

## What is Culture?

This Cultural Competence module will broaden the context for studying English language learning by examining the concept of culture in more detail.

Language is often regarded as the major hurdle to the improved academic achievement of English language learners, but there are other aspects of culture that impact teaching and learning as well. By expanding our view of English language learners to include these other aspects of culture, we gain a fuller understanding of our students and can design programs that meet their unique educational strengths and needs.

In this segment you will explore the concept of culture through a variety of definitions and become familiar with the factors of diversity that are integral to cultural identity

When you hear the word “culture,” what ideas and images come to mind? I would like you to take two minutes to think about what the word “culture” means to you and jot down your definition of “culture”.

Please click the Pause button and record your definition of culture on your capture sheet. When you are finished, click the play button to continue.

Volumes have been written on the meaning and significance of culture. Below are a few definitions that are particularly useful for considering English language learners in the context of culture.

As each definition is shown, consider the similarities between your definition and the ones on the screen. Think about:

- What ideas about culture were reinforced for you?
- What ideas are new or present a perspective that is different from yours?
- What ideas in the definitions raise questions in your mind?

The first definition is from Dr. Barbara Shade, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin.

What words resonate with you in this definition? Does anything in the definition surprise you? Take a moment to reflect on the key ideas in Dr. Shade’s definition. Record your thoughts on your capture sheet.

The second definition comes from Dr. Donna Ford, a professor of special education at Ohio State University and J. John Harris III, a professor of administration and supervision and scholar in the African American Studies and Research Program at the University of Kentucky. What ideas or key concepts are in this definition that was not in Dr. Shade's definition?

Take a moment to reflect on the key ideas in Dr. Ford's definition. Record your thoughts on your capture sheet.

In 1974, M.L. Maher wrote that culture is *"a group's preferred way of perceiving, judging, and organizing the things they encounter in their daily lives."*

All three definitions point out that two people from different cultural groups may experience the very same event, action, or circumstance, but respond to it in very different ways. Culture shapes what we view valuable or invaluable, important or trivial, and reasonable or unreasonable.

Each of us processes the world around us based on the culture in which we were raised. Culture is an invisible, unarticulated set of rules for living that we have learned through our experiences and interactions in our families and communities.

Think about culture as the rules for living with a group of people. Are there different rules for living being :

- Male vs. female?
- From Long Island vs. Long Beach?
- Muslim vs. Jewish?
- 15 vs. 50?

Yes, we all have rules for living based on our membership within different groups. Read the nine aspects of culture that appear in the Maryland State regulation for Education That Is Multicultural:

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Region
- Religion
- Gender
- Language
- Socio-economic status
- Age
- Presence of a disability

Can you identify yourself within each of these factors of diversity? Chances are you can. We have identities within each of these aspects of culture. Chances also are very good that some of aspects of culture are more important than others to forming your identity.

Take a moment to decide which of these nine factors of diversity are most important to your own identity.

Most of this course is focused on language as an aspect of culture that influences teaching and learning. But remember, students who speak the same language may have very different instructional needs based on their membership within the other aspects of culture. We will continue to explore these ideas throughout the rest of this module.