

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT CULTURE

The following list of questions reflect various aspects of culture. These may be used in a number of ways, such as:

- A basis for examination of one's own culture and background (compare your responses with friends, family members and colleagues to discover similarities and differences in aspects of deep culture);
- A guide for observing and gathering information about your students that will enhance your understanding and effectiveness with the students;
- A source of ideas for planning student projects on the various topics.

1 General

- ☛ a. What is the child called at home?
- ☛ b. What are the major stereotypes that you and others have about each cultural group? To what extent are these accepted by members of the group being typed?
- c. To what extent and in what areas has the traditional culture of each minority group changed in contact with the dominant American culture? In what areas has it been maintained?
- d. To what extent do individuals possess knowledge of or exhibit characteristics of traditional groups?

2 Family

- ☛ a. Who is considered "family?" Who among these live in one house?
- ☛ b. What is the hierarchy of authority in the family?
- ☛ c. What are the rights and responsibilities of each family member? Do children have an obligation to work to help the family?
- ☛ d. What is the relative importance of an individual family member vs. the family as a whole? What is the degree of solidarity or cohesiveness in the family?
- e. What are the functions and obligations of the family in the larger social unit?

3 The Life Cycle

- ☛ a. What are the criteria for the definition of stages, periods, or transitions, in life?
- ☛ b. What are the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors toward individuals at different stages in the life cycle?



- ☛ c. What behaviors are appropriate or unacceptable for children of various ages?
- d. How is language related to the life cycle?
- ☛ e. How is the age of children computed? What commemoration is made of the child's birth (if any) and when?

4 Roles

- a. What roles within the group are available to whom, and how are they acquired? Is education relevant to this acquisition?
- b. What is the knowledge of and perception by the child, the parents, and the community toward these roles, their availability and possible or appropriate means of access to them?
- ☛ c. Is language use important in the definition or social marking of roles?
- ☛ d. Are there class differences in the expectations about child role attainment? Are these realistic?

5 Interpersonal Relationships

- ☛ a. How do people greet each other? What forms of address are used between people in various roles?
- ☛ b. Is language competence a requirement or qualification for group membership?
- ☛ c. Do girls work and interact with boys? Is it proper?
- ☛ d. How is deference shown?
- ☛ e. How are insults expressed?
- ☛ f. Who may disagree with whom? Under what circumstances?

6 Communication

- ☛ a. What languages, and varieties of each language, are used in the home? By whom? When? Where? For what purposes?
- ☛ b. Which varieties are written? How widespread is knowledge of written forms?
- c. What are the characteristics of "speaking well", and how do these relate to age, sex context, or other social factors? What are the criteria for correctness?
- d. What roles, attitudes, or personality traits are associated with particular ways of speaking?
- ☛ e. What is considered "normal" speech behavior?
- f. Is learning language a source of pride? Is developing bilingual competence considered an advantage or a handicap?
- ☛ g. What is the function of the native language in the environment?



- ☛ **h.** What gestures or postures have special significance or may be considered objectionable? What meaning is attached to making direct eye contact? To eye avoidance?
- ☛ **i.** Who may talk to whom? When? Where? About what?

7 Decorum and Discipline

- ☛ **a.** What is discipline? What counts as discipline in terms of the culture, and what doesn't? What is its importance and value?
- ☛ **b.** What behaviors are considered socially unacceptable for students of different age and sex?
- ☛ **c.** Who or what is considered responsible if a child misbehaves? The child? Parents? Older siblings? School? Society? The environment? Or is no blame ascribed?
- ☛ **d.** Who has authority over whom? To what extent can one person's will be imposed on another? By what means?
- ☛ **e.** How is the behavior of children traditionally controlled, to what extent, and in what domains?
- ☛ **f.** What is the role of language in social control? What is the significance of using the first versus the second language?

8 Religion

- ☛ **a.** What is considered sacred and what secular?
- ☛ **b.** What religious roles and authority are recognized in the community? What is the role of children in religious practices?
- ☛ **c.** What taboos are there? What should not be discussed in school? What questions should not be asked? What student behaviors should not be required?

9 Health and Hygiene

- ☛ **a.** Who or what is believed to cause illness (e.g., the "germ theory" vs. supernatural or other causes)?
- ☛ **b.** Who or what is responsible for curing?
- ☛ **c.** How are specific illnesses treated? To what extent do individuals utilize or accept modern medical practices by doctors and other health professionals?
- ☛ **d.** What beliefs or practices are there with regard to bodily hygiene?
- ☛ **e.** If a student were involved in an accident at school, would any of the common first aid practices be unacceptable?



10 Food

- a. What is eaten? In what order? How often?
- b. What foods are favorites? What taboo? What typical?
- ☛ c. What rules are observed during meals regarding age and sex roles within the family, in the order of serving, seating, utensils used, and appropriate verbal formulas (e.g., how, and if, one may request, refuse, or thank)?
- ☛ d. What social obligations are there with regard to food giving, preparation, reciprocity, and honoring people?
- e. What relation does food have with health? What medicinal uses are made of food, or categories of food?
- ☛ f. What are the taboos or prescriptions associated with the handling, offering, or discarding of food?

11 Dress and Personal Appearance

- a. What clothing is typical? What is worn for special occasions? What seasonal differences are considered appropriate?
- b. How does dress differ for age, sex, and social class?
- ☛ c. What restrictions are imposed for modesty?
- d. What is the concept of beauty or attractiveness? What characteristics are most valued?
- ☛ e. What constitutes a compliment? What form should it take?
- f. Does the color of dress have symbolic significance?

12 History and Traditions

- ☛ a. What individuals and events in history are a source of pride for the group?
- b. To what extent is knowledge of the group's history preserved? In what forms and in what ways is it passed on?
- c. Do any ceremonies or festive occasions commemorate historical events?
- d. How and to what extent does the group's knowledge of history coincide with or depart from scientific theories of creation, evolution, and historical development?
- ☛ e. To what extent does the group in the United States identify with the history and traditions of their country of origin? What changes have taken place in the country of origin since the group of individuals emigrated?
- f. For what reasons and under what circumstances did the group or individuals come to the United States (or did the United States come to them)?



13 Holidays and Celebrations

- ☛ a. What holidays and celebrations are observed by the group and individuals? What is their purpose (e.g., political, seasonal, religious)?
- ☛ b. Which are especially important for children and why?
- ☛ c. What cultural values are they intended to inculcate?
- ☛ d. Do parents and students of immigrant children know and understand school holidays and behavior appropriate for them (including appropriate nonattendance)?

14 Education

- ☛ a. What is the purpose of education?
- ☛ b. What kinds of learning are favored (e.g. rote, inductive)?
- ☛ c. What methods for teaching and learning are used at home (e.g. modeling and imitation, didactic stories and proverbs, direct verbal instruction)?
- ☛ d. Do methods of teaching and learning vary with recognized stages in the life cycle? With the setting? According to what is being taught or learned?
- ☛ e. What is the role of language in learning and teaching?
- ☛ f. Is it appropriate for students to ask questions or volunteer information? If so, what behaviors signal this? If not, what negative attitudes does it engender?
- ☛ g. What constitutes a positive response by a teacher to a student?
- ☛ h. How many years is it considered "normal" for children to go to school?
- ☛ i. Are there different expectations by parents, teachers, and students with respect to different groups? In different subjects? For boys vs. girls?

15 Work and Play

- ☛ a. What range of behaviors are considered "work" and what "play"?
- ☛ b. What kinds of work are prestigious and why?
- ☛ c. Why is work valued (e.g., financial gain, group welfare, individual satisfaction, promotion of group cohesiveness, fulfillment or creation of obligations to/from others, position in the community)?
- ☛ d. What is the purpose of play?



16 Time and Space

- a. What beliefs or values are associated with concepts of time?
- ☛ b. How important is "punctuality?" Speed of performance when taking a test?
- ☛ c. Is control or prescriptive organization of children's time required (e.g., must homework be done before watching TV, is "bedtime" a scheduled event)?
- ☛ d. How do individuals organize themselves spatially in groups (e.g., in rows, circles, around tables, on the floor)?
- e. What is the spatial organization of the home?
- f. What is the knowledge and significance of cardinal directions (North, South, East, West)? At what age are these concepts acquired?
- g. What significance is associated with different directions or places (e.g., heaven is up, people are buried facing West)?

17 Natural Phenomena

- a. What beliefs and practices are associated with the sun, moon, comets, and stars?
- b. Who or what is responsible for rain, lightning, thunder, earthquakes, droughts, floods, and hurricanes?
- c. Are particular behavioral prescriptions or taboos associated with natural phenomena? What sanctions are there against individuals violating restrictions or prescriptions?
- d. How and to what extent does the group's beliefs about natural phenomena coincide with or depart from scientific theories?
- e. To what extent are traditional group beliefs still held by individuals within the community?

18 Pets and Other Animals

- ☛ a. Which animals are valued, and for what reasons? Which animals are considered appropriate as pets? Which are inappropriate and why?
- ☛ b. Are particular behavioral prescriptions or taboos associated with particular animals?
- c. Are any animals of religious significance? Of historical importance?
- d. What attitudes are held toward individuals or groups holding different beliefs and behaviors with respect to animals?
- ☛ e. Which animals may be kept in the classroom? Which may not, and why?



19 Art and Music

- a. What forms of art and music are most highly valued?
- b. What media and instruments are traditionally used?
- ☛ c. What forms of art and music are considered appropriate for children to perform or appreciate?
- ☛ d. Are there any behavioral prescriptions or taboos related to art and music (e.g., depiction of the human form; desecration of living things)?
- e. How and to what extent may approval or disapproval be expressed?

20 Expectations and Aspirations

- ☛ a. How is success defined?
- b. What beliefs are held regarding luck and fate?
- c. What significance does adherence to the traditional culture of the group have for the individuals's potential achievement?
- d. What significance does the acquisition of the majority culture and the English language have?
- e. Do parents expect and desire assimilation of children to the dominant culture as a result of education and the acquisition of English?
- ☛ f. Are the attitudes of community members and individuals the same as or different from those who speak for the community?

☛ **Questions to be answered in Activity 2, "Self-Analysis of Culture."**

Source:

Saville-Troike, M. (1978). *A Guide to Culture in the Classroom*. Rosslyn, VA: Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

