


# Creating Responsive Gifted

## Understanding

*Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity are . . . basic survival skills for almost everyone.*

—Craig Storti (1999, p. 1)

 For decades, we have studied and read about the poor achievement of culturally diverse students (specifically, African American, Hispanic American, and Native American students) in schools and their poor performance on achievement and intelligence tests. We share the sense of urgency among educators that we must find ways to better understand factors that contribute to poor or low achievement among this segment of our student population. In addition to addressing issues of low performance and underachievement by culturally diverse students, we share the agenda of educators who have sought to increase the recruitment and retention of these diverse students in gifted education programs.

Whatever view we hold of culturally diverse populations, we find ourselves in increased contact with people who are culturally different from us. Statistics on teacher and student demographics shed light on this point. Few teachers are culturally diverse. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2000), during the 1999–2000 school year, 84.3% of teachers were White; conversely, diverse students comprised some 30% of the U.S. population in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Further, while the percentage of culturally diverse students is expected to increase significantly, the percentage of minorities choosing teaching as a profession is not expected to increase. The implications of increased student diversity (world diversity) are profound, suggesting that teachers must become more familiar with the realities of culture and its impact on teaching and learning.

In the following pages, we present definitions of culture and scenarios of possible student-teacher differences, along with a model or framework for understanding cultural differences. Our goal in sharing this information is that educators will be more aware of and sensitive to the implications of diversity for themselves and their students.

### Definitions of Culture

The term *culture* originates from the Latin word *cultura* or *culturus* as in *agri cultura*, the cultivation of soil. Later, other meanings were attached to the word. From its root meaning of an activity, culture became transformed into a condition, a state of being cultivated.

Like the terms *intelligence* and *gifted*, there are many definitions of culture. The question “What is culture?” has intrigued scholars in various disciplines for decades. Culture is an enigma in that it contains both concrete and

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## is the First Step

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abstract components. Ting-Toomey (1999) defined culture as a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns or traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and meanings that are shared in varying degrees by interacting members of a community (p. 10). D'Andrade (1984) offered a similar definition:

[Culture is] learned systems of meaning, communicated by means of natural language and other symbol systems . . . and capable of creating cultural entities and particular senses of reality. Through these systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities. . . . Cultural meaning systems can be treated as a very large diverse pool of knowledge, or partially shared cluster of norms, or as intersubjectively shared, symbolically created realities. (p. 116)

Both of these definitions capture three points worth noting. First, culture refers to a diverse pool of knowledge, shared realities, and clustered norms that constitute the learned systems of meanings in a particular society. Second, these learned systems of meanings are shared and transmitted through daily interactions among members of the cultural

group and from one generation to the next. Third, culture facilitates the capacity of members to survive and adapt to their external environment (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 9).

Hofstede (1991) is credited with coining the phrase "The body is the hardware and culture is the software." Macintosh and PC computers serve the same functions, but do so in different ways due to different operating system software. So it is with different groups. For example, eating and sleeping are universal, but different groups eat different foods (pork vs. beef vs. no meat) for different reasons (to celebrate, because of traditions, because of folklore) and in different ways (fork vs. chopsticks, utensils vs. hands). Further, different groups may have traditions relative to the foods selected and their significance (e.g., on New Year's Day, some groups eat something green to represent money, pork for health, and black-eyed peas for luck, to name a few traditions; other groups drench themselves in water to cleanse themselves, wear new clothes, or sing certain carols to start the new year afresh).

Conceptually, many people also describe culture using an iceberg analogy. Above the surface of the iceberg are cultural artifacts—music, fashion, literature, and art, for example. When we think of African Americans and music,

jazz may come to mind; likewise, when considering clothes, the kimono represents the traditional clothing of Japan. However, culture is more than just artifacts. Differences become more meaningful as one goes beneath the surface. What is beneath the surface is termed "invisible culture" or "deep culture," and it includes cultural traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and symbolic meanings. Deep culture, using the computer analogy, is the software.

*Culturally shared traditions* include myths, legends, ceremonies, and rituals (e.g., celebrating holidays in certain ways) that are passed on, verbally and nonverbally, from one generation to another. *Culturally shared beliefs* refer to a set of fundamental assumptions that people hold dearly and without question. These beliefs can revolve around questions regarding the concept of time, the meaning of life and death, and the meaning of space. They serve as the explanatory logic for behavior and as the desired end goals to be achieved. *Cultural values* refer to a set of priorities that guides such notions as good and bad, fair and unfair, and right and wrong. *Cultural norms* refer to the collective expectations of what constitutes proper or improper behavior in a given situation. Norms guide the scripts groups follow in a particular situation (e.g., how we greet someone, how we

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introduce ourselves, how we eat, how we show gratitude, how we discipline children, how we treat the elderly, etc.).

Scholars contend, and we agree, that our ignorance of different traditions, beliefs, values, and norms can produce unintentional clashes between people or groups who differ on these points. As teachers, we may not even notice that we have violated a child's cultural values, norms, or traditions in a particular situation. The concept of two icebergs colliding illustrates this point in which our values and norms (deep culture) may conflict with those of our students (and their families); in other words, the clashes between cultures tend to occur at the deep culture level. For example, a teacher may celebrate Christmas and offer a gift to a child who does not celebrate Christmas; a child may offer beef to a teacher who holds cows as sacred; a teacher may consider prearranged marriages to be "wrong" and share this with a child whose family believes in this practice; a teacher may give the okay sign with a child who recognizes this sign as an insult; a teacher may go to a funeral wearing black when wearing black is unacceptable in the group's culture.

### Sample Scenarios: Cultural Clashes in Action

#### *Ms. Jenkins and Julio*

Ms. Jenkins teaches in a 5th-grade self-contained class for gifted students. She believes that gifted students are independent learners and encourages all of her students to work independently. She often uses independent learning contracts with students as one means of compacting for her students. After two grading periods, she has noticed a pattern: Julio dislikes working alone, and he seldom takes initiative on his independent projects. When questioned, Julio

states that he prefers working in groups and likes helping classmates. He recently stated, "I hate working by myself. I help my brother and sisters at home, and I like helping my friends in school. Why can't we work together?"

#### *Mr. Markstrom and Patrice*

Mr. Markstrom teaches advanced courses for high school students identified as gifted in English. He and Patrice have had two confrontations because she failed to turn in assignments on the dates required. Mr. Markstrom believes that gifted students at this age should be responsible and manage their time wisely. Patrice's style is different from his and most of her classmates. Patrice loves writing and poetry, but complains that Mr. Markstrom is unfair. She prefers completing assignments in small steps in order to get ongoing feedback and to keep focused. She has learned that major assignments lose interest if teacher feedback isn't frequent. She has failed two assignments because they were late. On both assignments, she lost interest and did not complete them.

#### *Ms. Bowling and Lee*

Ms. Bowling teaches students in a pull-out program once per week. She complains that she does not have much time to spend with students and that a few are not doing well in her class. She is especially concerned about Lee. He does not ask for help, and when asked if he understands the lesson, he always nods his head "yes." On the last assignment, Lee received a D, which surprised Ms. Bowling. Lee said that he enjoyed the assignment on butterflies and understood the lesson. Why won't Lee ask for help? Why won't he admit to being confused?

Below, we present a model of culture that sheds some light on the cultural

differences between the students and teachers in the above scenarios. How might the students and teachers differ in terms of individual-collective orientation, personal-social responsibility, concept of time, or style of communication, for example?

### A Model of Culture: A Discussion of Sample Dimensions

*What's special about people from other cultures is not simply that they are different from you, but the degree to which they are different.*

—Craig Storti (1999, p. 2)

In our work on cultural differences, we have found the works of Storti (1999), Ting-Toomey (1999), Hofstede (1991), Hofstede and Bond (1984), Hall (1981) and Hall and Hall (1987) to be particularly helpful. They have presented research-based models and theories of culture that offer much guidance to educators in understanding differences among groups of students.

Because space limitations do not permit a detailed discussion of each model, we present a synthesis of these models, with a major focus on the interpretations of Hofstede's extensive research in a practical guide by Storti (1999). In this section, five dimensions of culture are presented: (1) concept of self, (2) personal vs. social responsibility, (3) concept of time, (4) locus of control, and (5) styles of communication. These dimensions, all having at least two extreme poles, are not to be interpreted as dichotomous; rather, they are continuous. For the sake of space and clarity, the discussion and examples below focus on the extreme or opposite orientations of each dimension. Behaviors can fall anywhere along the continuum, with some groups falling along the center. (For an extensive discus-

sion of research that summarizes where specific cultural groups fall along the continuum, see Hofstede, 1991; Storti, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

### ***Concept of Self***

People from different cultures have different notions of personal identity, spanning a wide range of alternatives from collectivism at one end to individualism at the other.

*Individualism.* At this end of the continuum, the smallest unit of survival is the individual. Members of individualistic groups identify primarily with the self, and the needs of the individual are satisfied before those of the group. Independence and self-reliance are emphasized and valued, and personal freedom is highly desired.

*Collectivism.* At this end, the primary group, often the immediate family, is the smallest unit of survival. One's identity is largely a function of one's membership and role in a group. The survival and success of the group ensures the well-being of the individual so that, in considering the needs and feelings of others, one protects oneself. Harmony and interdependence of group members are stressed and valued.

### ***Personal vs. Social Responsibility***

People in every culture wrestle with how to balance personal responsibilities to family, close friends, and colleagues with responsibility to self and the larger society.

*Universalism.* At this end of the pole, people believe there are certain absolutes that apply, regardless of the circumstances or situation. What is right is always right, and rules should be applied to everyone in similar situations. Being fair means treating everyone alike and not making exceptions, even for family and friends. Personal feelings are laid

aside in order to be objective in looking at situations.

*Particularism.* At this end, how one behaves in a given situation depends on the circumstances. What is right in one situation may not be right in another. Family and friends are treated the best, and the rest of the world can take care of itself. There is the belief that there will always be exceptions made for certain groups, and to be fair is to treat everyone as unique. Personal feelings should not be laid aside, but rather relied upon.

### ***Concept of Time***

Another way that cultures differ is how people conceive of and handle time and how their concept of time affects their interactions with each other.

*Monochronic.* At this end, time is viewed as a commodity; it is quantifiable and there is a limited amount of it. Therefore, people consider it essential to use time wisely and not waste it. A premium is placed on efficiency, which means doing one thing at a time and doing it well, and interruptions are considered a nuisance.

*Polychronic.* Time is limitless and not quantifiable when one's orientation is polychronic. There is always more time, and people are never too busy. Time is adjusted to suit the needs of people. Thus, schedules and deadlines often get changed, and people may have to do more than one thing at a time—a sign of being efficient, maximizing time, and using time wisely. It is not necessary to finish one thing before moving on to something else, and interruptions are not bothersome.

### ***Locus of Control***

Cultural groups differ in the degree to which they believe that human beings can control or manipulate their own destiny.

*Internal.* The locus of control here is primarily internal, or within the individual. People at this end of the continuum believe there are few givens in life and that few things or circumstances cannot be changed and thus have to be accepted as they are. There is the belief that there are no limits to what you can do or become if you set your mind to it and take the steps necessary to achieve goals. ("You make your own luck." "Where there's a will, there's a way.")

*External.* This locus of control is largely external, outside of the individual. Some things in life are predetermined. Individuals believe there are limits beyond which one cannot go, and there are certain givens that cannot be changed and must be accepted. One's success is a combination of effort and good fortune. Life is part of what happens to you, which represents a more fatalistic orientation. ("That's the way things are." "Unhappiness is a part of life.")

### ***Styles of Communication***

Communication is the sending and receiving of messages. What people say, how they say it, and what they don't say are all deeply affected by culture (Storti, 1999). The differences between two poles of directness and indirectness account for more cross-cultural misunderstandings than any other single factor (Storti, p. 91). In addition to directness, communication styles fall along a continuum of high and low context.

*Indirect.* Groups in the indirect cultures tend to infer, suggest, and imply, rather than say things directly. There is a tendency toward indirectness and away from confrontation. In-group members have an intuitive understanding of each other. (People tell you what they think you want to hear; you may have to read between the lines to grasp what someone is saying.)

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*High-context.* This intuitive understanding is known as *context*. In high-context cultures, words are not needed or necessary to convey messages; nonverbal communication is often enough. (What you do is just as important, or more important, than what you say.) People are sensitive to the setting or environment and are watchful of the behaviors of others; thus, “actions speak louder than words.” Personal space, touching, eye contact, affect, tone when speaking, and other nonverbal cues receive much attention because they help to communicate messages.

*Direct.* Direct cultures tend to be more individualistic. People need to spell things out, that is, they need to be explicit in communicating their desires, likes, dislikes, and feelings. People say exactly what they mean, rather than suggesting or implying it. Thus, the spoken word carries most of the meaning. (“Yes” means “yes,” “no” means “no.” You should not read anything into what is not said or done.)

*Low-context.* In low-context culture, the primary mode of communication is verbal. Contextual cues, unique situations, and special circumstances are less likely to be noticed because of the reliance on what is said, rather than what is done.

### Culture: Implications for Teachers

*The less we know about each other,  
the more we make up.*

A persistent challenge facing educators is that of increasing student diversity in educational settings. In addition to rectifying assessment issues, policies, and procedures, for more than 2 decades, researchers (i.e., Mary Frasier and Alexinia Baldwin) have proposed that educators explore additional explanations for the underrepresentation of

diverse students in institutions of higher education. One explanation worth exploring is the cultural mismatch that may exist between educators (the majority of whom are White) and diverse students. As we noted earlier, the U.S. population is more diverse than ever before, and the percentage of culturally diverse students is increasing rapidly (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Differences between students and educators can result in cultural mismatch, as we illustrated in the scenarios above. Teachers and students can hold different values regarding group vs. independent work (e.g., Ms. Jenkins and Julio), different conceptions of time (e.g., Mr. Markstrom and Patrice), and different styles of communication (e.g., Ms. Bowling and Lee). However, educators who understand culture, are familiar with the functions of culture, and are aware of the dimensions of culture are less likely to experience such conflicts. Ideally, such knowledge and understanding will positively impact perceptions of and relationships with culturally diverse students. We encourage teachers to engage in ongoing self-examination and to consider the following questions:

1. What is “culture” and how does it affect teaching and learning, as well as relationships with diverse students?
2. What are the cultural beliefs, values, norms, and traditions of the diverse students represented in my class and my school district?
3. How do I feel about working with students who are different from me?
4. What stereotypes, biases, and fears do I hold about minority students? How might these stereotypes hinder me from referring culturally diverse students for gifted education screening and placement?
5. What aspects of my teaching and classroom practices (for example,

my instructional style or reward system) hinder minority students’ achievement, motivation, and interests?

6. How are the expectations I hold of diverse children different from those of White children? (For example, are minority students given challenging assignments? Do I refer them less often for gifted education screening and assessment?)
7. How much time and effort am I willing to commit to learning about the culture of my diverse students? Similarly, how much time and effort (in my curriculum, instruction, and assessments) am I willing to devote to teaching about diverse groups and multicultural education?
8. How can I use my students’ cultural backgrounds as scaffolding for teaching and learning, thereby avoiding the adoption and practice of a colorblind philosophy?
9. How can I make learning culturally meaningful and relevant for all my students? What are my diverse students interested in learning? That is, what topics and issues engage them? What teaching strategies are culturally congruent and responsive?

Finally, in addition to self-reflection, we believe that educators might find it helpful to consider some potential outcomes of cultural awareness, knowledge, and understanding. Several possibilities are described below.

- *Educators may more actively seek to increase the representation of diverse students in gifted education classrooms and services.* This would entail studying student participation in gifted education and the myriad factors that affect their representation and then developing strategies to decrease such barriers. Educators need to ask, “How do we get more diverse students in our gifted programs and

how can we keep them once placed?” “How does my teaching style (grouping practices, feedback and directions, focus on competition, etc.) affect students’ interest, engagement, and sense of belonging?”

- *Educators may work more diligently and contentiously to provide a learning environment that is culturally responsive.* Such a classroom or school is characterized by positive student-teacher relationships, multicultural curricula, and culturally compatible instructional styles.
- *Educators may ensure that culture is reflected in the curriculum, including theories, research, and readings.* Every attempt will be made to prepare future educators for the realities of living and teaching in a diverse society. Thus, curricula (e.g., readings, activities, and other materials) will be mindful of addressing issues of diversity.
- *Educators’ commitment to equity may increase.* Educators may, accordingly, take concerted efforts to ensure that assessments, policies, and procedures, as well as staff, do not discriminate against diverse gifted students.
- *Educators and students may have more positive and productive relationships.* As we noted earlier, when people are from different cultures, they may not have positive encounters or interactions. When cultural differences are understood, educators and students will have relationships characterized by respect, acceptance, and cooperation.
- *Educators may be more confident in dealing with race-related issues and incidents in school settings.* Some studies (e.g., Harmon, 2002) indicate that educators are uncomfortable and ill-prepared to deal with social injustices. Educators who feel culturally competent may feel better

prepared to negotiate group differences and cultural conflicts.

- *Educators, particularly administrators, may expand their efforts to increase the diversity of their staff.* The value of a diverse school staff cannot be underestimated. Like others, diverse staff can serve as mentors, role models, and cultural translators for students—not just culturally diverse students, but all students.
- *Educators, particularly administrators, may increase their efforts to provide staff with multicultural training and preparation.* Professional development, for example, will be devoted to topics surrounding culture and diversity.

## Summary

*Each of us is like everybody else in some ways (universal behaviors), like the people in our culture (cultural behaviors), and like no one else at all (personal behaviors).*  
—Craig Storti (1999, p. 16)

Some educators are uncomfortable when labels are used to characterize groups or behaviors. Some of us have been conditioned or encouraged to be “culture blind,” as might be connoted by the statement “I don’t see differences. All people are the same.” However, we have read hundreds of studies where group differences along these cultural dimensions have been found, including concept of time, concept of self, locus of control, and so forth. These patterns help us to make generalizations about children from different cultural groups, although our generalizations must be flexible. We must never lose sight of children as *individuals* who are members of a group. Nonetheless, we must also understand that acknowledging group differences is acknowledging cultural differences. For the sake of our nation’s

increasingly diverse student population, educators must seek to become culturally aware, knowledgeable, and competent. [GCT](#)

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