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# Culture and Motivation to Learn

*None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.*

—Vivian Gussin Paley

**W**ithin the last decade, there has been a profound change in the context of most of P–12 education—the transition from a national industrial society to a global digital information society. Computer literacy, social media, and the Internet are woven into the fabric of most children’s lives by the third grade (Barone & Wright, 2008). Nonetheless, culture and motivation remain integrally bound in how students learn, and characteristics, ranging from race to social class, indelibly influence educational engagement.

This chapter introduces the essential role of *intrinsic* motivation in the success of students from similar and diverse backgrounds. It explains why motivation and culture are inseparable, linking these concepts to teachers’ primary spheres of influence—student-teacher relationships and instructional repertoires. Because feelings of safety inside *and* outside of classrooms are foundational to academic motivation, this chapter provides context for how government policy and personal values impact students’ motivation to learn, especially in relation to students of color, low-income students, students who are recent immigrants, students with biological disabilities, and students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). This chapter also establishes the theories and research to support the teaching methods throughout the rest of this book.

## MOTIVATION IS ESSENTIAL TO LEARNING

Motivation is the energy that human beings direct toward achieving a goal. Across all ethnic and cultural groups, the primary sources of motivation reside in *all* of us. When we can see that what we are learning makes sense and is important according to our values and perspectives, our motivation emerges. Like a cork rising through water, intrinsic motivation surfaces in an environment (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000) where students learn because the learning experience is valued and rewarding, resulting in their academic engagement and success.

As a crucial feature of rigorous learning, intrinsic motivation is validated across disciplines such as cross-cultural studies (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), education (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006), bilingual education (Cummins, 2003), adult education (Wlodkowski, 2008), and work and sports (Frederick-Recascino, 2002). Given that teachers' knowledge and skill make a larger difference for student learning than any other single factor (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012), instructional interactions need to be *motivationally significant* as well as content rich (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004).

Everyday reasoning, as well as research, indicates that motivated students surpass unmotivated students in learning and performance. But what motivates students to learn—students who are younger and older; low, medium, and high income; ethnically similar and diverse; first-generation college students and students with an educational legacy in their family; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and straight; biologically agile and differently able; monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual; male, female, and those whose gender identity is mixed; from families with undocumented members and from indigenous communities? The setting students are in, the respect they receive from people around them, and their ability to trust their own thinking and experiences influence their concentration, imagination, effort, and willingness to persist in spite of challenges. People who feel unsafe, unconnected, and disrespected are often unmotivated to learn (Tatum, 2003). Such a conclusion does not explain all of the issues and barriers related to how students continue to learn, but without a doubt, day-to-day, face-to-face feelings affect whether students stay in school and whether they are willing to direct their energy toward learning.

There are many assumptions about motivation because it is something that can be neither directly observed nor precisely measured. Although there has been some neuro-scientific progress, motivation research with students tends to focus on their emotions, behavior, words, and stories for indications of interest, effort, perseverance, and completion. While much of this information provides valuable clues for teaching,

it remains difficult to understand the intentions of others. Misconceptions abound on matters of will and purpose, especially when culture, ethnicity, language, life experience, and orientation toward learning markedly vary among students and between students and educators.

## THE CULTURE AND MOTIVATION CONNECTION

Culture is the deeply learned confluence of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors that pervade every aspect of a person's life, and it is continually undergoing changes (Geertz, 1973). Culture is dynamic and changing. It is not an isolated, mechanical aspect of life that can be used to directly explain phenomena in the classroom or that can be learned as a series of facts, physical elements, or exotic characteristics (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). This means that the study of culture is not an experimental science in search of a *law* but an interpretive one in search of *meaning* (Geertz, 1973). It implies that there are few hard and fast rules about the ways in which diverse human groups learn and work together. Even within a supposedly unitary majority culture, there is significant variation (Gay, 2010). With few exceptions, the variation and distinction within cultural groups transcend a single set of cultural norms even when a common bond of history, political oppression, religion, or language creates a strong sense of peoplehood (Banks, 2006). A consequence of failing to understand this is stereotyping.

Stereotyping is rooted in our assumptions about the “average characteristics” of a group. We then impose those assumptions on all individuals from the group. In fact, some of the characteristics commonly associated with European Americans—for example, Christianity, individualism, and social conservatism—have become so pervasive that these traits have become a form of taken-for-granted national “commonsense” (Blum, 2005). Stereotypes and other biases that reside within learning environments become agents of historic patterns of marginalization.

Human beings are socialized in one or more cultural communities with values and beliefs that are transmitted through stories, song, spiritual beliefs, interactions with family and friends, world events, and political orientations. The ways in which educators teach and students learn is mediated by such cultural influences. No learning situation is culturally neutral. Generally, if we teach as we were taught in P–12 and higher education, we sanction individual performance, prefer “reasoned” argumentation, advocate impersonal objectivity, and condone sports-like competition for testing and grading procedures. Further, when we accept our own cultural norms as universal, when students disengage we may see deficit rather than difference. One common example occurs in classrooms where

teachers rely heavily on the Socratic seminar, one of several instructional methods that, in the absence of adequate student preparation, tend to favor those for whom assertive public discourse is part of everyday life. Should a teacher perceive this form of active participation as evidence of being smart, entire groups of students who view modesty and deference to others as a form of respect may find themselves at risk of failure.

Since culture is inextricably connected to personal motivation, a “seek first to understand” orientation toward students is wise. This wisdom can be found in many ethnic and faith communities and it is particularly relevant in classrooms today. Yet to understand other people, to avoid stereotypes based on a narrow set of assumed group characteristics, and to be open to the meaning that is created through authentic interactions requires educators to personally apply such wisdom. A later section of this chapter, “Personal Appreciation for the Concept of Culture,” offers ways to accomplish this quest.

## CHANGES IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Classrooms in the United States today differ markedly from 40 years ago, when many of today’s educators were still in school. In 1970 more than 60% of the nation’s 9.7 million immigrants originated in Europe, 19% in Central and South America, 9% in Asia, and 10% in other parts of the world. By 2000 the number of immigrants from European countries totaled 15% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The wave of immigration absorbed by the United States during the 1990s was the largest in 70 years, and today at least one out of every four people in the United States speaks a language other than English at home (Suárez-Orozco, Darbes, Dias, & Sutin, 2011). In California, one in three school districts has a student population with 75% of students considered to be “long-term English learners” (Olson, 2010). Although schools are becoming increasingly aware of ways to support the development of content knowledge while students are in the process of learning English, we seldom address the impact of immigration policy on children and youth, a relevant motivational issue.

## IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Immigrant youth, including children born to immigrant parents, represent approximately one-third of all children in the United States (Passel, 2011). Between 2005 and 2050, it is projected that the U.S. population will expand by 48%, with immigrants expected to make up 82% of that growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Changes have already resulted in a new and dynamic

U.S. landscape, one in which many members of immigrant communities have moved beyond port-of-entry cities to suburban metropolitan areas and rural communities (Hernandez, Denton, & McCartney, 2007). With such changes, the consideration of schools as monocultural environments with rigid educational norms seems increasingly out of touch.

## **THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND SOCIAL BIAS ON MOTIVATION**

A particularly troubling aspect of immigration's effect on education is the plight of the children of undocumented workers. Although issues related to undocumented workers and families exceed the focus of this book, it is important to note that approximately one-third of the estimated 37 million immigrants in the United States are unauthorized, and nearly two-thirds (64%) of the children living with unauthorized family members are U.S. citizens (Passel & Taylor, 2010). In 2011, 397,000 individuals were deported and more than 46,000 of these individuals were mothers and fathers of U.S. citizen children (Wessler, 2011). Fear of deportation is not restricted to a few states or a few ethnicities. In addition to Latinos, relatively large proportions of recent immigrants from Asia and Africa are unauthorized, and all unauthorized groups are vulnerable to long periods of parent-child separation and consequent social-emotional problems (Tienda & Haskins, 2011).

The threat of a family member's deportation is one of several policy-related influences on students' lives that affect academic motivation. A number of factors related to race, ethnicity, and income, such as discrimination, segregation, and political scapegoating, affect large numbers of learners and put academic motivation in competition with priorities such as health care, secure housing, and—for older youth—employment (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). Although educators make a difference in the lives of students, such political decisions and social outcomes influence students' motivation and may undermine even the most inspired educators' pedagogical innovations.

## **VALUES AND POLITICS ARE INESCAPABLE**

History is replete with examples of the ways in which racism persists over time, often in virulent forms (Lipsitz, 2006; Marabel, 2002). The legacy of the United States includes the appropriation of Native American land, the enslavement of African peoples, and the exploitation of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Latino labor. White power and privilege are maintained through law, politics, property ownership, economic rights, and immigration, as well

as organizational policy and social structures (Foner & Frederickson, 2004; Katznelson, 2005). Whether or not educators acknowledge the pervasive impact of political decisions on their work, politics is inherent in the teacher-student relationship (authoritarian or democratic), the readings chosen for a course of study (those left in and those left out), and course content (a shared decision or the teacher's prerogative). (Giroux, 1992)

Values and politics also reside in the discourse of learning (which questions get asked and answered and how deeply they are probed), the imposition of standardized tests, grading and tracking policies, and the physical conditions of classrooms and buildings, which send messages to learners and teachers about their worth and place in society (Shor, 1993). Political/social values can be found in attitudes toward nonstandard English as they are reflected in the curriculum and in the way schools are unequally funded depending on the economic class of students served.

Education is political because it is one place where individuals and society are constructed. Human beings and society are developed in one direction or another through education, and the learning process cannot avoid being political (Shor, 1993, p. 28). A pedagogy that consciously integrates an ethical perspective begins not with test scores but with questions. What kinds of citizens do we hope to create through education? Are they educated citizens who can earn a living family wage? Are they citizens who experience joy in learning throughout their lives? Are they citizens who are effective advocates for social justice and active civic participants? Are they citizens who are prepared to contribute to a fair global economy? What kind of society do we want, and how can we teach in ways that reconcile conflicting values and expectations (Lipsitz, 2006)?

## THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES THROUGHOUT LIFE

Although high school graduation rates have steadily improved in the United States, students from low-income families continue to perform significantly lower on assessments of literacy and mathematics achievement *before they start kindergarten*. These differences tend to persist as students progress through school and raise considerable equity concerns (Lee & Burkham, 2002). Nearly half of African Americans have a high school diploma or less. In contrast, more than seven in ten Asian Americans ages 25 to 64 and more than six in ten European Americans have completed some college (EPE Research Center, 2007). In the 21st century, with wage stagnation and economic policies that contribute to low wages among people without college degrees or certificates, a college degree has become more important than ever before.

A college graduate in the United States earns on average \$23,441 more per year than a high school graduate and \$31,595 more than a high school dropout. And while only 7% of 24-year-olds from low-income families had earned a 4-year college degree in 1999–2000, 52% of students from high-income families had completed a postsecondary degree (Olson, 2007). From 2000 to 2012, the full-time employment rate for young adults (26- to 30-year-olds) with less than a BA declined substantially to 53% for those with only a high school diploma, compared to 70% for those with a BA. Not only is making learning more accessible and motivating at every level of education a matter of equity, it has significant pragmatic value (Carnevale, Hanson, & Gulish, 2013).

While educators may agree with the U.S. Department of Education’s commitment to making the diminishment of the achievement gap between groups of children the “new civil right” (Ballasy, 2011), the educational requirements for successful economic integration are higher now than in the past, when basic literacy and numeracy often provided entry to secure jobs that paid a family wage (Erisman & Looney, 2007).

Higher standards and the limited preparation of teachers and administrative leaders for working in diverse communities have contributed to another significant motivational and ethical concern—the disproportionately high number of low-income students of color who are referred for remedial support and intervention. Race and ability have been woven into a perverse justice narrative that racializes disability and suggests that low-performing or nonconforming students are “the problem” (Artiles, Bal, & King-Thorius, 2010).

The idea of “fixing” nonconforming students is associated with popular ideology in the United States about individualism, and it is kept in place with metaphors such as pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps. Although individuals are responsible players in their academic success, the failure of schools to support historically marginalized students in this effort is exacerbated by an accountability movement that encourages teachers to spend inordinate amounts of time on test-taking skills and tests, often at the expense of one of the most fundamental influences on student motivation—teacher-student relations that enable teachers and students to know each other as human beings.

## **THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL DOMINATION ON THE RIGHT TO LEARN**

The right to learn has been a struggle for over 5,000 years (Du Bois, 1949), with similar and different challenges for each generation. In the United States many educators are two generations removed from legally sanctioned

educational segregation. Yet despite efforts to integrate schools through policies such as busing, the formative experiences of many educators have been in relatively homogeneous school programs, schools, or communities. Given that 87% of educators are from Anglo American homes, many teachers and school leaders grew up unaware of or unprepared to critically examine our dominant or higher status environments. For heterosexual European American educators whose families immigrated to the United States several generations ago, it is not a stretch to think of personal attitudes and norms as universally valued and preferred.

As mentioned earlier, a dominant group can so successfully project its way of seeing social reality that its view is accepted as common sense, as part of the natural order, even by those who are disempowered or marginalized by it (Freire & Macedo, 1987). We may not imagine that we hold negative assumptions or stereotypes toward people with different sets of values or beliefs. In fact, for some, it may feel like heresy to acknowledge that Anglo Americans and dominant Western norms enjoy a position of privilege and power in this country's educational system that has diminished other norms as valuable as cooperation and interdependence (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). The roots of dominant perspectives may be from an earlier time, yet their currency is maintained through policies and practices that perpetuate powerful ideas about "normality" (K. Baker, 2011).

Although culture is taught, it is generally conveyed in ways that are indirect or a part of everyday life (Anzaldúa, 1987; Young, 1990). This is one of the reasons that it is difficult for most of us to describe ourselves in culturally explicit terms. The times we are likely to experience uniqueness as cultural beings occur when we are in the presence of people who appear different from ourselves. As an example, a person from a family and community that is emotionally demonstrative and sees this as a sign of open communication may embarrass or concern a person whose upbringing intertwines restraint with virtue. When we meet others whose family or community norms vary from our own, it is akin to holding up a mirror, provoking questions we might not otherwise think to ask. While contrasts can spark a search for interpersonal understanding, there can be strong ideological underpinnings that can interfere with these interactions.

Many educators are aware that what may seem empowering on one level inhibits communication on another. This dualism is evident when we stress the importance of kindness while ignoring all but the most blatant acts of bigotry. Organizational cultures that promote honest, direct, and respectful discussions of race and identity are essential to overcoming the disconnect that occurs when superficial relationships become more important than the deeper meanings of difference (Tatum, 2003).



## THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH

This understanding applies, as well, to sexual orientation and the school experiences of LGBT youth. In the 21st century, many educators remain unaware of the hostile conditions and the implications of hostile conditions that many LGBT youth struggle against on a daily basis. A national survey of over 1,700 sexual minority adolescents conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network found that about 75% of self-identified LGBT adolescents reported hearing antigay remarks “often” or “frequently” at school. Most survey respondents reported that they had been harassed or threatened and nearly one in three students had been physically attacked (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Further, U.S. high school students who report same-sex attractions and/or same-sex sexual experiences are at least twice as likely as other youth to report having attempted suicide (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

While difficult discussions about discrimination and hostility benefit from relevant data that expose the consequences of oppression on LGBT youth, the despair from data can overshadow the strength within LGBT communities. In recent years families of LGBT youth have won significant lawsuits against school systems that discriminate or fail to create a safe environment. Further, LGBT youth and their allies are working with schools and school districts to create influential anti-bullying policies and programs, including Gay Straight Alliances. Significant work lies ahead. The relationship between harassment and lower school attendance, lower grade point average, and lower educational aspirations is clear (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006).

From a motivational perspective, historically dominant students suffer as well as students whose emotional well-being is directly impacted by micro-aggressions such as regular verbal and nonverbal put-downs. The energy it takes to block things out when injustice is evident is the same energy that students need to focus on academic goals. The antidote is well-informed and open conversations about significant societal problems that are played out in schools. This can positively impact motivation and learning across student groups because when students are able to collectively confront tough issues, they are able to feel more energized for learning (Tatum, 2003).

For more extensive research on the experiences of LGBT youth, see *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People* (Institute of Medicine, 2011). There are also several websites and books that provide perspective and activities to help educators work with students to examine and confront inequalities based on race, gender, class, age, language, sexual orientation, physical/mental ability, and religion. Two valuable sourcebooks for facilitating social justice conversations are *Teaching for Diversity and Social*

*Justice* (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007) and *Open Minds to Equality* (Shneidewind & Davidson, 2006). Also, *Rethinking Schools Magazine* is a highly motivating and academically rigorous resource for teaching about equity and social justice.

## MOTIVATIONALLY EFFECTIVE CLASSROOMS

The previous sections introduced the importance of motivation as a cultural, ethical, and instructional concern. Later chapters introduce pragmatic approaches to working with motivation as the central goal in culturally diverse classrooms. Here, we'll explore the qualities of motivationally effective classrooms and return to some of the underlying reasons for such a focus. We will spotlight differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Although vulnerable to distraction, motivation is innate and educators are a critical influence on how it generates learning. While we do not technically "motivate students," because students have innate motivation, we can nonetheless influence, encourage, and inspire students to direct their motivation toward important academic goals. Educators often notice that the same students who respond apathetically in one class energetically challenge themselves in another class or with peers in the hallway (Ginsberg, 2011). Realities of this sort help us know that students are motivated even when they are not motivated to academically engage with a particular subject or teacher. Nonetheless, the challenge of teaching large numbers of students with limited time and dwindling fiscal resources can lead educators to believe that student motivation is well beyond their influence.

Fortunately, experience and research provide an attainable image of motivating classrooms. Those environments occur when conditions, structures, and activities respond to the motivational needs of diverse groups of students so that every student (1) feels respected by and connected to others, (2) understands the relevance of her or his learning experiences, (3) experiences challenges that are within reach, and (4) is able to authentically identify academic growth in personally and socially valued ways (Brophy, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1991). These essential instructional attributes are within our reach as educators.

Another formidable reality is that enthusiastic teaching begets motivated learning (Cruickshank et al., 1980). As educators, one of our most important responsibilities is to stay motivated ourselves—to advocate for the conditions for our own learning that we seek to create for students and to experience a sense of deep purpose in our own learning that prevails against shifting policy agendas, fiscal constraints, and daily challenges.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how we can accomplish this state of engaged purpose as individual teachers and partner with other educators, families, and students to enhance learning.

## **CONTRASTS BETWEEN INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION**

Although intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may work together, there are tensions between these two different types of motivation. Extrinsic motivators are frequently used in education, especially in high-poverty schools. A popular metaphor for extrinsic motivation is the “carrot and the stick.” This orientation is based on an assumption that human behavior is primarily driven by the opportunity to receive a reward or avoid a sanction. An example of this is when we complete an assignment for a grade (reward) or correct an error because a grade will be lowered (sanction). This way of thinking contrasts with an intrinsic orientation to motivation whereby we learn because the learning experience is rewarding in and of itself. The learning process elicits emotions such as interest, concentration, satisfaction, knowing, worth, esteem, appreciation, and vitality.

To be extrinsic, rewards and punishments are not a part of the actual learning experience. For example, it is possible to keep students focused on a short-term task by offering a reward such as earning pizza for reading. Further, students understand the significance of grades for reasons of recognition, credentialing, and promotion. Classrooms are generally silent when students are taking quizzes, which are scored and graded. Motivationally, however, this approach to teaching can negatively influence academic outcomes and future attitudes toward learning. In this way motivation is analogous to other forms of energy use and their consequences. Energy sources such as solar, nuclear, and fossil fuels “work,” but they all have different by-products. For example, burning coal produces more pollutants than using solar energy. A by-product of overreliance on extrinsic motivators is superficial learning. A common example is cramming for a test for the purpose of avoiding a bad grade. Many of us can recall the ephemeral nature of last-minute learning. Information learned in this manner fades quickly. Therefore as educators, if we advocate for substantive learning yet rely on instructional rewards that encourage students to take the most expedient route to accomplish a goal (getting a passing grade), we are undermining deeper learning.

Given that the importance of extrinsic rewards such as grades and grade point averages increases as students advance in school, and given the disproportionate number of historically underserved students who

drop out of school each day, it is legitimate to question whether extrinsic motivation systems are genuinely effective for students across racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research underscores this concern (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). Evidence suggests that with an intrinsic orientation to learning, students

- engage in learning in the absence of, or in spite of, rewards or threats;
- lose their sense of time because it seems to quickly pass;
- experience a loss of self-consciousness;
- initiate learning without being coerced or forced;
- maximize their energy, concentration, and effort;
- value learning outcomes;
- ask probing or substantive questions;
- feel capable, creative, and joyful; and
- develop the habit of learning for learning's sake.

With an extrinsic orientation to learning, students

- participate in learning primarily for the promise of extrinsic rewards;
- adopt a cursory approach to accomplishing a goal (as in cramming for a test);
- notice that time passes slowly;
- become easily distracted;
- begin learning experiences reluctantly;
- struggle with low energy, effort, and concentration;
- adopt an indifferent stance toward learning outcomes (except for their value in attaining adequate grades, academic credit, or other extrinsic rewards);
- ask questions that are superficial or off task; and
- approach tasks with limited creativity and joy.

A conservative estimate is that extrinsic rewards, such as grades, promotion, and money, are ineffective for at least a third of students in our schools (Wlodkowski, 2008). Teachers have been threatening students with poor grades, lower test scores, and ultimate failure for over a century and students are still flunking, dropping out, and withdrawing from school with little remorse (Farrington, 2014). Using only extrinsic incentives to inspire learning is a form of educational engineering that implicitly views students as inferior, inert, and in need of motivation. Such an orientation dims our awareness of learners' own determination and promotes their dependency.

It is part of human nature to be social, curious, active; to initiate thought and behavior; to make meaning from experience; and to strive to

be effective at what we value. However, the most favorable conditions for learning vary among people. To engage learners requires educators to be aware of the various ways students make sense of the world and interpret their learning environment. Students who find reading, writing, calculating, and expanding their stores of knowledge interesting and satisfying are likely to be lifelong learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The tendency to find such processes worthwhile is considered to be the trait of motivation to learn: a propensity for learning that develops and endures over time (Brophy, 2004). The way we teach can make learning a compelling means to a better future.

### **Intrinsic Motivation and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Teacher respect for cultural diversity influences students' motivation to learn (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Merriam et al., 2007). By virtue of our physiology and the ways in which we are socialized, we are compelled to pay attention to things that matter to us (Ahissar et al., 1992). What is culturally and emotionally significant to a person evokes intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Theories of intrinsic motivation recognize and include the influence of culture on learning.

## **EMOTIONS ARE SOCIALIZED THROUGH CULTURE**

While people have common needs and experiences, we also have culturally different values and perspectives. Our emotions are socialized through culture. For example, one person working at a very challenging task feels joy and continues. Another person, who has been socialized within another set of cultural norms, begins to feel frustrated at the same task and does not persevere. And yet another person feels frustrated at this task as well but continues with increased determination. What elicits that joy, frustration, or determination may differ across ethnic and cultural groups because of differences in definitions of novelty, hazard, opportunity, and gratification, and in accepted, appropriate responses to these perceptions (Kitayama & Markus, 1994). To a significant extent the response that a person has to a learning experience varies according to the activity itself and his or her cultural background. To effectively teach *all* students requires culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).

While the internal logic as to why students do something may not coincide with that of the teacher, it is nonetheless present. To be consistently effective, a teacher has to accommodate that perspective. Possessing such awareness can be particularly challenging to educators, especially

when students and/or their families have had experiences of cultural invalidation that their teachers have not experienced or examined. For example, if a low-income student has repeatedly heard educators discuss the consequences of poverty in ways that stereotype or diminish her community, she may detach from learning experiences that are oriented toward making other people appear unhealthy or misguided. Receiving a good grade becomes a lower priority than maintaining her integrity as a community member. Should her teachers rely on unquestioned assumptions about how the meanings of effort and reward combine as a driving force in student learning, they may be misled by what they perceive as insufficient effort in this student's academic behavior.

Scholarship on the possible disconnect between student effort and striving for achievement includes stereotype threat (Cole, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995), self-theories (Dweck & Molden, 2005), and the history of marginalized peoples (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Although it is reasonable to assume that a host of influences account for persistent gaps in academic performance among student groups, these studies spotlight the ineffectiveness of high grades or test scores as a primary motivational influence on learning.

For many students the connection between increasing their effort and receiving an extrinsic reward is neither obvious nor desirable as their main reason for learning. When extrinsic rewards fail to motivate students, they may be described as lacking ambition, initiative, or self-direction. Teachers are more likely to fall back on blameful attributions and deficit thinking when they lack awareness of the ways in which students are motivated by personal definitions of respect, meaning, and success. For these students, such reasoning may be an invitation to further disconnect from learning.

It is reasonable to propose that as long as educational systems continue to connect motivation to learn to extrinsic rewards and punishments, students whose histories, beliefs, and values differ from the norms of school will in large part be excluded from academic engagement and success (Hebel, 2007; Yosso, 2005). Being aware of and responsive to students and ourselves as cultural beings is an essential aspect of equitable instruction.

## THE LANGUAGE OF DIVERSITY

Since Chapters 2–7 stress pragmatic approaches to enhancing motivation among diverse student groups, there is a need to discuss the implications of the language in this book. For the two terms that appear throughout this book—*diversity* and *culturally responsive teaching*—there are various interpretations. For example, *diversity* is a word whose meanings are

dependent on the context in which it is being understood. An anthropological approach to diversity would provide a comparative view of human groups within the context of all human groups. A political approach would analyze issues of power and class. Applied to a learning situation and the purpose of this book, diversity conveys a need to respect similarities and differences among human beings and to move beyond simply developing personal sensitivity to active and effective responsiveness. This may require constructive action on our part to change ideas and attitudes that perpetuate the exclusion of underserved groups of students and to find new ways to challenge their motivation to learn.

In addition to the various academic connotations of the word *diversity*, some view its general use as platitudinal or euphemistic. Although this book uses the words *diversity*, *cultural diversity*, and *cultural pluralism* interchangeably, there is the perspective that language associated with cultural differences must acknowledge issues of racism, discrimination, and the experience of exclusion. This argument implicates *diversity* when the word is used as a way to dilute or skirt critical issues by implicitly representing all forms of difference—including individual differences and heterogeneity—within personal identities (Adams et al., 2007; Nieto, 2004). The point here is to acknowledge that each of us has beliefs and understandings that guide and challenge our work within a pluralistic society.

Although the term *diversity* appears throughout this book, the book advocates for social justice education that includes an understanding that social inequality is structured and maintained in ways that protect privileged interests. The term *privilege*, another common term in this book, means unearned access to resources and social power, often because of social group membership.

With respect to *culturally responsive teaching*, this book offers a macro-cultural instructional framework known as the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000). The motivational framework, which is introduced in Chapter 2, is built on principles and structures that are meaningful across cultures, especially with students from families and communities that have not historically experienced success in formal education. Rather than comparing and contrasting groups of people from a microcultural perspective—one that, for example, identifies a specific ethnic group and prescribes approaches to teaching according to assumed characteristics and orientations—the motivational framework emerges from literature on and experience with creating a more equitable pluralistic framework that elicits the intrinsic motivation of learners. A fundamental belief is that a macrocultural framework can provide instructional guidance without reducing dynamic groups of people to sets of stereotypical characteristics. The chapters in

this book provide multiple concrete approaches from which teachers may choose in order to more consistently support the diverse perspectives and values that students bring to the classroom. This does not, of course, preclude the need for ongoing examination of one's own socialization, cultural identity, and related practices.

## PERSONAL APPRECIATION FOR THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

This chapter has introduced the idea that underlying educational equity is the understanding that the most favorable conditions for learning vary among people even though all people are naturally curious and want to make meaning of their experiences. Teachers who engage students in learning are aware of differences in how students make sense of their world and how they interpret the learning environment. This chapter has also drawn attention to the prejudicial nature of generalizing about entire groups of people and the need to seek understanding through relationships with students, families, and communities.

Another source of understanding springs from examining how myths and stereotypes are shaped and used to maintain power and privilege. Even in teacher education programs where prospective teachers are exposed to a multicultural curriculum, students can distance themselves from historical and social realities (Au, 2009). The awareness of how people are socialized to accept inequalities makes it possible to expose and disrupt narratives that maintain unequal rules, practices, and power in classrooms and communities. In this way, learning about cultural diversity does not simply mean understanding different beliefs, customs, and orientations that operate in the classroom. It includes understanding how our own values and biases have been shaped and how to provide meaningful opportunities for learning that are not simply the repackaging or disguising of dominant perspectives. These ideas are illuminated in the work of scholars such as Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), Irvine (1991), and Cochran-Smith (2004).

Several approaches can help personalize the concept of culture. First, it is useful to examine why the term *culture* seems evasive to many people and to examine what we know about it as a concept and as an educational opportunity. As mentioned earlier, culture is taught, but it is often taught in ways that are implicit and conveyed unsystematically (Schein, 2004). This is one of the reasons why it is difficult for anyone to describe in explicit terms who they are culturally. Our own beliefs, values, and usual patterns of interaction most often work subconsciously. Contrast and dissonance make it possible to uncover the rich variation within and between cultural groups.



The most obvious cultural characteristics that people observe are physical. Ethnicity, race, gender, and physical ability are often the antecedents to recognizing possible differences in experiences, beliefs, values, and expectations. Physical characteristics, of course, provide a cursory sense of who a person is. One's families, jobs, organizational ties, and lifestyles draw on a repertoire of behaviors, obstructing a clear view of who someone might be culturally. Similarly, unique personal histories, political beliefs, and psychological traits interact dramatically to distinguish us from other members of our own cultural groups. It is, at best, inaccurate to second-guess a person's cultural identity when the sole criteria are observable characteristics and behaviors.

This is one of the primary reasons why there are no fixed scripts for teaching in a culturally diverse classroom. In most classrooms it is easy for a teacher to misconstrue the motivation as well as the capabilities of students who vary in the ways they speak or remain silent (Delpit, 1988), ask for or boldly display knowledge (Heath, 1983), prefer to work as individuals or as members of groups (Ladson-Billings, 1994), and connect information in different ways. Misconceptions can lead to dangerous assumptions about linguistic or intellectual limitations, underpreparedness, lack of initiative, or arrogance.

Educators, as well as learners, have beliefs and values regarding teaching. These are culturally transmitted through narratives shaped by economics, history, religion, mythology, politics, and family and media communication. As mentioned earlier, the ways in which we experience a learning situation are mediated by such narratives. No learning situation is culturally neutral.

## **DOMINANT CULTURAL THEMES AND BELIEF SYSTEMS**

Unless we as educators understand our own culturally mediated values and biases, we may be misguided in believing that we are encouraging divergent points of view and providing meaningful opportunities for learning to occur when we are in fact repackaging or disguising past dogmas. It is entirely possible to believe in the need for change and therefore learn new languages and techniques, and yet overlay new ideas with old biases and frames of reference. It is possible to diminish the potential and the needs of others at our most subconscious levels and in our most implicit ways without any awareness that we are doing so. Mindfulness of who we are and what we believe culturally can help us examine the ways in which we may be unknowingly placing our good intentions within a dominant and unyielding framework—in spite of the appearance of openness and receptivity to enhancing motivation to learn among all students.

One of the most useful places to begin the exploration of who we are culturally and the relevance of that identity is to ask what values we hold that are consistent with the dominant culture. This question allows us to be cognizant not only of our dominant-culture values but also of the distinctions we hold as members of other groups in society. This is particularly important for fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-generation Americans of European descent. For many descendants of European Americans, one's family's country or countries of origin can be only marginally useful in understanding who we are now as cultural people in the United States. The desire and ability to assimilate, as well as affiliations with numerous other groups (religious, socioeconomic, regional, and so forth), can create confusion about the cultural origins of personal beliefs and values. Furthermore, culture is a dynamic and changing concept for each of us, regardless of the country of our geographical origin. Our cultural identities are constantly evolving or changing, and consequently values, customs, and orientations are fluid. Because we as educators exert a powerful influence over classroom norms, it is important to make explicit those values that are most often implicit and profoundly affect students in our classrooms.

## EXAMINING OUR VALUES

One way to gain insight into the elusive concept of culture is to consider the research of sociologist Robin M. Williams Jr. (1970). Several decades ago Williams identified cultural themes that tend to be enduring reflections of dominant values, which in the United States have been northern European. These themes may or may not be operative in a classroom, but because belief systems influence teaching practices, the selected themes, condensed by Locke (1992), may provide a useful source for our reflection on prevailing cultural and political norms in a classroom. In the list that follows, each theme is accompanied by at least one alternative perspective. The alternative examples are meant to invite a consideration or possibly a conversation about counter-beliefs and values that students and teachers may bring to a learning environment:

1. **Achievement and success:** People emphasize rags-to-riches in stories.

*Alternatives:* Personal generosity is the highest human value; conspicuous consumption represents greed and self-interest; rags-to-riches is rooted in cultural mythology that overlooks the social, political, and economic forces that favor certain groups over others. Thus, achievement has at least as much to do with privilege as with personal desire and effort.

2. **Activity and work:** People see this country as a land of busy people who stress disciplined, productive activity as a worthy end in itself.

*Alternatives:* People believe that caring about and taking time for others is more important than “being busy”; discipline can take many forms and should be equated with respect, moral action, and social conscience; a means-ends orientation has been the justification for such things as cultural genocide and environmental disaster; sustenance is a higher value than productivity.

3. **Humanitarian mores:** People spontaneously come to the aid of others and hold traditional sympathy for the underdog.

*Alternatives:* Human beings are selective about whom they will help; for some, personal gain takes precedence over kindness and generosity; for others, human emotion is to be avoided because it makes them feel vulnerable and inept.

4. **Moral orientation:** People judge life events and situations in terms of right and wrong.

*Alternatives:* People feel there is no objective right or wrong and that such a perspective tends to favor and protect the most privileged members of society; finding meaning in life events and situations is more important than judging.

5. **Efficiency and practicality:** People emphasize the practical value of getting things done.

*Alternatives:* People believe that process is just as important as product and that it makes the strongest statement about what an individual values; living and working in a manner that values equity and fairness is both practical and just.

6. **Progress:** People hold the optimistic view that things will get better.

*Alternatives:* People believe that the idea of progress assumes human beings can and should control nature and life circumstances; instead, we ought to acknowledge, respect, and care for that which we have been given, that which is greater than ourselves, and that which is, like life, cyclical. (Interestingly, many languages in the Americas and around the world do not include a word for *progress*.)

7. **Material comfort:** People emphasize the good life. Conspicuous consumption is sanctioned.

*Alternatives:* People believe that a good life is defined by sharing and giving things away. The idea that life will be good if one owns many possessions leads to insatiable behavior and greed as well as environmental devastation.

8. **Freedom:** People believe in freedom with an intensity others might reserve for religion.

*Alternatives:* People believe that freedom without justice is dangerous; limiting freedom is necessary for equality; accepting the limitations of personal freedom is a sign of respect for others.

9. **Individual personality:** People believe that every individual should be independent, responsible, and self-respecting; the group should not take precedent over the individual.

*Alternatives:* People believe that sharing and humility are higher values than ownership and self-promotion; self-respect is inseparable from respect for others, community, and that which is greater than oneself. Individualism can promote aggression and competition in ways that undermine the confidence, self-respect, and human rights of others; independence denies the social, cultural, racial, and economic realities that favor members of certain groups over others.

10. **Science and secular rationality:** People have esteem for the sciences as a means of asserting mastery over the environment.

*Alternatives:* People believe the earth is a sacred gift to be revered and protected. The notion of scientific objectivity is based on the mistaken presumption that human beings are capable of value-neutral beliefs and behaviors.

11. **Nationalism-patriotism:** People believe in a strong sense of loyalty to that which is deemed “American.”

*Alternatives:* People believe that, functionally, “American” has meant conformity to Anglo European values, behaviors, and appearances; the way in which the word *American* is commonly used to describe a single country on the continent of the Americas is presumptuous and arrogant; “American” needs to be redefined in the spirit of pluralism and with respect for other global identities.

12. **Democracy:** People believe that every person should have a voice in the political destiny of their country.

*Alternatives:* People believe that democracy is an illusion that perpetuates the domination of society’s most privileged members; people must have the means and capacity to use their voices—this requires access to multiple perspectives on issues and confidence that speaking up will not jeopardize one’s economic and personal security.

13. **Racism and related group superiority:** People believe that racism represents a value conflict in the culture of the United States because

it emphasizes differential evaluation of racial, religious, and ethnic groups. They argue for a color-blind ideology based on the assumption that social and economic advantage in contemporary life is the consequence of merit and hard work.

*Alternatives:* People believe that racism combines prejudice with power and is personal, institutional, and cultural. It has been used for over 400 years as a way to secure the psychological, educational, and material dominance of a select group. Without acknowledgment of its existence, it is impossible for members of a society to examine the implications of advantage and power and develop practices that level the playing field.

When we clarify our own cultural values and biases, we are better able to consider how they might subtly but profoundly influence the degree to which learners in our classrooms feel included, respected, at ease, and generally motivated to learn. The range of considerations found in Williams's cultural themes assist us with developing questions to ask ourselves about our own assumptions when we construct reflective questions to enhance a learning experience. A few examples, subject to age-appropriateness, follow:

- Are your classroom norms clear, so that if they are different from what students are used to at home or in their communities, or if students are at the beginning stages of learning English, they are able to understand and negotiate expectations? It may be important to model behavior, provide visible examples of expectations, and elicit information about clarity of communication through student polls or written responses. A common norm teachers in the United States typically share is for students to raise their hand when they have questions. Some students, however, are embarrassed about publically identifying what they do not understand. The anonymity of writing or conferencing with peers and then sharing information with a teacher can facilitate communication. In addition, some teachers use a "fist-to-five" approach to checking for clarity. If students raise all five fingers on a hand, it means they understand what they have learned so well that they could teach it to someone else. Four fingers mean they understand it but would be cautious about teaching it. Three fingers mean they have a good start but are confused about some things. Two fingers mean they don't get it. One finger means they are struggling not to give up.
- One additional consideration is clarity about time. For students from communities where time is not a commodity that can be spent, wasted, or managed, time may be experienced more in relation to natural patterns. For such students, expectations about punctuality require definition and modeling.

- Have you examined the values embedded in your discipline that may confuse or disturb some students? Ask questions that encourage students to represent alternative perspectives, construct panels that can discuss key issues from diverse perspectives, and help students organize their discussion groups in ways that encourage collaborative dialogue and knowledge sharing.
- Are the examples you use to illustrate key points meaningful to and respectful of students? Give one example from your experience and then ask students to create their own examples to illustrate different viewpoints, providing an opportunity for group discussion. Acknowledge the experiences of people from different backgrounds, and be aware of nonverbal language and voice. Seeking feedback through regular anonymous surveys can be instructive.
- Do you have creative and effective ways to learn about your students' lives and interests? In recent years, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005), Zigarelli, Nilsen, Moore, and Ginsberg (2014), and other research-practitioners have brought attention to the value of a *funds of knowledge* approach to teaching and learning. Funds of knowledge are cultural experiences and strengths that are revealed through informal interactions with families and students, such as visiting a student's home or eating lunch each week with students. When educators are in the role of learner and listener, a family's stories and experiences along with insights into students' values, feelings, language, identity, and academic strengths can stimulate insight into new ways to engage students in learning. For many educators, this translates into ideas for a more culturally relevant curriculum.
- Other ways to learn about students include a photo board, creative opportunities for self-expression, occasional potluck meals, regularly scheduled discussion topics about local and global problems, acknowledgment of birthdays and cultural holidays, open sharing about oneself, a beverage urn at the back of the classroom as a site for informal discussion, and other similar opportunities.
- Many teachers also use "door passes" or "exit tickets," which are simply 3×5 cards or electronic postings on which students write a response to a question the teacher has asked. Students use their response as their ticket to leave when class is over. When teachers collect these at the door, this has the added benefit of allowing educators to make contact with each student. Here are a few examples of questions for older students: What is one connection that I was able to make between what we learned today and a personal interest or goal? What is one question I wish I had asked today but didn't think of it at the time? If I were teaching this topic, I would want to be sure to include. . . .

- In addition, teachers might create a display to which students submit photos or original reminders about themes that vary from month to month. For example, an experience I had that I will always remember, one of the most beautiful places I've been, something that still surprises me. Teachers might work with students to generate the themes and ask for volunteers to design and manage the display. Instead of buying posters, teachers might ask students to make their own on different topics, such as "words of wisdom" or "wisdom from my ancestors" to post on the wall for inspiration. The section on inclusion in Chapter 3 provides additional ideas. Although most teachers have several ways to become more familiar with the lives and interests of students, the goal is to make a regular point of doing so in ways that include every student.
- Are you aware of nonverbal communication from a multicultural and cross-cultural perspective? For many students socialized within the dominant culture of the United States, physical proximity has little effect on emotional safety or academic effectiveness. Similarly, a well-modulated voice signals authority and knowledge. But these characteristics vary considerably across cultures (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Remland, 2000), and a well-modulated voice, for example, is not necessarily one that is approachable or invites thinking. Although research on communication tends to be painted with a fairly broad brush, attention to voice, proximity, and other kinetic characteristics can determine who gets the floor, whose perspective is respected, and who enjoys learning (Andersen & Wang, 2006; Goldin-Meadow, 2003).

In general, a good place to begin deepening cultural awareness is to consider our own repertoire of behaviors in relation to whom we are teaching (Enns & Sinacore, 2004). A small focus group of diverse students can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of significant cultural differences among students.

Peggy McIntosh (1989) has written:

As a white person I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. . . . I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group. (p. 10)

Many of us, regardless of racial, ethnic, linguistic, sexual, or gender affiliations, have been socialized to think of the United States as a just society. It is difficult to imagine that each of us is responsible for everyday

actions that can undermine other peoples' motivation with consequences that parallel overt and intentional acts of bigotry. Though history and the broader policy environment bear significant responsibility for social inequality, learning about who we are culturally, as individuals, community members, and educators, can create a consciousness that is satisfying and empowering in ways we may have never dreamed.

## SUMMARY

This chapter provided background on the relationship between motivation, learning, and culture, and it gave readers the opportunity to examine some of their own cultural values. It also offered a rationale for intrinsic motivation as the foundation for teaching and learning, emphasizing that instructional planning should be motivational planning. The following chapter, titled "Critical Features of a Motivating and Culturally Responsive Classroom," explores the question: How can teachers support the intrinsic motivation of learners within and across cultural groups? It provides a planning tool based on the motivational framework and a graphic organizer to help teachers align motivational strategies for individual lessons or unit development.