

Mainstream American Culture

Outcome: In this segment we will explore the characteristics of mainstream American culture and how those characteristics shape education.

To begin, let's revisit the definitions of culture from module one. Think back once again to the introduction of culture in the last segment. There were nine aspects of culture that appear most frequently in the educational research. How many can you recall?

Take 10 seconds to record as many of them as you can on your capture sheet.

How many of the nine aspects of culture listed did you remember?

Before we begin exploring how the aspects of culture influence teaching and learning, a note of caution is warranted. The range of differences in the beliefs, values, and behaviors of individuals within any cultural group are greater than the differences between cultural groups. The exploration of culturally-based thinking and behavior is based on patterns. That is, when one cultural group is compared to another, certain beliefs, values, and actions will be more prevalent in one culture than in another. The point of this module is to provide realistic information about the culture of a group, not to stereotype individuals. The value in understanding these group differences is to observe and think about students from a different perspective which can help us provide the most effective instruction.

Each of us processes the world around us based on the culture in which we were raised. Culture shapes not only our individual and group worldviews, but also that of our public institutions, including schools. Mainstream American culture reflects the beliefs, values, and practices that shape public education in this country.

Before we examine the characteristics of mainstream American culture, think about how you would describe mainstream culture in this country. What are the common characteristics of mainstream American culture? Take 10 seconds to record 3-5 ideas of how you would characterize mainstream American culture. Try to think beyond your individual experience to the subtle and not so subtle messages that we get from the community, media, and our public institutions.

Now think back to your childhood. Was there an old adage or proverb that your parents or grandparents often recited? “A stitch in time saves nine,” or “Children should be seen and not heard.” H. Ned Seelye, a national diversity trainer, says that proverbs are “everybody’s bite-sized bits of culturally transmitted wisdom.” The dictionary defines proverbs as “sayings referring to common fact, knowledge.” Proverbs reflect the common knowledge shared by people within a particular cultural group. They provide a glimpse into the values and beliefs that shape the cultural rules for living.

What is the value or belief behind the first proverb? This proverb values immediate attention and action to correct a situation as opposed to letting things get worse before taking action. The value is on quick response.

How about the second proverb? What are the values and beliefs behind it? This proverb values quietness, compliance, and conformity in children. Is this still true today? What makes you think so?

In a moment 10 familiar American proverbs will appear one at a time on the screen. As you read each one, record the value or belief that is at the core of each one on your capture sheet.

1. **“God helps those who help themselves.”**
2. **“He who hesitates is lost.”**
3. **“ Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”**
4. **“Don’t cry over spilt milk.”**
5. **The squeaky wheel gets greased.”**
6. **“You’ve made your bed now lie in it.”**
7. **“Stand on your own two feet.”**
8. **“No rest for the weary.”**
9. **“Time is money.”**
10. **“The early bird catches the worm.”**

Look back to the 3-5 characteristics of American mainstream culture you wrote before we looked at the proverbs. Compare those characteristics to the values expressed in each proverb. How similar are your two lists?

Let’s revisit each proverb and examine the core values reflected in each one.

“God helps those who help themselves.”

This proverb reflects the belief that each person is responsible for his or her own success. It reflects a value on individual effort, perseverance, and work.

“He who hesitates is lost.”

The belief behind this proverb is that quick action is a key to success.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

This proverb communicates a value on risk-taking - on taking action to obtain a desirable goal.

“Don’t cry over spilt milk.”

Here again this proverb expresses a value on action. The message is to “get over it.” Implicit is the belief that it’s a waste of time to regret whatever did not go your way. Instead, focus on a new action that will bring about the desired result.

“The squeaky wheel gets greased.”

Here the value is on individual expression and communication of individual wants and needs.

“You’ve made your bed now lie in it.”

Once again, this proverb communicates a value on individual efforts. Independence and autonomy are prized characteristics.

“Stand on your own two feet.”

Much like the previous proverb, this one says that it is the individual who is in control of the environment. The individual is responsible for creating the circumstance that they are seeking. “Where there’s a will there’s a way” is another popular proverb that expresses the same basic value.

“No rest for the weary.”

Again, a value on hard work and effort as the means to success.

“Time is money.”**“The early bird catches the worm.”**

These two proverbs communicate a value on close adherence to time and schedules. The value is on promptness. What’s the first thing you say if you walk into a meeting late? You probably apologize because being late is viewed as a negative trait.

These proverbs and many others convey the acknowledged characteristics of mainstream American culture.

Reflection: How do the policies, procedures, and practices in your school reflect these mainstream American values?