Understanding ESL Learners: Moving Toward Cultural Responsiveness— A Guide for Teachers

"Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. A pedagogy that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures."

—Education Alliance, Brown University, 2006

The creation of culturally responsive schools and classrooms is of the utmost importance to the learning, development and overall health of newcomer students and their families. Moreover, it is an essential element in the strong and healthy growth of an increasingly diverse community.
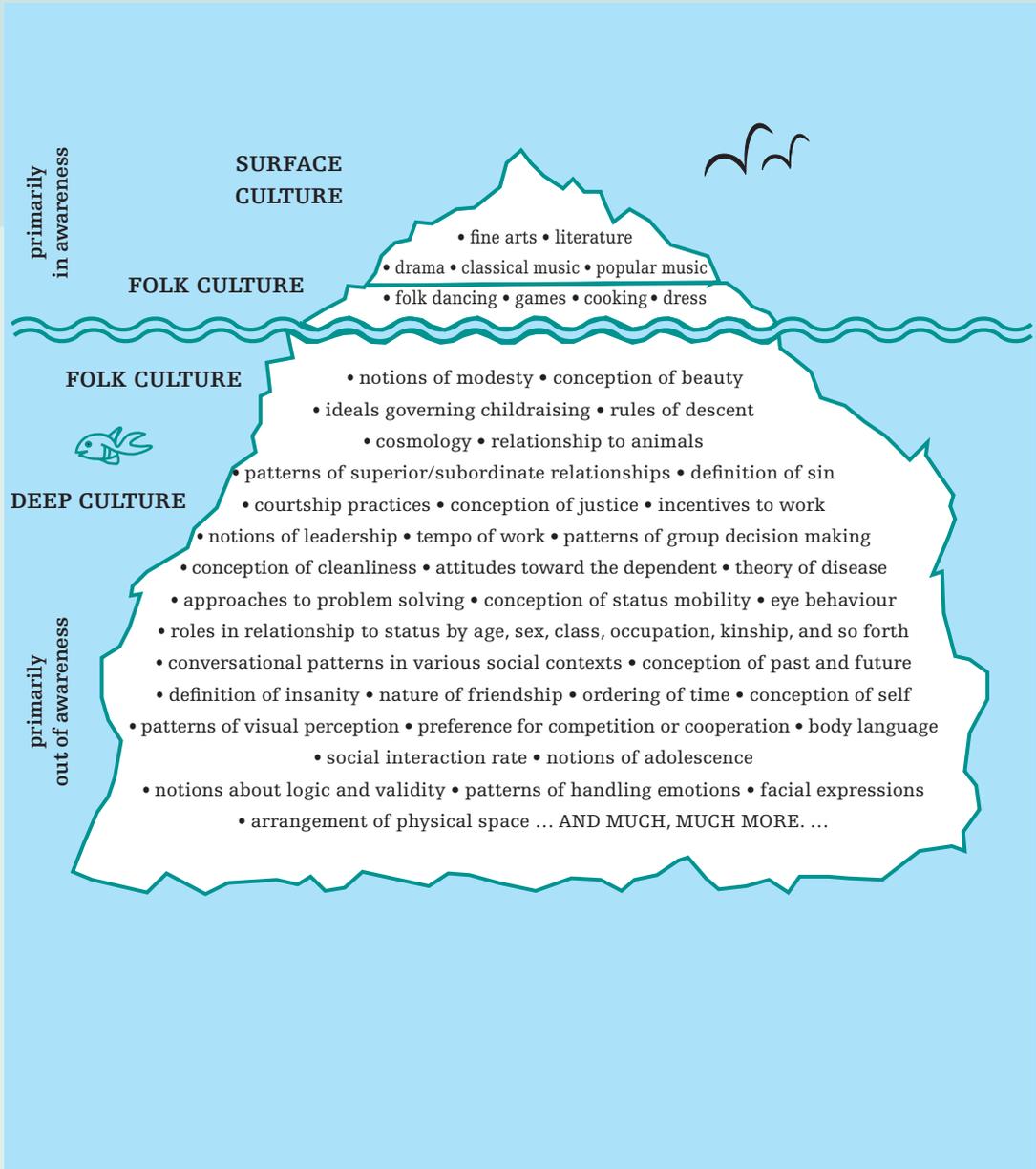
Factors of motivation, interpersonal acceptance and self-esteem can enhance or limit the speed and depth of learning. When students experience a positive and culturally responsive learning environment, they are more likely to be relaxed, receptive to learning and more confident to take risks.

What Is Culture?

"The unique system of beliefs, attitudes, customs and behaviours that identify a particular group. Cultural norms guide behaviour and determine thoughts and actions. Culture contributes to social and physical survival."

—*Safe and Caring Schools for Newcomer Students*, ATA 2003, 9

Culture manifests in many ways...

primarily in awareness

SURFACE CULTURE

• fine arts • literature
• drama • classical music • popular music

FOLK CULTURE

• folk dancing • games • cooking • dress

FOLK CULTURE

• notions of modesty • conception of beauty
• ideals governing childraising • rules of descent
• cosmology • relationship to animals
• patterns of superior/subordinate relationships • definition of sin

DEEP CULTURE

• courtship practices • conception of justice • incentives to work
• notions of leadership • tempo of work • patterns of group decision making
• conception of cleanliness • attitudes toward the dependent • theory of disease
• approaches to problem solving • conception of status mobility • eye behaviour
• roles in relationship to status by age, sex, class, occupation, kinship, and so forth
• conversational patterns in various social contexts • conception of past and future
• definition of insanity • nature of friendship • ordering of time • conception of self
• patterns of visual perception • preference for competition or cooperation • body language
• social interaction rate • notions of adolescence
• notions about logic and validity • patterns of handling emotions • facial expressions
• arrangement of physical space ... AND MUCH, MUCH MORE. ...

primarily out of awareness

Source: Hanley 1999

The iceberg metaphor of culture distinguishes between surface and deep culture.
Deep culture is mostly hidden and comprises the aspects of identity that most
powerfully affect our self-concept, perceptions and interactions with others. It is
the many subtleties of deep culture that we must respond to with acceptance and
sensitivity in our classrooms and hallways.

Considering Deep Culture: Understanding Cultural Differences in Student Behaviour

Perceived Behaviour	Possible Cultural Source
Student avoids eye contact.	Casting the eyes down may be a demonstration of respect.
Student smiles at seemingly inappropriate times.	A smile may be a gesture of respect, meant to avoid offence in difficult situations.
Student shrinks from physical contact or interacts at an inappropriately close distance to others.	There are significant differences among cultures with respect to personal space. There may also be taboos associated with certain parts of the body (top of the head, soles of the feet, etc).
Student does not eat with peers.	Some students may be unaccustomed to eating with anyone but members of their own family.
Student does not participate actively in group work.	Cooperative group work is not used by teachers in all cultures. Students may be unaccustomed to collaboration.
Student is unresponsive, uncooperative or even disrespectful in dealing with teachers of the opposite gender.	Separate schooling for boys and girls is the norm in some cultures, and the expectations for males and females are quite different.
Student seems reluctant to engage in debate, speculation, argument or other classroom processes.	In some cultures, it is considered inappropriate to openly challenge another's point of view, especially the teacher's.
Student exhibits discomfort or embarrassment at being singled out for special attention or praise.	To put oneself in the limelight for individual praise is not considered appropriate in some cultures, where the group is considered more important than the individual.

(Alberta Education 2007)

What can I do in the classroom?

1. Model respect.
2. Reflect on your own cultural biases.
3. Select culturally relevant classroom resources.
4. Provide opportunities for students to share their own cultural traditions and beliefs.
5. Understand the importance of promoting equity, rather than equality. (ATA 2003)
6. Establish a routine for welcoming newcomers.
7. Know how to pronounce their names, and ensure that the students do as well.
8. Have students seated with first-language peers initially.
9. Make personal contact with new students at least once each lesson.
10. Design classroom learning activities that encourage students to get to know one another.
11. Ensure that classroom displays are inclusive of all classroom cultures.
12. Learn some expressions in the students' first languages. (Coehlo 1998)
13. Inform yourself about the student's culture.
14. When interacting with students, be aware of deep culture and how it may play a role in student behaviour.

What can the school do?

1. Hire teachers from diverse backgrounds.
2. Involve members of newcomer communities in the school as staff, volunteers, translators or cultural brokers.
3. Conduct staff training in cultural awareness and cultural competency. (ATA 2003)
4. Have a planned reception and orientation program for newcomer students and parents.
5. Ensure that orientation materials, school or district publications, and written communication with parents are available in the first languages of newcomer groups.
6. Hold parent meetings with specific linguistic and cultural groups.
7. Post school signs and notices in multiple languages.
8. Use interpreters and translators for intake, orientation and routine communication with parents.
9. Support student maintenance and use of heritage languages.
10. View students' first languages as linguistic, academic and cultural assets.
11. Give equal treatment to important festivals and special days of all cultures in the school. (Coehlo 1998)
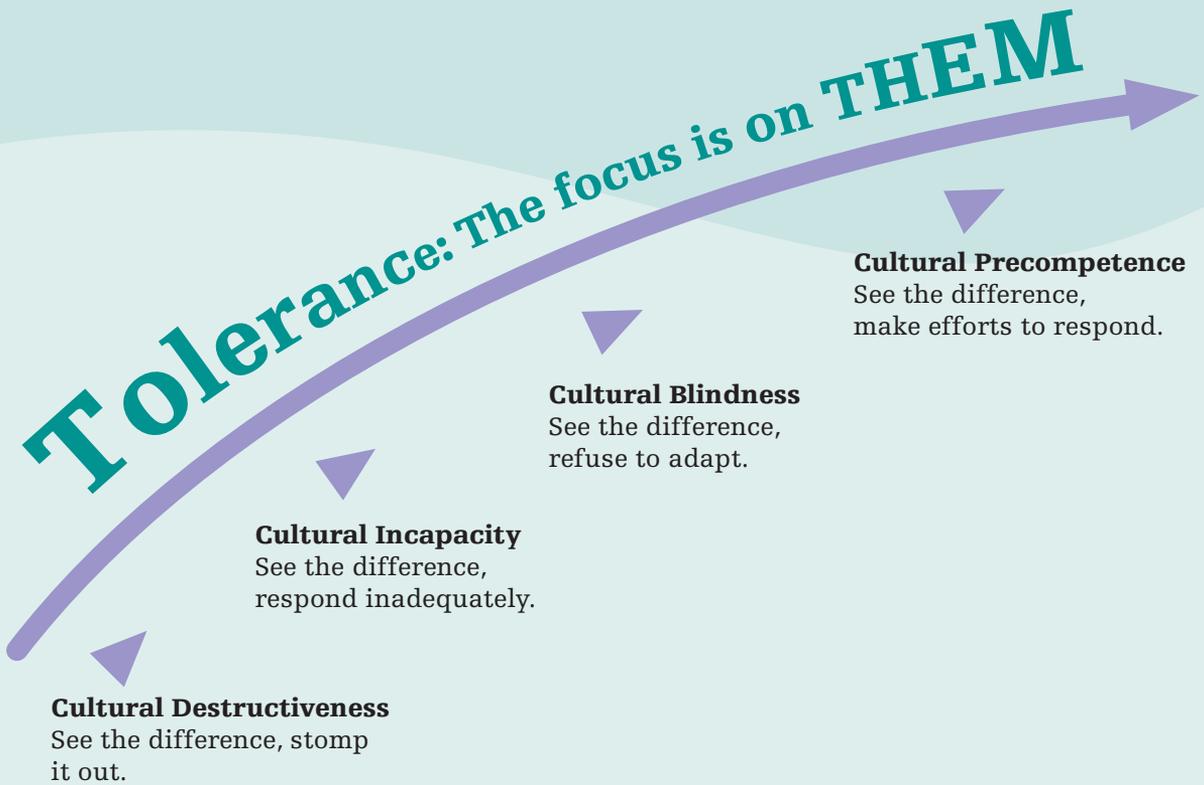
Does your school have high expectations for all students?

✓ Are examples of the achievements and ideas of diverse authors, thinkers and historical figures woven into—not separated from—the curriculum?

✓ Are texts, lessons and discussion topics chosen with thought about how to provide a safe environment for discussion of controversial issues?

✓ Do all students feel safe in the classrooms, hallways and lunchroom?

✓ Does the school challenge anyone making generalizations about racial and ethnic groups?

✓ Is evidence of diverse cultures displayed in hallways, in the library, in classroom examples, and in the racial and cultural backgrounds of adults working in the building?

✓ Does the school take students' and parents' discomfort, frustration or anger seriously?

✓ Are issues worked out through mediation and discussion?

✓ Do teachers expect all students to complete and turn in work, know the answers to different levels of questions, work in class, follow class guidelines and respond to structure?

✓ Do parents of colour feel welcome at conferences, parent advisory group meetings and school events?

✓ Do students of all ethnicities represented in the school participate in all academic courses and programs?

✓ Are students of colour counselled to consider high-level academic programs and college?

✓ Are administrators and teachers willing to counter racist comments?

✓ Do teachers value inclusive curriculum even when the school is primarily populated by white students?

✓ Do teachers and staff members feel they can openly discuss issues of race, class and gender without feeling defensive or ashamed? (Landsman 2004)

Toward Cultural Proficiency

Becoming culturally proficient is an ongoing process.

Tolerance: The focus is on THEM

Cultural Precompetence
See the difference,
make efforts to respond.

Cultural Blindness
See the difference,
refuse to adapt.

Cultural Incapacity
See the difference,
respond inadequately.

Cultural Destructiveness
See the difference, stomp
it out.

Cultural Competence

Culturally competent agencies and individuals accept and respect cultural differences, continue self-assessment of cultural awareness, pay careful attention to the dynamics of cultural differences, continually expand their cultural knowledge and resources, and adopt culturally relevant service models in order to better meet the needs of minority populations. (Hanley 1999)

Level 1

—Remember our policy is no hats in school, which includes any form of head covering.

—We don't have that name in Canada. We're going to call you Sam from now on.

Level 2

—The rules are the same for everyone. I'm not going to give you more time to do the test.

—Praying is a religious practice that we can't accommodate during school hours.

Cultural Competence
See and accept the difference. Expand understanding. Continue to adapt and reflect on practices.

Cultural Proficiency
Accept and respect differences. Continue self-assessment.

Transformation:
The focus is on our practices

Adapted from Hanley (1999).

Level 3

—We don't discriminate in our school; everyone is treated equally.

—All students in the swimming program must wear proper bathing suits. No shorts or T-shirts.

Level 4

—Let's have each family bring a traditional meal and wear traditional dress for the school's heritage fair.

—Tell us what your name means in your language.

Level 5

—Our staff have agreed to provide classroom space for the Heritage Language Association to teach the national language of Eritrea on Saturdays. (Holloway and Maheu 2007)

Further Reading and Resources

Helmer, S, and C Eddy. 2003. *Look at Me When I Talk to You: ESL Learners in Non-ESL Classrooms*. Toronto, Ont: Pippin.

www.naarr.org—Northern Alberta Alliance on Race Relations

www.calgarycentreforculture.org

www.canada.metropolis.net—Metropolis is an international network for comparative research and public policy development on migration, diversity, and immigrant integration in cities in Canada and around the world.

www.ucalgary.ca/cdi—The Cultural Diversity Institute

www.catholicsocialservices.ab.ca—Offers a directory of newcomer programs and services in selected communities in Alberta

www.emcn.ab.ca—Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

http://eisa-edmonton.org/—Edmonton Immigrant Services Association

www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca/—Immigrant Services Calgary

www.cp-pc.ca/english/index.html—Cultural Profiles Project—Brief summaries of the cultures and traditions of many different newcomer groups

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Landsman, J. 2004. "Confronting the Racism of Low Expectations." *Educational Leadership* 62, no 3 (November): 28–32.

Walqui, A. 2000. *Access and Engagement: Program Design and Instructional Approaches for Immigrant Students in Secondary School*. McHenry, Ill: Delta.