature to Address Prejudiced Comments in the Classroom

It is not surprising to hear children make comments and statements reflective of prejudiced or stereotypical views. Most of the time, they repeat what they have heard adults say, unaware of the meaning of the words. Other times, they are repeating what they have heard in the media or on the streets. Rather than ignoring these incidents, responding to their comments and clarifying the meanings is the best way to avoid repetition. Upon hearing an inappropriate comment, use your own words to let the child know that the comment is not appropriate and that you intend to discuss the statement with the child. (“Those are words that hurt and that we don’t use.”) Be sure to take time to (1) clarify the comment or incident and (2) explain on the child’s level why it is inappropriate. These are important steps in building understanding and in avoiding having such behaviors become a part of the child’s response repertoire. For example, ask the following:

• Why did you say this?
• Where did you hear such words?

• What made you say that?
• What do you think it means?
• How would you feel if someone were to call you such a name?

Another way for clarifying prejudiced comments in the classroom is to use stories addressing racial and ethnic content. For preschoolers, stories with fantasy characters, like the animals in What if the Zebras Lost Their Stripes? are age-appropriate ways to engage them in a lively discussion about words and attitudes that hurt. You may want to try some of the suggested titles included in this section:


Equity in Educational Services for All Children

Unequal programs and services available to the young have presented enduring challenges for multicultural educators. The No Child Left Behind Act, passed in 2002, addressed these critical issues (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Although the mandate placed emphasis on individual and school accountability—a facet that has caused concern for educators regarding testing bias and developmentally and culturally appropriate approaches—it also brought to the forefront the recognition of the rights of all children to quality educational services. The law also addresses the disparities and fair services, a main issue in multicultural education. It reinforces the rights of all children, especially those in poor communities, to receive educational experiences from well-trained teachers. No Child Left Behind establishes high expectations for all, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. Equal treatment is based on the premise that all children have potential beyond racial background or language capability and deserve quality services.

As we move forward in the twenty-first century, we recognize that although much has been gained, much still remains to be changed for the young children and families of the increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse society of the United States.

Stability and Change: The Rhythm of Culture

All cultures have shared meanings that give direction to the group (Bowman, 2001). Your classroom is the place where children come to explore and discover how to live in their social environment. The playground is another place where children express the views of the world that they have acquired so far. We say “so far” because these views are not static. Being a dynamic process, culture evolves and changes with time. This process affects our personal perceptions and beliefs about people and environments.

Your classroom reflects cultural changes in many ways. For example, educational theories of early childhood practices evolved from being teacher-centered to being child-centered. If you had been teaching in the 1950s or 1960s, your classroom would have included more academic materials and activities. A higher number of large group
experiences would have dominated your teaching. Children would have probably been found doing many “pencil and paper” exercises while you would have been delivering more information for them “to learn.” You also would have looked different. Most likely, your school dress code would not have included sneakers and today’s informal, casual clothing. Because our cultural values have experienced modifications, we now have a very different picture of how the early childhood classroom should look.

Change is a positive characteristic of all cultures. Through change, a group keeps itself alive. Comparing culture to the human organism, we find that in the same manner that the body affects modifications when faced with new circumstances, culture similarly adapts itself to new pressures. This capacity to adapt itself grants culture the capability to respond to reality. Actually, this mechanism of change is as active as the one in our bodies. You must remain abreast of current social transformations that take place in society, which will allow you to respond and provide for the needs of children.

**Supporting Cultures in Our Classroom: Taking Action**

Your classroom is a reflection of our social mosaic. The children you teach bring to the classroom the ideas and experiences that characterize the United States in the twenty-first century. One of the things the children reflect is the diversity of visions found in our communities. As they interact in their social environments—the family, the classroom, the neighborhood, and the community—they learn that not all individuals are alike. For example, they will discover that what makes some people happy might be different from their own ideas of happiness. They will notice that not all people like to wear the same kind of clothes as they do or that other people have a hair texture smoother or curlier than theirs. They will learn that they have ideas of their own and that others see the world differently. While holding their own views, children—and you as a teacher—come to discover that there are other ways to see and interpret reality. Sometimes we will agree with others’ interpretations, and sometimes we will disagree. Not everyone looks at life through the same glasses!
Preparing to serve children who live in a diverse country requires much initiative and imagination. Becoming effective teachers of young children in a multicultural world begins with the following steps:

- **Discover and clarify your own cultural viewpoints.** Begin by ascertaining your own beliefs, values, and practices. To appreciate other cultures, you must be clear about your own. The search for your roots can begin by talking to your relatives and family. Examine official records that document your and your family members’ birthplaces, marriages, travels, and other significant events. Analyze your responses to the activities presented in the “In Action” sections throughout this chapter. They are intended to help you clarify ideas about your own cultural identity.

- **Learn to be more culturally competent.** Examine the cultures represented in the community where you live and those in your school. See what cultural groups are there that you know very little about or that you would like to learn more about. One way to choose is to think about those cultures commonly found in your classroom. Remember, we are all learning more about the cultures in this country. Do not feel bad if you lack knowledge about some of them!

- **Honestly examine the stereotypes about other groups that you have in the classroom or that you have encountered.** Do a self-inventory to find out what you know about any stereotypes associated with those groups. You may be surprised to find that they are probably based on very inconsequential and unfair facts.

- **Read about people from other cultures.** The reference list in this book is a starting point. Check your local library, where you may also find a variety of publications about different ethnic groups.

- **Consider the importance that principles of development have on planning and designing classroom experiences.** Along with that, learn to recognize and appreciate the influence of the family in the child’s overall development. These two points will be examined in Chapters 3 and 4.

**WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED—CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The main topic of this chapter is culture. We defined what culture is and discussed many ways in which it shapes our behavior and our lives. Culture is the most potent single influence that makes us who we are. There are many aspects of culture. Some of the elements of culture are very visible (material) while others are very covert and deal with the emotional and thinking patterns (nonmaterial) of individuals and groups. Because one’s sense of identity is very closely related to one’s culture, it is important for all of us as individuals to know as much about each other’s cultures as possible and to understand their influences on ourselves and on the world around us. Educators of young children are expected to learn about various cultures and their rituals in order to teach and nurture young children. Through education comes understanding and toler-
THINGS TO DO . . .

1. Based on the discussion about culture presented in this chapter, create your own definition of culture.

2. Visit your community or neighborhood and make a list of its cultural elements. How many of these are visible to the eye? How many are not visible?

3. Observe two young children (ages 3–5). Identify how they exhibit their cultural heritage.

4. List the ways you share your own culture with others. Include both material and non-material items.

5. Find an early childhood textbook and review two or three chapters for stereotype language and concepts.

6. Engage a group of friends or family members in a conversation about stereotypes. Make a list of the terminology that was used. What did you learn about their level of acceptance of others?

RECOMMENDED INTERNET RESOURCES

■ “The ABCs of Disability Rights,” from the Southern Poverty Law Center
  www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=872

■ Colorín Colorado, a website that provides a variety of resources to support the needs of young English language learners
  www.colorincolorado.org

■ Culture and Ethnic Groups, a portal that provides resources and information from the government about the different cultural and ethnic groups in the United States
  www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/History_Culture.shtml

■ Race, the Power of an Illusion, a PBS series
  www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm

YOUR STANDARDS PORTFOLIO

NAEYC Standard 4b: Teaching and Learning Using Developmentally Effective Approaches*

Culture is one of the factors that influence the child’s development and learning processes. Teaching and responding to the child’s unique needs requires a clear understanding.*

* NAEYC Standard 4b correlates with INTASC Standard 2: Student Development and Learning.
of the cultural and linguistic contexts in which children grow and develop. Select and complete one of the following artifacts to evidence how you meet NAEYC’s Standard 4b.

- Create a pictorial cultural profile of the community where you live or teach. Include aspects such as cultural groups, religious groups, languages used, businesses, places of interest, community celebrations, and any other details. Reflect on how these elements influence and play a role in the children’s development.

- Prepare a chart about the linguistic environment in your community. Identify languages used by people and in signage in streets; names of businesses; newspapers; media, including radio and television programs; materials at the library; and any other places. Comment on your findings and reflect on how the nature of the linguistic environment may influence children.

- Stereotypes often can be found in the visuals, children’s books, and materials used in the classroom environment. Conduct observations in at least three classrooms and look for any stereotypical content in pictures, posters, children’s literature, and manipulatives. Comment on your findings and reflect on how they may influence development. Suggest alternative materials to prevent stereotypes in the classroom.

REFERENCES


