

# **TEACHING WITH CULTURE IN MIND: AN OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION TOOL**

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*Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center*

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## About the Centers

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The Region III Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Great Lakes Equity Center, an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act to provide equity-focused technical assistance to states, districts, and public schools focused on systemic improvements to ensure educational access, participation and positive outcomes for students who have been historically marginalized based on race, sex, national origin, or religion, at the request of public schools, districts, state departments of education, and other responsible governmental agencies.



## Introduction

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What is culture and what does it have to do with learning? For most teachers, gone are the days when we thought being culturally responsive meant celebrating holidays such as Día de los Muertos, or having a cultural heritage day at school. While these things may still occur, most teachers now understand that there is much more to culture than holidays, food, and dress. Despite having deeper understandings and desires to center culture in their practice, many teachers are left without tools to leverage.

This *Equity Tool* is designed for teachers that want opportunities to think about culture and what it has to do with teaching and learning. In this tool we briefly theorize what culture is, and what it has to do with teaching and learning. Next, we introduce a useful framework for thinking about cultural practices in schools. Finally, we offer a tool to facilitate the process of teaching with culture in mind.



## What is Culture?

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Culture, in a nutshell, is the process of being. As you read through this tool, you are engaging in culture. But, since this *culture-is-everything-and-everywhere* understanding is broad to the point of not being very useful, we will attempt to add some contours and edges to our definition. First, we want to disrupt the use of culture as a code to refer to Black and Brown students that we often hear in relation to schools (e.g., *I work in a culturally diverse school*). All schools are culturally diverse, but at times, culturally diverse is used as code for racially and/or ethnically diverse. *Everyone* has culture. Culture is reflected in everyday actions: the **processes** one takes to engage in actions, and the **things** we use to engage in actions. Culture is dualistic, both inherited while also continually constructed and reconstructed through social interactions (Nasir &



## What is Culture? (cont.)

Hand, 2006). For example, teaching is a cultural practice. You are passed down (i.e., inherit) understandings of pedagogy and curriculum through teacher education programs, but you also do a lot of improvisation and have agency within the classroom (i.e., construct new cultural practices).

Individuals are also multicultural (Erickson, 2011). People may identify with cultural groups due to race, ethnicity, language, dis/ability, political affiliation, geographic location, hobbies or interests, but even within those cultural groups there are vast within-group differences (Artiles et al., 2005). For example, two individuals who identify as Latinx may have very different linguistic practices, and even speak different languages or may come from different socioeconomic circumstances. Not only is there cultural heterogeneity within cultural groups, culture itself is dynamic and constantly changing. Nasir and Hand (2006) explain that culture is informed, adapted, modified, (re)created, shared, and experienced depending upon contexts. One example of this seen in racially diverse contexts, when White and Latino boys share African American English (Baker-Bell, 2020; Baker-Bell et al., 2017) as a shared (or appropriated) cultural practice (Paris, 2016).

In summary, culture includes artifacts (e.g., nouns—food, art, dress) but it is also the process of being (e.g., verbs—interacting, language use). We all have culture, we inherit culture, sometimes we borrow and share culture, we participate in cultural communities, and we also help create culture. So what does this have to do with teaching and learning? In order to explain this, we will use Artiles' (2003, 2015) Three Cultures framework to think about how culture shapes teaching and learning.



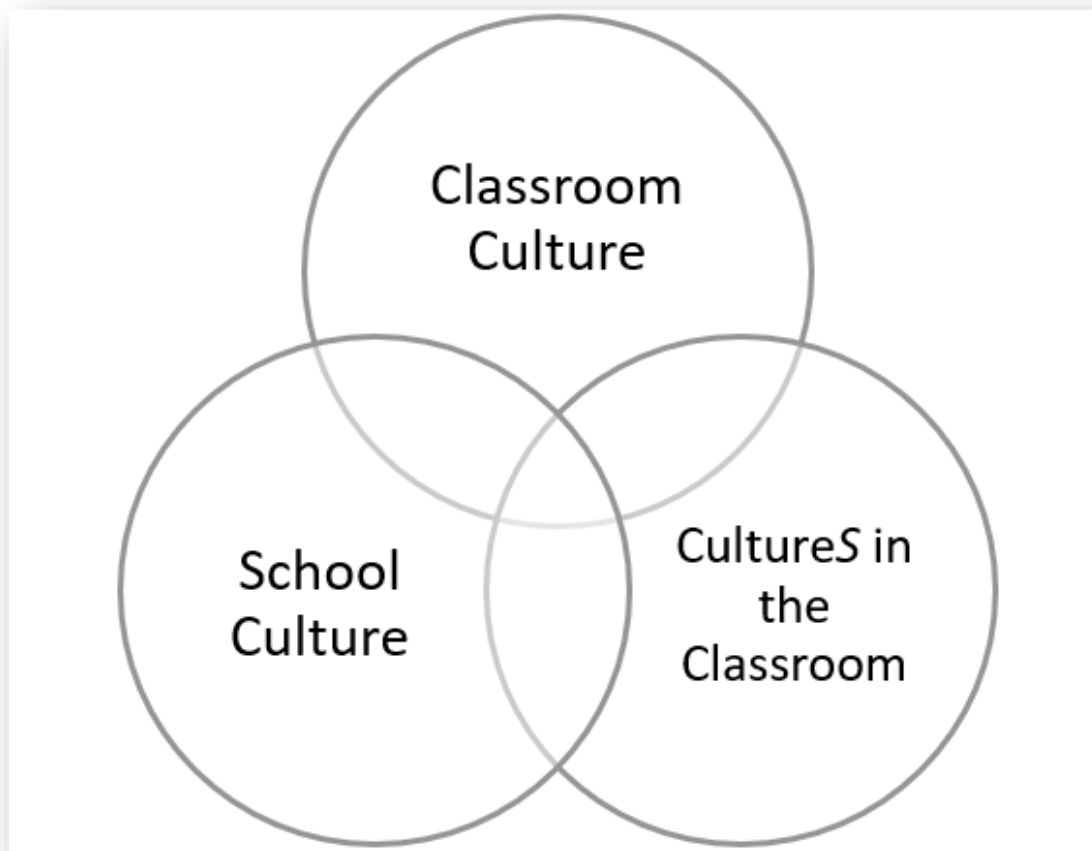
*[Graphic description: Group of arms of people in a circle, representing different ethnic/racial identities, each holding a piece of a jigsaw puzzle.]*

## Thinking About Culture in Teaching and Learning:



### A Guiding Framework

Though culture is a complicated and multidimensional concept, Artiles (2003, 2015), drawing from Gallego et al. (2001) has developed a useful *Three Cultures* framework for teachers and school leaders to operationalize culture in a tangible and useful concept, despite all of the complexities embedded in the concept (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1 Artiles' Three Cultures Framework*

The **school culture** refers to school as a community with its own cultural practices in the form of rules, traditions, artifacts—essentially the ways things are done institutionally. A brand-new novice teacher can enter a school having been prepared to teach in certain ways, yet quickly be swept into the school culture, abandoning practice they aimed to use. This can result in adjusting teaching practices to conform to the ways things are done at the school site—having a positive or negative outcome. If teachers are aware of the school culture, they can more purposefully tap into their own beliefs or theories about teaching and learning, and make some critical equity decisions around which practices they choose to adapt, accept, resist, and reject.

## Thinking About Culture in Teaching and Learning:



### A Guiding Framework (cont.)

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The *cultureS in the classroom* refers to each individual that enters the classroom and the cultural practices that make them who they are—hence the capital “S” for emphasis at the end of *culture*. This also, of course, includes the teacher(s). Individual cultures may be connected to racial, ethnic, generational, geographic location, affinity groups, and more. If we think about culture as an asset to learning then culture becomes something we seek to understand, engage with, and sustain.

Finally, the *classroom culture* is what teachers and students create together. Every classroom has a culture. Sometimes it results from thoughtful reflection and engagement in culture as a means to sustain it. At other times it is a bit more haphazard. We have all experienced what it feels like walking into different types of classroom communities. Students can feel this too. For some students the classroom is a place where they can bring their full repertoires of linguistic and cultural selves into the classroom and into learning processes. But this doesn’t happen in every classroom. Many students feel the need—or are forced—to leave important aspects of who they are outside of school, which can greatly constrain their participation and outcomes.



### Using this Equity Tool

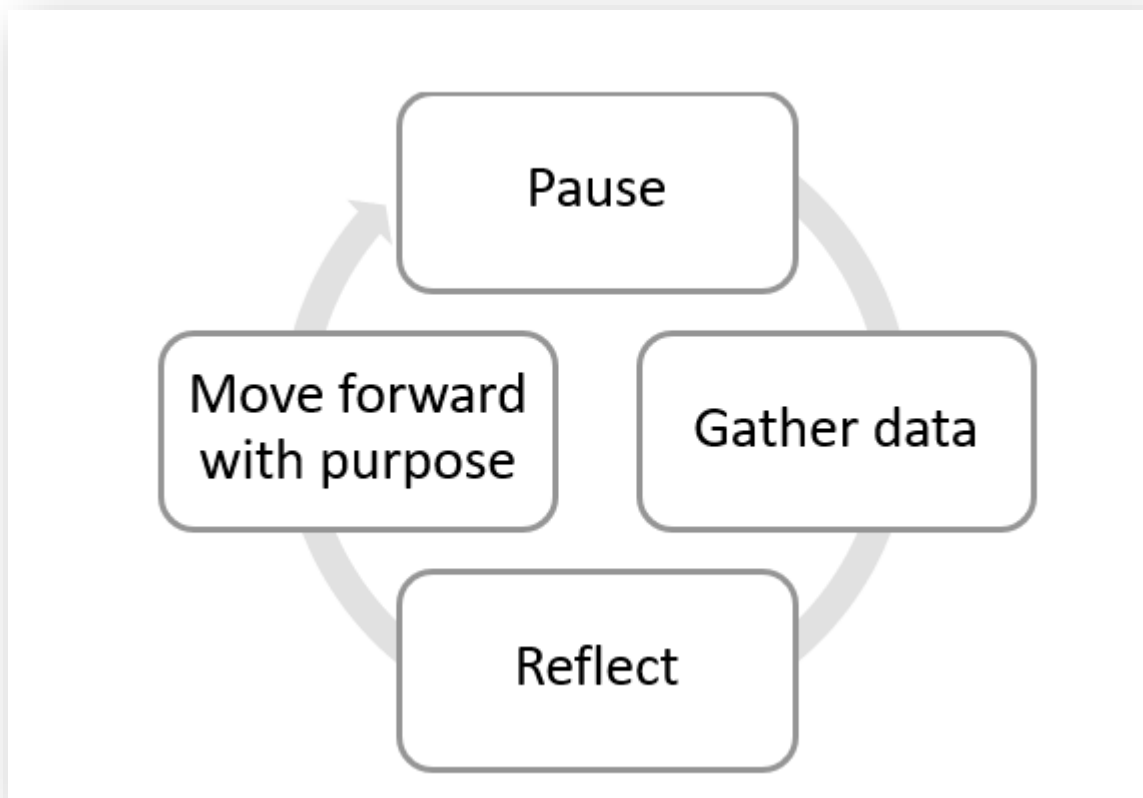
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This tool is designed for teacher candidates, teachers, and school leaders to be used flexibly individually, with small teams, or as a school effort. Whether you are using this tool individually or with colleagues, we encourage you to factor in time to reflect and discuss what you are learning along the way; individuals can do this through journaling or voice memos. While we imagine most educators using this tool will be doing so within the context of schools and classrooms, it is also applicable to other learning contexts such as field trips, environmental education programs, and exploratory learning.

This tool can be used in a variety of ways. It can be used as an individual teacher, with a small team, or school-wide over the course of a couple of weeks, a semester, or a school year. However it is used, it is helpful to think about the purpose of using this tool to pause, gather data, reflect, and move forward with purpose in teaching with culture in mind (see Figure 2). We also ask that you bring an assets-based focus to this work, focusing on what youth *can* do, what families *contribute*, and how this knowledge allows you to understand culture in a way that advances equity for your students.



## Using this Equity Tool (cont.)



*Figure 2 Teaching with Culture in Mind Process*

In order to gather data, we recommend that you set a reminder to collect data two to three times daily over a period of 1-2 weeks. Here are some recommendations for data collection:

- Collecting evidence for the **School Culture** (Table 1) will require you to decide on 3-5 different data collection moments, and you will need to take 5-10 minutes to jot down notes immediately following that moment. Maybe it's when you are arriving at the school in the morning (try to experience this like a newcomer), maybe it's at lunch in the staff lounge, at a grade level team meeting, at a staff meeting, at an assembly, an IEP meeting, at recess, or at the end of the day during student pick up.
- The **CultureS in the Classroom** data (Table 2) can be collected in and outside of the classroom, however, you will be getting to know individual students. We recommend that you hone your attention to 3-5 students. These might be students that seem to struggle with how the classroom and/or school is organized. This struggle may manifest in behavioral or academic issues. You might also choose



## Using this Equity Tool (cont.)

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students that are quiet and tend to fly under the radar, whom you would really like to know better as individuals and as learners. Your data collection will move beyond the walls of the classroom, so take your notebook with you. We recommend you take 2-3 minutes when you walk the students to lunch, recess, their elective classes, or before/after school to focus on close observation of one of your focal students.

- The **Classroom Culture** data (Table 3) can be collected by informing your students that when you pick up your special (orange/glittery) notebook or pen (some sort of visual cue for them), that you will need 3-5 minutes of uninterrupted time to take notes. During this time focus primarily on tangible observations such as what you *hear* and *see* (though you might add what it feels like if you have evidence). What are students saying?

# Table 1: The School Culture

<b>Artifacts</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<i>[Example]</i>	A school resource officer stands near the main entrance at the start of each day	This signals safety to some, but may signal discomfort to some students and or community members. How might students and families be interpreting the officer's presence?
<i>[Example]</i>	The school has invested money to have a professional development series on grit.	This might signal a school culture that considers poor educational outcomes as individual deficiencies (e.g., they don't have enough grit) rather than exploring reasons students might be disengaging.
What is the school mission/vision?		
What do you hear/see the leadership emphasize/prioritize most often? (Quinn, 2005)		
What you see when you approach the school with outsider eyes? (Delamont & Atkinson, 2020)		
What does it feel like to work at the school?		
What do you hear colleagues saying about students, families, and the local community? (Quinn, 2005)		
What languages are used for school displays and messages? (Fine et al., 2020)		
What messages are on display for families? Students?		
<i>[Other artifacts]</i>		
<i>[Other artifacts]</i>		





## The School Culture: Notes

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*Write a brief reflection describing the school culture:*

## Table 2: The CultureS in the Classroom

<b>Artifacts</b>	<b>Student A – Evidence &amp; Notes</b>	<b>Student B – Evidence &amp; Notes</b>	<b>Student C – Evidence &amp; Notes</b>
<i>[Example]</i>	Sebastian is always wearing shirts that reflect sports teams. Even if I don't know much about sports, maybe I can ask him more about it as an entry point to strengthening our relationship.	Francis, her twin sister, and another friend seem to be working on putting together a dance at recess. Maybe I can find books about famous dancers or dancers of color that would interest her.	John has been talking about the upcoming rodeo that his family is attending. Maybe I could partner with his family to teach some standards through a rodeo theme.
<i>[Example]</i>			
What does the student try structuring their learning (certain supplies, people, structures)? (Lave & Wenger, 1991)			
What does the student's participation look like? (Lave & Wenger, 1991)			
What does the student talk about? What does that reveal about who they are? (Quinn, 2005)			
When are they smiling/laughing/frustrated/shining the most/least?			
Are students able to talk using the language of their household without being "corrected" or feeling embarrassed? (MacSwann, 2020)			

## Table 2: The CultureS in the Classroom (cont.)

<b>Artifacts</b>	<b>Student A – Evidence &amp; Notes</b>	<b>Student B – Evidence &amp; Notes</b>	<b>Student C – Evidence &amp; Notes</b>
Are students' ways of participating seen as differences or deficits? (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003)			
[Other artifacts]			
[Other artifacts]			



### The CultureS in the Classroom: Notes

*Write a brief reflection describing the school culture:*

# Table 3: The Classroom Culture

Artifacts	Evidence	Notes
<i>[Example]</i>	Jason and Yareli are often pulled to the back table to work with the paraprofessional	How does this impact their experiences and senses of belonging in class? What does it signal to the other students as well? How inclusive is this daily practice?
<i>[Example]</i>	Students are working on narratives from writing prompts	Am I supporting their written expression in ways that taps into the cultural and linguistic richness of their households? How could I do that?
What do you see in the physical environment? What does it communicate about who belongs?		
What do you see students doing? (Lave & Wenger, 1991)		
What do you see on the walls? Who is represented visually?		
What do you hear students talking about? (Quinn, 2005)		
What racial, ethnic, linguistic, and/or different groups do the instructional materials reflect?		
What stereotypes or overgeneralizations (Latinos are ...) are present? (Rogers et al., 2020)		
What beliefs are evident about what counts as “good” or “smart”? (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011)		

## Table 3: The Classroom Culture (cont.)

Artifacts	Evidence	Notes
Which students are physically not present in the classroom? Why? (Fitch, 2003; Snyder, 2006)		
[Other artifacts]		
[Other artifacts]		



### The Classroom Culture: Notes

*Write a brief reflection describing the classroom culture:*

# Putting Observation into Action

<b>School Culture</b>	What is one aspect of the school culture that you can further promote because you have seen that it advances equity for students?	What is one aspect of the school culture that may be hindering school for some students? As a teacher, is this a practice you can adapt, resist, or change? If you can't, who can? What would be the next steps to address this aspect of the school culture?
<b>CultureS in the Classroom</b>	What are you learning about your focal students that you didn't know before?	How might your new understandings of your students be used to build a relationship or guide curriculum?
<b>Classroom Culture</b>	What have you learned from observing your classroom culture?	How can the cultureS in the classroom inform your instruction, how you organize learning, or your curriculum? How can students' cultures be more centered in teaching and learning non-essentializing ways?



## About the Authors

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**Taucia González, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at the University of Arizona. She earned her Ph.D. at Arizona State University. Her research addresses issues of equity and inclusion for dual language learners with and without learning disabilities (LD). She is currently examining how Latinx and Hmong bilingual youth with and without LD use youth participatory action research to engage in critical literacies and to advance equity and inclusion in their schools and communities. Dr. González teaches undergraduate and graduate courses that prepare future practitioners and researchers to create more inclusive educational systems across intersecting markers of difference.

**Michelle Silvers** is a 3<sup>rd</sup> year Doctoral student in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies at the University of Arizona. She received her undergraduate and Masters' degrees at St. Louis University. Michelle worked for St. Louis Public Schools as an Early Childhood Special Education Teacher for 6 years prior to beginning her Ph.D. program. Michelle's dissertation research investigates the relationship between the fields of Special Education and Environmental Education (EE). Specifically, her research explores methods for supporting the advancements of increased accessibility, program inclusion, and equitable practices within EE educational opportunities for historically marginalized communities.



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# IMPACT:

*Educate, Engage, Empower — For Equity*



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