

What Is Cultural Identity?

Children begin to develop a sense of identity as individuals and as members of groups from their earliest interactions with others (McAdoo, 1993; Sheets, 1999a). One of the most basic types of identity is ethnic identity, which entails an awareness of one's membership in a social group that has a common culture. The common culture may be marked by a shared language, history, geography, and (frequently) physical characteristics (Fishman, 1989; Sheets, 1999a).

Not all of these aspects need to be shared, however, for people to psychologically identify with a particular ethnic group. Cultural identity is a broader term: people from multiple ethnic backgrounds may identify as belonging to the same culture. For example, in the Caribbean and South America, several ethnic groups may share a broader, common, Latin culture. Social groups existing within one nation may share a common language and a broad cultural identity but have distinct ethnic identities associated with a different language and history. Ethnic groups in the United States are examples of this.

ACTIVITY: Exploring Cultural Identity

With a colleague or in a small group, discuss the following questions:

- *What is your cultural identity? Describe it.*
- *Do you remember a time when you felt a connection with someone who shared your cultural background? Describe that feeling. What made you feel connected to that person?*
- *What kinds of issues related to cultural identity (either your own or your students') have come up for you as a teacher?*

Definitions of Culture and the Invisibility of One's Own Culture

In your discussion with a colleague it is likely that both of you had different ideas about what constitutes culture. Anthropologists and other scholars continue to debate the meaning of this term. García (1994) refers to culture as

[T]he system of understanding characteristics of that individual's society, or of some subgroup within that society. This system of understanding includes values, beliefs, notions about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and other socially constructed ideas that members of the society are taught are "true." (p. 51)

Geertz (1973) asserts that members of cultures go about their daily lives within shared webs of meaning. If we link García and Geertz's definitions, we can imagine culture as invisible webs composed of values, beliefs, ideas about appropriate behavior, and socially constructed truths.

One may ask, why is culture made up of invisible webs? Most of the time, our own cultures are invisible to us (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1996; Philips, 1983), yet they are the context within which we operate and make sense of the world. When we encounter a culture that is different from our own, one of the things we are faced with is a set of beliefs that manifest themselves in behaviors that differ from our own. In this way, we often talk about other people's cultures, and not so much about our own. Our own culture is often hidden from us, and we frequently describe it as "the way things are." Nonetheless, one's beliefs and actions are not any more natural or biologically predetermined than any other group's set of beliefs and actions; they have emerged from the ways one's own group has dealt with and interpreted the particular conditions it has faced. As conditions change, so do cultures; thus, cultures are considered to be dynamic.





ACTIVITY: Exploring Values, Beliefs, and Ideas

Think about the values, beliefs, and ideas that are prevalent in your culture. Then, speculate on how those values, beliefs, and ideas may have emerged from the conditions members of your culture faced in the past. Use the table below to record your thoughts.

VALUE, BELIEF, OR IDEA	WHERE IT CAME FROM
<i>EXAMPLE: Education is the most important thing in life.</i>	<i>Asian Indian parent's experience about how to achieve success in the United States.</i>



Now, think of some prevalent values, beliefs, and ideas of your culture that are currently being challenged by members of the cultural group. How have conditions changed for members of the group since the old values, beliefs, and ideas were formulated?

HISTORICAL VALUE, BELIEF, OR IDEA	CHALLENGE TO THE VALUE, BELIEF, OR IDEA	CHANGED CONDITIONS THAT MAY HAVE LED TO THE CHALLENGE
<i>EXAMPLE: Parents arrange their children's marriages.</i>	<i>People should marry for love.</i>	<i>Increased education and individual pursuit of work; the feminist movement.</i>

Individual Differences Within Cultures and the Dynamic Nature of Culture

Individual cultural identity presents yet another layer of complexity. Members of the same culture vary widely in their beliefs and actions. How can we explain this phenomenon? The argument for a “distributive model” of culture addresses the relationship between culture and personality (García, 1994; Schwartz, 1978). This argument posits that individuals select beliefs, values, and ideas that guide their actions from a larger set of cultural beliefs, values, and ideas. In most cases, we do not consciously pick and choose attributes from the total set; rather, the conditions and events in our individual lives lead us to favor some over others. In summarizing Spiro’s concept of “cultural heritage,” García (1994) draws a distinction between “cultural heritage” and “cultural inheritance.” Cultural heritage refers to what society as a whole possesses, and a cultural inheritance is what each individual possesses. In other words, each individual inherits some (but not all) of the cultural heritage of the group.

We all have unique identities that we develop within our cultures, but these identities are not fixed or static. This is the reason that stereotypes do not hold up: no two individuals from any culture are exactly alike. While living inside a culture allows members to become familiar with the total cultural heritage of that society, no individual actually internalizes the entire cultural heritage. In fact, it would be impossible for any one person to possess a society’s entire cultural heritage; there are inevitably complex and contradictory values, beliefs, and ideas within that heritage, a result of the conditions and events that individuals and groups experience. For example, arranged marriage has long been a cultural practice in India based on the belief that the families of potential spouses best know who would make a desirable match. More and more frequently, however, individuals reject the practice of arranged marriage; this is partly due to the sense of independence from family brought on by both men and women’s participation in a rapidly developing job market. The changing experience of work is shifting cultural attitudes towards family and marriage. These different experiences and the new values, beliefs, and ideas they produce contribute to the dynamic nature of culture.

No two individuals from any culture are exactly alike.

Because individual differences within cultural groups are far greater than differences between cultural groups, it is both particularly crucial and particularly challenging to operationalize understandings of culture and avoid stereotyping in diverse classrooms. To learn about the cultural and individual experiences of students, Hollins (1996) suggests that teachers

- observe and record individual student responses to classroom events or situations,
- develop and administer questionnaires about student beliefs and expectations,
- conduct formal and informal interviews, and
- request life histories and biographies.



ACTIVITY: Personal Cultural History Exercise

(adapted from Okazawa-Rey, 1998)

The purpose of the personal cultural history exercise is to

- *recall and reflect on your earliest and most significant experiences of race, culture, and difference;*
- *think about yourself as a cultural being whose life has been influenced by various historical, social, political, economic, and geographical circumstances; and*
- *make connections between your own experience and those of people different from you.*

This activity may generate a lot of feelings for you and others in your group. Please keep all information confidential (within the group), and do not refer to the specifics of what others have said without their permission after the activity. It will be useful to appoint someone as the group's facilitator.

Using drawings, symbols, and colors, each participant should answer the following questions:

- *What is your racial and ethnic identity?*
- *What is your earliest recollection of someone being included or excluded from your group based on race or culture?*
- *What is your earliest recollection of being different or excluded based on race or culture? Describe a time when your difference made a difference.*

**After drawings are complete, share with each other:**

- *How it made you feel to think about and answer the questions*
- *How it felt to use a medium most people are unaccustomed to using*
- *The story that your picture tells. (Other group members should be active listeners and may only ask factual questions of the speaker.)*

After sharing your histories, analyze your collective experiences; pay particular attention to geography, historical time period, race, class, gender, religion, language, and other factors. Think about the following questions:

- *What similarities and differences do you notice in your experiences?*
- *What are some of the major forces that shaped your experiences?*
- *How did oppression, discrimination, and prejudice affect your lives?*
- *If your lives were not noticeably affected by discrimination and prejudice, why might this be?*
- *When might you have had an advantage because of your group membership? When were you placed at a disadvantage?*
- *In the United States, what difference does color or race make? Ethnicity? Language background?*



Think about the role schools played in the dynamics of oppression when you were a young person.

- *Can you think of policies or practices that have negative consequences for members of a particular group?*
- *How was what happened in school supported in other institutions?*
- *What strategies did communities, families, and individuals use to resist discrimination and organize on their own behalf?*

Reflect on how your personal experiences with culture and difference shaped your conception of yourself as a professional.

- *How might a person's cultural and racial experiences influence their career path?*
- *Share with a colleague or two some of the ways in which your experiences with culture and difference influenced your career choice.*
- *How have these experiences shaped your views of students who are from racial and cultural groups different from your own?*



Minority Cultural Identity Development

Students who are not members of the dominant group may have difficulty developing their own identity because they are pressured in school (and often, also, in public) to suppress behaviors that mark them as different. A sense of individual and group identity is related to normal emotional and cognitive development, so when this process is interfered with, students are more likely to fail in school (Sheets, 1999b).

Identity is not a neat and tidy concept, nor is it something one person can assign to another (though social attribution of a person's identity can affect him or her—as when people make assumptions about what ethnic group another person belongs to and treat him according to preset expectations). Members of the dominant culture whose identity development is less likely to be interfered with may not understand the complex process of identity development for students from minority or mixed ethnic backgrounds.

VIGNETTE: Supporting Students' Ethnic Identity in School

An urban high school in the Northwest allowed one of its staff members, Dr. Rosa Hernandez Sheets, to conduct a research project. Her plan was to take 27 freshmen who were not doing well in school and put them in a class—a 2-hour language/social studies block—in which they could express their ethnic and cultural identities and develop friendships that would support their academic development. These students, who were Asian (6), African American (10), Biracial (6), and European American (5), could work individually or together in groups of their choosing. They could pursue literature and research topics of interest to them. The role of the teacher was to try to promote a classroom climate in which students could hold open discussions related to their cultural values. The teacher was to place less emphasis on curriculum and more emphasis on strong student participation and positive development of ethnic identity. As a result of this project, the following occurred:

- *Students spoke freely about their personal experiences with race, culture, and ethnicity.*
- *Students chose a range of research topics linked to their own social needs and culture-based knowledge.*
- *Students worked together in same-ethnic/race groups most often (with the biracial students splitting between Asian and African American groups, based on their non-white parent) and produced research reports that were accepted for presentation at the following year's National Association for Multicultural Education.*
- *Nine of twenty-seven students earned honors credit on their academic transcript.*
- *Most received an A as a grade in the course.*
- *Sheets (1999b) observed, however, that the academic success of students did not transfer to their other classes. In those classes, students had a significant number of disciplinary incidents, high levels of absenteeism, and low academic performance.*



DISCUSSION:

- **What are your first thoughts about this scenario?**
- **Why do you think students' success in Dr. Sheets' class did not transfer to their other four classes?**
- **Consider how student identity affects educational success. What might this say about the usual attribution of school failure to low basic skills, home problems, and poverty?**
- **How can we make room in classrooms for students to engage in this kind of personal identity construction?**

The above vignette illustrates some of the complexity of interrelationships among students' backgrounds and sense of self, teachers' attitudes and instructional approaches, and the institution of schooling. Opening up a class in this way seems risky, and most teachers may not feel that they have the skills to manage potential conflicts based on race and ethnicity. Some wouldn't be comfortable with the way students segregated themselves and would regard that outcome as a failure. Yet, there were many positive outcomes in this situation. What became clear was that using students' cultural identities as the point of departure for instructional strategies and curriculum design transforms their performance in school.

How Is Learning Both Social and Cultural?

In the past 15 years, developmental psychology has shifted its focus from individual development in isolation to a focus on how social interactions shape development (Greenfield et al., 1996). The work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian psychologist whose work was not translated into English until the 1960s, forms the basis of the sociocultural (sometimes referred to as sociohistorical) approach to developmental psychology.



ACTIVITY: Culture and Learning

- *In your opinion, what are some of the strongest influences on the way children learn and develop?*
- *What role do you think culture plays in development and learning?*
- *With regards to culture, what settings and conditions have allowed you to learn best?*

Vygotsky observed that cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships (Goldstein, 1999). Thus, interactions between people are the vehicle for intellectual growth. Learning cannot occur in isolation; it is socially mediated. Goldstein (1999) explains Vygotsky's notion of socially mediated knowledge:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)... All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (p. 649)

As Moll (1992) notes, "From a Vygotskian perspective...a major role of schooling is to create social contexts for the mastery of and conscious awareness in the use of...cultural tools, such as oral language, literacy, and mathematics" (p. 213). Classroom tasks or activities contain both culture and the individual; that is, the individual's mental processes must grapple with learning concepts or skills the culture deems important. Because social interactions are culturally defined, sociocultural interactions can either facilitate or hinder learning.

We refer to Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development," or ZPD, in the language section of *The Diversity Kit*. In his volume *Mind and Society*, Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD as

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

In other words, as students develop cognitively, they take more and more responsibility for increasingly difficult tasks. The challenge for a teacher is to find the developmental zone in which a student can approach a more difficult task with the appropriate amount and type of support. Over time the student begins to take more control over that kind of task (Cole, 1985).

The ZPD has tremendous significance for teaching and learning. When a teacher and student share the same culture, the instructional interaction is simple: an adult

or more skilled peer helps a student master a task through what Rogoff (1990) calls “guided participation.” McLaughlin and McLeod (1996) posit similarly that

Participation in cultural activities with the guidance of more skilled partners enables children to internalize the tools for thinking and for taking more mature approaches to problem solving that are appropriate in their culture. Individual development is mediated by interactions with people who are more skilled in the use of the culture’s tools. The development of young children into skilled participants in society is accomplished through children’s routine, and often tacit, guided participation in ongoing cultural activities as they observe and participate with others in culturally organized practices. (p. 2)

This dynamic, as Vygotsky notes, is immensely powerful developmentally. But what happens when the teacher and student bring different cultural frames of reference and communication styles to their interaction? Rather than a dialogue or activity that draws students into the “zone of proximal development,” there can be a disconnect between the teacher’s and student’s ways of forming and displaying knowledge. As a result, child-adult interactions in the classroom can fail to advance student learning. Students can, in effect, be stranded developmentally, and teachers can experience frustration when their attempts to engage students in developmental dialogue or activity break down. Cultural differences, then, must be bridged in order to activate powerful developmental dynamics like the ZPD. Teachers who have students from many cultural backgrounds may wonder how they can adjust their teaching to align with the cultural orientations of all of the students. While this is not an easy task, providing instruction that draws on students’ ways of knowing will have a positive impact on student learning.



VIGNETTE: Conducting a Critical Ethnography

In a school-university partnership in New York City, Carmen Mercado and her colleagues engaged middle school students of various ethnic and language backgrounds in ethnographic research using an “apprenticeship-enculturation” approach. This approach involved students’ observing how adults carry out authentic research activities as they themselves do research (Mercado, 1992). Students chose topics that interested them and that related to the overarching theme of taking action against the undesirable conditions in their community. The university and teacher researchers, while conducting their own research on the academic uses of literacy, assisted students in developing the literacy skills necessary to conduct an ethnographic study. With support, students became experts in tasks such as writing field notes, analyzing data, writing ethnographies, and presenting their work at professional conferences. After the first year of the project, students who had acquired the ethnographic skills and habits of mind necessary for success helped the university and teacher researchers instruct novice sixth- grade ethnographers.

DISCUSSION

- How does the work of Mercado and her colleagues apply Vygotskian principles?
- Why do you think Mercado calls this an “apprenticeship-enculturation” approach?
- How could such an approach assist learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds?
- What do you or could you do as a teacher to try out this theory of learning and teaching?

VIGNETTE: Making Connections through Dialogue

Christina Igoa, author of *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child* (1995), describes some strategies that she used when she began teaching a group of immigrant fifth and sixth graders. She writes:

Shortly after I got acquainted with the class, I prepared quiet, productive activities on which the children could work individually or in pairs without my direct participation. I trained two to four mature students to be student teachers who could answer questions or clarify directions.

As I looked across the room at the global reality of children from all corners of the world, I knew I needed to find out where they came from so I could prepare the curriculum. As the children worked quietly, I met with each student for a one-on-one dialogue. It was a profoundly rich experience.

At the university level it is often a given for students to meet individually with professors to clarify mutual expectations, discuss academic concerns, and bring up matters that might affect the attainment of goals. In our classroom, such dialogues gave the children the opportunity to express themselves; and the dialogues became an important methodology in working with the students. Through the dialogues I found a way of connecting with each child as a unique individual, validating the child's cultural history, and establishing a trusting, respectful, and warm relationship.

I set up a little "office space" around my desk and met with each student for about 15 minutes. During the dialogue, I inquired into the style of teaching and method of learning used in the child's country of origin...

For those who preferred to remain silent, I entered the silent stage with them by respecting the child and waiting. If there was resistance, if the child wasn't ready to talk, we spent time together quietly in order to establish trust and warmth. I spoke very directly to the child and tried to find out what I could

do to make it safe for the child to speak to me. I felt that if I could figure out what the child was feeling, I could understand his or her behavior. (pp. 125-126)

DISCUSSION

- **What kinds of questions do you think Igoa asked her students during her conferences with them? What kinds of questions do you think you would ask your students?**
- **In what ways was one-on-one dialogue between Igoa and her students an essential part of teaching and learning in her class?**
- **What are some ways that Igoa might use the information she gathered about teaching and learning in students' home countries to assist them in their development?**
- **How can Vygotsky's theory of ZPD and the role of culture in learning be applied to the vignette?**

How Does Valuing Students' Cultures Support Their Development in Schools?

Cultural Value Orientations: Collectivism and Individualism

Cultural value orientations have an enormous impact on learning in schools (Greenfield et al., 1996; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). Current research on cultural value orientations and learning in school reveals that schooling becomes problematic when students from collectivist cultures encounter the individualistic culture of U.S. schools and classrooms. Trumbull et al. (2001) explain that “(t)he continuum of ‘individualism-collectivism’ represents the degree to which a culture emphasizes individual fulfillment and choice versus interdependent relationships, social responsibility, and the well-being of the group. Individualism makes the former the priority, collectivism the latter.” (p. 19)

ACTIVITY: Valuing Culture

- *What do you think it looks like for teachers to value students' home cultures?*
- *How has your own culture been valued or devalued in school? At work?*
- *How might cultural power relationships affect student performance? Teacher attitudes?*



It is important to emphasize that cultures and individuals vary in the degree to which they are collectivist or individualist, but that, generally, an individualist orientation among students is the norm in many U.S. classrooms. Among world cultures, collectivist orientation to culture is often found among Native Americans, Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians (Greenfield et al., 1996). African American culture has been described as more collectivist than the dominant U.S. culture in terms of family orientation and kinship help but more individualistic than many other cultures in terms of its emphasis on individual achievement (Hollins, 1996).

Like other belief systems that undergird cultures, individualism and collectivism are often invisible to the people who live within those respective “webs of meaning.” A member of a collectivist culture probably goes about her daily business without consciously thinking, “I’m helping my brother with his homework because we have a network of interdependent relationships within my collectivist culture.” A member of an individualist culture likely doesn’t stop to reflect, “I am striving to get all A’s in my classes because in my individualist culture we value personal achievement over all else.” Members of cultures, on the whole, do not consider the overarching frameworks within which they live their lives; they simply live. However, as we discussed earlier, when cultures come into contact, people quickly recognize that different values, beliefs, and ideas have come into play, even when they are unsure what those values, beliefs, and ideas are.

When students with a collectivist orientation are forced to conform to individualistic modes of learning, there is a cultural mismatch, and the result is often frustration and failure for teachers, students, and families. Likewise, when school personnel with individualist mindsets and families with collectivist mindsets attempt to interact in a school setting, negotiating meaning and intent can be difficult, as we see in the vignette on page 24.

VIGNETTE: Mismatches in Cultural Expectations

In a linguistically diverse, urban neighborhood, parents (and their preschool children) remained with their elementary school children during the school's morning breakfast program. During that time, the students shared their food with their family members. However, school administrators and teachers felt that the parents were taking advantage of the subsidized breakfast program. Stating that parents were violating federal and district guidelines, administrators decided to close the school doors to the parents in the mornings. Parents protested the action, and teachers felt that the breakfast incident was another example of the school's failure to foster parental involvement.

DISCUSSION

- **Analyze the vignette above in light of the information on collectivism and individualism. What beliefs might the parents have had that led to their decision to stay at school and eat breakfast with their children?**
- **What beliefs might have guided the administrators when they prohibited the parents and siblings from eating breakfast with their school-aged children?**
- **How did the school personnel and the parents judge each other?**
- **How might the situation have been dealt with differently by school personnel, taking cultural value orientations into account?**

Trumbull et al. (2001) contrast individualism and collectivism as they may play out in school settings. The following table draws from their work with immigrant Latino families. Keep in mind that cultures, and individuals within cultures, will vary in terms of where they fall on the collectivist-individualist continuum, so their perspectives on schooling will vary as well.

TABLE 1

INDIVIDUALIST PERSPECTIVE	COLLECTIVIST PERSPECTIVE
<i>Student should "achieve her potential" for the sake of self-fulfillment.</i>	<i>Student should "achieve her potential" in order to contribute to the social whole.</i>
<i>Student should work independently and get his own work done. Giving help to others may be considered cheating.</i>	<i>Student should be helpful and cooperate with his peers, giving assistance when needed. Helping is not considered cheating.</i>
<i>Student should be praised frequently. The positive should be emphasized whenever possible.</i>	<i>Student should not be singled out for praise in front of her peers. Positive feedback should be stated in terms of student's ability to help family or community.</i>
<i>Student should attain intellectual skills in school; education as schooling.</i>	<i>Student should learn appropriate social behaviors and skills as well as intellectual skills; education as upbringing.</i>
<i>Student should engage in discussion and argument in order to learn to think critically (constructivist model).</i>	<i>Student should be quiet and respectful in class because he will learn more this way (transmission model).</i>
<i>Property belongs to individuals, and others must ask to borrow or share it.</i>	<i>Most property is communal and not considered the domain of an individual.</i>
<i>Teacher manages behavior indirectly or emphasizes student self-control.</i>	<i>Teacher has primary authority for managing behavior, but also expects peers to guide each other's behavior.</i>
<i>Parent is integrally involved with student's academic progress.</i>	<i>Parent believes that it is teacher's role to provide academic instruction to student.</i>

**ACTIVITY:** Exploring Individualist and Collectivist Orientations

Read **TABLE 1** on page 25. Then, discuss the following questions:

- *What makes sense to you about the expectations in the “Individualist Perspective” column?*
- *What makes sense to you about the expectations in the “Collectivist Perspective” column?*
- *Elaborate on some of the expectations and explain why you agree or disagree with them as a teacher. What factors from your own cultural background might influence your opinions?*
- *What kinds of conflicts might occur in a classroom because of these different cultural values? How might you deal with such conflicts? What might you do in your classroom to allow for different cultural values?*

Historical Power Relations and Their Impact on Development and Learning

Greenfield et al. (1996) and Bartolomé (1995) draw our attention to another key variable in minority child development and learning: the historical power relationships between dominant and non-dominant cultural groups. Frequently, Asian Americans have been touted as the “model minority.” That is, as an undifferentiated group Asian Americans have not experienced the widespread school failure commonly observed among Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Native Americans. Ogbu (1994) offers a distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities. Voluntary minorities are those who freely immigrate to the U.S., such as Asian Americans. Involuntary minorities are those who have been conquered, colonized, or subjugated by the U.S., such as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and Native Americans. There is a clear parallel between those groups that are involuntary minorities and resulting school failure. For involuntary minorities, participation in public institutions (like schools) that value the culture of the dominant group may result in further loss of culture, language, and power. Thus, in the case of involuntary minorities, it is of utmost importance to create a climate that values students’ cultures and that follows culturally responsive pedagogy. Villegas (1991) elaborates:

A culturally responsive pedagogy builds on the premise that how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures...Cultural differences present both challenges and opportunities for teachers. To maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice. (p. 13)

Bartolomé (1995) proposes that culturally responsive pedagogy alone is not enough to mediate the effect of historical inequity on involuntary minorities. Bartolomé emphasizes that methods by themselves do not suffice to advance the learning of involuntary minorities. She advocates what she calls “humanizing pedagogy,” in which a teacher “values the students’ background knowledge, culture, and life experiences and creates contexts in which power is shared by students and teachers” (p. 55). This power sharing and valuing of students’ lives and cultures may provide a positive counterforce to the negative sociocultural experiences of students; it can enable them to see themselves as empowered within the context of school and allow them to retain pride in their cultural heritages.

VIGNETTE: Letter from Kai James (1998)

Kai James was a freshman in high school when he wrote the following letter.

“Dear High School Teacher”

I am a new high school student and I am looking forward to these next years of my schooling. I feel the need to write this letter because I seek a different experience in high school from that of elementary school. One of the things I would like to see changed is the relationship between students and teachers. I feel that a relationship that places students on the same level as teachers should be established. By this I mean that students' opinions should be taken seriously and be valued as much as those of teachers, and that together with the teachers we can shape the way we learn and what we learn...

After years of being ignored, what the students need, and in particular what black students need, is a curriculum that we can relate to and that will interest us. We need appropriate curriculum to motivate us to the best we can be. We need to be taught to have a voice and have teachers who will listen to us with an open mind and not dismiss our ideas simply because they differ from what they have been told in the past. We need to be made aware of all our options in life. We need to have time to discuss issues of concern to the students as well as the teachers. We must be able to talk about racism without running away from it or disguising the issue. We must also be taught to recognize racism instead of denying it and then referring to those who have recognized it as “paranoid.” We also need to be given the opportunity to influence our education and, in turn, our destinies.

We should also be given the right to assemble and discuss issues without having a teacher present to discourage us from saying what we need to say. Teachers must gain the trust of their students, and students must be given

the chance to trust their teachers. We need teachers who will not punish us just because they feel hostile or angry. We need teachers who will allow us to practice our culture without being ridiculed ... (pp. 109-110)

DISCUSSION

- **What is Kai James asking teachers to do?**
- **What do you think James' experiences as an African American student have been like in school?**
- **Why do you think changing the power structure of schools is important to him?**
- **After reading this letter, what new thoughts do you have about cultural identity, development, and learning?**

In this section we have explored the concepts of culture and cultural identity. We have discussed how notions of cultural identity affect minority student populations, how culture impacts students' learning, and how an understanding of students' cultures can inform teachers' instructional strategies. We have advocated a culturally responsive pedagogy that values students' funds of knowledge, including their culture, language, and experiences. Culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula incorporate that knowledge into the learning process. In the following section of *The Diversity Kit* we expand upon the areas of culture, teaching, and learning more fully.