

# 8. WHAT IS CULTURE?

## Rationale

The purpose of this lesson is to provide students an opportunity to examine the complex concept of culture and to understand that while all people have a culture, for some it may mean the country or region of their ancestors, and for others it may encompass other aspects including family, religion and community. Students will learn that no matter how it is defined, culture gives people a sense of who they are and impacts how they experience the world around them.

## Objectives

- Students will examine the complexity and intersections of culture.
- Students will identify various elements and the importance of culture on how one perceives and experiences the world.
- Students will reflect on the cultures of those different from them.

## What's Needed

*Handouts and Resources:* *Who Am I?* (one for each student)

*Other Material:* chart paper or board/smart board and markers

*Advance Preparation:*

- Reproduce handout as directed above.
- Chart and post the following definition of **Culture**: The patterns of daily life learned consciously and unconsciously by a group of people. These patterns can be seen in language, governing practices, arts, customs, holiday celebrations, food, religion, relationships, family roles, clothing, etc.  
**Note to teacher:** It is suggested that you keep this charted definition of culture as it will be referenced again in later lessons throughout this unit.
- Create a chart with three columns labeled with the following headings: ELEMENTS OF CULTURE, CULTURAL GROUPS and IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE (see step 1).

### TIME

45 minutes or 1 class period

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Reading, Writing, Speaking & Listening, Language

### STRATEGIES AND SKILLS

critical thinking, small and large group discussion, defining terms

### KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

ancestors  
bicultural  
biracial  
communal  
ethnicity  
heritage  
multicultural  
nationality  
primary culture  
race

## Procedures

1. Refer to the chart paper posted in advance and remind students about the meaning of the word “culture,” which was defined in lesson “7. Developing a Common Language.”
2. Reveal the chart you created in advance with “Elements of Culture,” “Cultural Groups” and “Importance of Culture.” Begin the lesson by having students brainstorm a list of words and phrases that come to mind when they hear the word “culture.” List these responses in the first column under “Elements of Culture.”
3. Next, ask students to identify the cultural groups that exist in their school community based on the definition above and record those in the second column. If there isn’t a diversity of cultures in your school community, ask them to name other cultural groups outside their community.
4. Complete the chart by asking students to brainstorm the importance of culture and listing their responses in the third column.

*Example:*

Elements of Culture	Cultural Groups	Importance of Culture
Food	Mexican American	Shared history
Customs	Southerner	Traditions and celebrations
Language	Muslim	Sense of belonging
Dating rituals	African American	Handed down by relatives

5. Distribute the *Who Am I?* handout. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 each and assign each group a scenario from the handout to discuss, using the questions provided on each handout. Depending on the size of your class, you may have more than one small group working with each of the scenarios. Explain to students the scenarios are real stories, though the names are fictitious and they are to keep in mind that some of the language may differ than what we use today, but this is how each person described themselves at the time. Give students 10 minutes to discuss the scenarios and answer the questions.
6. Reconvene the class and have each group share their scenario and briefly summarize their responses to the discussion questions.
7. After all the scenarios have been discussed, ask students to look back at the chart created in steps 2–4 above. Give them an opportunity to add ideas to each column based upon their discussions.
8. Engage the students in a class discussion about culture using the following questions.
  - Is it possible for someone to belong to several cultural groups? What are some examples?



### NOTE 7

The individuals who contributed to this student handout identify themselves as follows: Cori identifies herself as Asian American; Kaya identifies herself as biracial; John identifies himself as both deaf and African American (the descriptor African American serves two purposes—John was born in Africa and is now American; John also describes himself as black); James describes himself as Piscataway Indian or as American, depending on the situation.

- Do you have to be born into a cultural group to understand the culture? How so?
- Are there instances where people who belong to more than one cultural group may feel the need to identify their primary cultural group? Please explain.
- What are some instances when people might feel the need to identify their primary culture?
- How is cultural identity taught to people formally and informally?
- Can a culture originate and grow from a shared experience with prejudice, discrimination and oppression?
- Is cultural identity “fixed” or permanent? Is one’s primary culture fixed? If change is possible, what might cause a change?
- Are there instances when a discussion on culture or cultural heritage might be difficult for a person? Explain (e.g., continually being asked formally and informally to speak on behalf of their entire culture instead of being seen as an individual).
- Why is it important for people to have the opportunity to define their own cultural identities? What happens when we allow others to define our cultural identities for us?



**NOTE 8**

Make sure that the discussion about culture is not limited to race and ethnicity, but includes (among other things) religion, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental ability, geography, gender, gender identity and socio-economic status. Ensure students understand that culture can be formed in a number of different ways.

## Extension Activities

- Have students read one or more of the following books and write an essay on the importance of culture to the events of the story.
  - *Hearts Unbroken* by Cynthia Leitich Smith
  - *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck
  - *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson
  - *Waiting for Snow in Havana* by Carlos Eire
  - *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
  - *Typical American* by Gish Jen
  - *Saving Fish From Drowning* by Amy Tan
  - *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
  - *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* by Heidi Durrow
  - *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson
  - *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini
  - *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri
  - *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz



#### NOTE

For more information about KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) visit [www.nea.org/tools/k-w-l-know-want-to-know-learned.html](http://www.nea.org/tools/k-w-l-know-want-to-know-learned.html).

- Have students reflect on their own cultural identities, considering what they already know about them, what they recently learned or discovered, and what more they want to know. You can use a KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) structure for this part. Invite them to interview their family members to learn more about their cultural background and traditions. Their research can culminate in a project that illustrates what they want to express about their culture by writing an essay or creating a multimedia project.

# WHO AM I?



## Cori

I was born in Korea to a Korean mother and father. I was adopted as an infant by Americans. My adoptive mother's ethnicity is Portuguese and my father's is Welsh. I speak fluent English and Portuguese. I was raised in a diverse community outside Washington, D.C., where I have always socialized with students from various backgrounds, but my closest friends have always been Hispanic.

- What are some of the ways that Cori might identify herself culturally?
- Culturally, how would you describe Cori?
- Is it possible that at different times in Cori's life she might identify more strongly with one aspect of her cultural identity than another? Explain.
- What are some of the obstacles that Cori might face?



## Kaya

My father is African American and my mother is a white, Irish American. My mother is Catholic, but my father does not practice any one religion. As a young child growing up in New York, I was raised in a communal environment where there were people of many different races, religions and backgrounds. When I was 7 years old, I moved to a predominantly African-American community. At that point, I had mostly African and Caribbean-American friends. I went to middle school in a different community where most of the people in my class were white. By high school, I was once again in a diverse setting.

- What are some of the ways that Kaya might identify herself culturally?
- Culturally, how would you describe Kaya?
- Is it possible that at different times in Kaya's life she might identify more strongly with one aspect of her cultural identity than another? Why or why not?
- What are some of the challenges that Kaya might face?
- How are biracial or bicultural people sometimes forced to choose one culture over another? Who forces the choice? Why do you think this happens?



## John

I was born in South Africa where I lived until I was a teenager. Because there were few schools in South Africa that could teach students who were deaf, I was sent to the United States to continue my education. I eventually became a U.S. citizen and became active in the Deaf Culture by working with students at Gallaudet University, where I have been for the past 20 years.

- What are some of the ways that John might identify himself culturally?
- Culturally, how would you describe John?
- What do you think is meant by the term “Deaf Culture?”



## James

My name is James Monroe, or at least that is my name to most people. To other Piscataway, my name is James Green Corn. I was named after the Green Corn celebration that Piscataway Indians held on the grounds of St. Ignatius Church at Chapel Point (MD) during the 1940s and '50s. Most people have no idea that I'm Indian because I look “white,” so I pass for “white.” I guess I don't say much about it because of all the stereotypes about Indians. I want to be successful, and sometimes I feel that if I don't let people know who I am, I will have a better chance to succeed. I go to annual powwows and other events that help me learn about my culture, but I'm also a Washington Redskins fan and Redskins is a derogatory term for my people. Sometimes I feel that I am disloyal when I do things like that.

- Culturally, how would you describe James?
- What are some of the ways that James might identify himself culturally?
- What does the term “passing” mean? In what other situations have you heard this term used?
- Why might being a Redskins fan make James feel disloyal to his culture or people?
- What are other examples of things people do that might make them feel disloyal to their cultural groups? Why do you think people do that?