

## CHAPTER 9

### *Culture and Education*

By this point in the volume, the need for dialogue in public spaces may seem obvious. But having this conversation occur in shared, respectful, and productive ways is not easy in diverse, pluralistic settings. It may be even more difficult in those settings where differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, and language are awarded pride of place or position. In this chapter Sonia Nieto advances the conversation about the educational implications of some of the ideas we grappled with in Part Two: if democracy involves people creating common and uncommon worlds in order to define themselves and live together, what are some of the horizons of significance available for this kind of education? Nieto captures the challenge as how to live together and thrive amidst what seems inevitable interracial misunderstanding and conflict explained by differences in ethnicity, color, language—often referred to as cultural differences.

Nieto reminds us that culture is not a given, but a human creation, dependent on particular geographical, temporal, and sociopolitical contexts and therefore vulnerable to issues of power and control. She unpacks some of the features that follow from this understanding—culture as dynamic, multifaceted, embedded in context, influenced by social, economic, and political factors, socially constructed, learned, and dialectical—often drawing on her personal experience to illustrate her points.

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*Culture and Education*<sup>1</sup>

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[We] are not simply bearers of cultures, languages, and histories, with a duty to reproduce them. We are the products of linguistic-cultural circumstances, actors with a capacity to resynthesize what we have been socialized into and to solve new and emerging problems of existence. We are not duty-bound to conserve ancestral characteristics which are not structurally useful. We are both socially determined and creators of human futures.<sup>2</sup>

The term *culture* can be problematic because it can mean different things to different people in different contexts. For instance, culture is sometimes used as if it pertained only to those with formal education and privileged social status, implying activities such as attending the opera once a month. In the present day, it generally is acknowledged that culture is not just what an elite group of people may do in their spare time, but there are still various and conflicting ideas of what it actually means in everyday life. Among many Whites in the United States, for instance, culture is thought to be held exclusively by those different from them. As a consequence, it is not unusual to hear people, especially those of European background, lament that they do not “have” culture in the same way that African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, or other groups visibly different from the dominant group “have” it. In other cases, culture is used interchangeably with ethnicity as if both simply were passed down constant and eternal from one generation to the next. At still other times, culture can mean the traditions one celebrates within the family, in which case it is reduced to foods, dances, and holidays. Less often is culture thought of as the values one holds dear, or the way one looks at and interacts with the world.

In this chapter, I will explore the complex relationship between culture and education. First, I will define culture through a number of interrelated characteristics that make it clear that culture is more than artifacts, rituals, and traditions. In fact, it is becoming increasingly indisputable that culture and cultural differences, including language, play a discernible role in power relationships and how children identify

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with their schools. I will consider how culture and language influence the quest for culturally democratic learning environments by looking at some of the cultural discontinuities between school and home expectations of students from various backgrounds.

### Defining Culture

Previously, I have defined culture as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion.” As is clear from this definition, culture is complex and intricate; it includes content or product (the *what* of culture), process (*how* it is created and transformed), and the agents of culture (*who* is responsible for creating and changing it). Culture cannot be reduced to holidays, foods, or dances, although these are, of course, elements of culture. This definition also makes it clear that everyone has a culture, because all people participate in the world through social and political relationships informed by history as well as by race, ethnicity, language, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other circumstances related to identity and experience.

At least two issues need to be kept in mind if culture is to have any meaning for educators who want to understand how it is related to learning. First, culture needs to be thought of in an unsentimental way. Otherwise, it is sometimes little more than a yearning for a past that never existed, or an idealized, sanitized version of what exists in reality. The result may be an unadulterated, essentialized “culture on a pedestal” that bears little resemblance to the messy and contradictory culture of real life. The problem of viewing some aspects of culture as indispensable attributes that must be shared by all people within a particular group springs from a romanticized and uncritical understanding of culture. For instance, I have heard the argument that poetry cannot be considered Puerto Rican unless it is written in Spanish. Thus, the Spanish language becomes a *constitutive characteristic* of being Puerto Rican. While there is no argument that speaking Spanish is an important and even major aspect of Puerto Rican culture, it is by no means a prerequisite for Puerto Ricanness. There are hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans who identify themselves first and foremost as Puerto Rican but who do not speak Spanish due to the historical conditions in which they have lived.

The second consideration to be kept in mind is that the sociopolitical context of culture needs to be acknowledged. That is, cultures do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are situated in particular historical, social, political, and economic conditions, and therefore they are influenced by issues of power. The claim of Whites that they do not have a culture is a case in point. Whites frequently do not experience their culture *as a culture* because as the officially sanctioned and high-status culture, it “just is.” Therefore, when Whites say that they do not “have” a culture, they in effect relegate culture to no more than quaint customs or colorful traditions. This stance is disingenuous at best because it fails to observe that Whites as a group participate disproportionately in a *culture of power*<sup>3</sup> based simply on their race; access to this power is not available to those who are not White (nor, it should be stressed, is it shared equally among Whites).

In what follows, I describe a set of attributes that are key to understanding how culture is implicated in learning, and how these notions of culture complicate a facile approach to multicultural education. These characteristics are complementary and interconnected, so much so that it is difficult to disentangle them from one another. I do so here only for purposes of clarity, not to suggest that they exist in isolation. The characteristics I review here include culture as *dynamic; multifaceted; embedded in context; influenced by social, economic, and political factors; created and socially constructed; learned; and dialectical.*

### *Culture Is Dynamic*

Culture does not exist outside of human beings. This means that cultures are not static relics, stagnant behaviors, or sterile values. Steven Arvizu’s wonderful description of culture as a *verb* rather than a *noun* captures this essence of culture beautifully.<sup>4</sup> That is, culture is dynamic, active, changing, always on the move. Even within their native contexts, cultures are always changing as a result of political, social, and other modifications in the immediate environment. When people with different backgrounds come in contact with one another, such change is to be expected even more.

But cultural change is not simply a one-way process. The popular conception of cultural change is that it is much like a transfusion: As one culture is emptied out of a person, a new one is poured in. In this conception, each culture is inert and permanent and human beings do not influence the process to any significant degree. But the reality is that cultures are *always* hybrids, and people select and reject particular elements of culture as suitable or not for particular contexts. Cultural

values are not gotten rid of as easily as blood. Nor are new ones simply infused. For instance, there is ample ethnographic evidence that in spite of the enormous political, social, and economic changes among Native Americans in the past one hundred years, their child-rearing practices, although they have, of course, changed, have also remained quite stable.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, among immigrants to the United States, there are indications that ethnic values and identities are preserved to some extent for many generations.<sup>6</sup>

In some ways, we can think of culture as having both *surface* and *deep structure*, to borrow a concept from linguistics (Chomsky 1965).<sup>7</sup> For instance, in previous research,<sup>8</sup> when interviewing young people of diverse backgrounds I was initially surprised by the seeming homogeneity of the youth culture they manifested. That is, regardless of racial, ethnic, or linguistic background, or time in the United States—but usually intimately connected to a shared urban culture and social class—the youths often expressed strikingly similar tastes in music, food, clothes, television viewing habits, and so on. Yet, when I probed more deeply, I also found evidence of deeply held values from their ethnic heritage. For example, Marisol, a young Puerto Rican woman, loved hip hop and rap music, pizza, and lasagna. She never mentioned Puerto Rican food, and Puerto Rican music to her was just the “old-fashioned” and boring music her parents listened to. Nonetheless, in her everyday interactions with her parents and siblings, and in the answers she gave to my interview questions, she reflected deep aspects of Puerto Rican culture such as respect for elders, a profound kinship with and devotion to family, and a desire to uphold important traditions such as staying with family rather than going out with friends on important holidays. Just as there is no such thing as a “pure race,” there is likewise no “pure culture.” That is, cultures influence *one another*, and even minority cultures and those with less status have an impact on majority cultures, sometimes in dramatic ways. Rap music, with its accompanying style of talk, dress, and movement, is a notable example among young people of diverse backgrounds in urban areas.

In terms of schooling, the problem with thinking of culture as static is that curriculum and pedagogy are designed as if culture indeed were unchanging. This issue was well expressed by Frederick Erickson, who has argued that when culture is thought of as fixed, or simply as an aesthetic, the educational practice derived from it supports the status quo. This is because reality itself can then be perceived as inherently static. Erickson goes on to say, “When we think of culture and

social identity in more fluid terms, however, we can find a foundation for educational practice that is transformative.”<sup>9</sup> The view of culture as dynamic rather than fixed is unquestionably more befitting a conception of multicultural education as liberating pedagogy based on social justice.

### *Culture Is Multifaceted*

Closely related to the dynamic nature of culture is that cultural identifications are multiple, eclectic, mixed, and heterogeneous. This means, for one thing, that culture cannot be conflated with just ethnicity or race. As an example, Mexican or Mexican-American culture may be familiar to us because it concerns an identity based primarily on ethnicity, the best-known site of culture. But one also can speak, for instance, of a lesbian culture because, as a group, lesbians share a history and identity, along with particular social and political relationships. Thus, one can be culturally Mexican American and a lesbian at the same time. But having multiple cultural identities does not imply that each identity is claimed or manifested equally. A wealthy light-skinned Mexican-American lesbian and a working-class Mexican-American lesbian may have little in common other than their ethnic heritage and sexual orientation and the oppression that comes along with these identities. People create their identities in different ways: While one Mexican-American lesbian may identify herself first and foremost ethnically, another may identify herself as a lesbian, a third as both, and a fourth primarily as a member of the working class.

Because culture is not simply ethnicity, even among specific cultural groups there are many and often conflicting cultural identities. Skin color, time of arrival in the United States, language use, level of education, family dynamics, place of residence, and many other differences within groups may influence how one interprets or “lives” a culture. Further, the intersection of ethnicity and social class, or what Milton Gordon (1964) termed *ethclass*,<sup>10</sup> is a key factor in defining culture. For instance, as a young girl I was surprised to meet middle-class Puerto Ricans when I spent a summer in Puerto Rico. Given my experiences until that time as a member of an urban U.S. Puerto Rican family that could best be described as working poor, I had thought that only Whites could be middle-class. Although I spoke Spanish fairly well and thought of myself as Puerto Rican, I discovered that in some ways I had more in common with my African-American peers in my Brooklyn neighborhood and school than with the middle-class Puerto Ricans I met on the island. I began to see that my Puerto Rican culture was in fact quite

different from Puerto Rican culture as defined on the island. Years later I understood that these differences had to do with location, experience, and social class.

Another important aspect of identity has to do with how interactions with people of other cultural groups may influence culture and identity. This is certainly the case in urban areas, where the identities of young people of many diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds defy easy categorization. Shirley Brice Heath has suggested that young urban dwellers in the United States are creating new cultural categories based on shared experiences because, according to her, these young people “think of themselves as a *who* and not a *what*.”<sup>11</sup> They engage not only in border crossings, but also in what Heath called “crossings and criss-crossings.”<sup>12</sup> Given the growing presence of people in the United States who claim a biracial, multiracial, or multiethnic identity, ethnicity alone is unable to fully define culture. The multiple identities of youths have important and far-reaching implications for the development and implementation of multicultural education: It is evident that simplistic and bounded conceptions that focus just on specific racial or ethnic groupings fail to capture the realities of many urban youths who live with complicated and heterogeneous realities.

#### *Culture Is Embedded in Context*

To say that culture is embedded in context is to say that it invariably is influenced by the environment in which it exists. The culture of Japanese students in Japan is of necessity different from that of Japanese immigrant students in the United States or of Japanese immigrant students in Peru or Brazil. When culture is presented to students as if it were context-free, they learn to think of it as quite separate from the lives that people lead every day. It is what Frederick Erickson (1990) has described as the fragmenting of people’s lives “as we freeze them outside time, outside a world of struggle in concrete history.”<sup>13</sup> Culture is commonly decontextualized. In the United States, decontextualization typically occurs in the school curriculum and in media images outside of school. A notable case is that of Native Americans, who customarily have been removed from their cultural and historical rootedness through images that eternalize them as either noble heroes or uncivilized savages, and typically as a combination of both.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the history of oppression, dehumanization, resistance, and struggle of the many Indigenous Nations rarely is studied in schools. If there is any doubt about the image of Native Americans held by most non-Indian children in the United States, ask even six-year-olds and

they will provide in precise detail the most stereotypical and ahistorical portrait of Indians, as Erickson noted, "outside time."<sup>15</sup> If these children happen to live in a geographic region where there are no reservations or large concentrations of Native Americans, they often are shocked to learn that Native Americans are still around today and that they are teachers, or truck drivers, or artists. Even when Native Americans are included in the curriculum as existing in the present, the idyllic images of them tend to reinforce common stereotypes. For instance, while we may be happy to show students pictures of powwows, we are less likely to discuss how reservations have been used as toxic dumping sites.

A further example of how culture is influenced by context will suffice. Puerto Ricans generally eat a great deal of rice in many different manifestations. Rice is a primary Puerto Rican staple. There is even a saying that demonstrates how common it is: "Puertorriqueños somos como el arroz blanco: Estamos por todas partes" (Puerto Ricans are like white rice: We are everywhere), an adage that says as much about rice as it does about the diaspora of the Puerto Rican people, over half of whom live outside the island. As a rule, Puerto Ricans eat short-grained rice, but I prefer long-grained rice, and other Puerto Ricans often made me feel practically like a cultural traitor when I admitted it. I remember my amazement when a fellow academic, a renowned Puerto Rican historian, explained the real reason behind the preference for short-grained rice. This preference did not grow out of the blue, nor does any particular quality of the rice make it inherently better. On the contrary, the predilection for short-grained rice was influenced by the historical context of Puerto Ricans as a colonized people.

It seems that near the beginning of the twentieth century when Puerto Rico was first taken over by the United States among the spoils of the Spanish-American War, there was a surplus of short-grained rice in the United States. Colonies frequently have been the destination for unwanted or surplus goods from the metropolis, so Puerto Rico became the dumping ground for short-grained rice, which had lower status than long-grained rice in the United States. After this, of course, the preference for short-grained rice became part of the culture. As is true of all cultural values, however, this particular taste was influenced by history, economics, and power, which will be further elaborated in what follows.

*Culture Is Influenced by Social, Economic, and Political Factors*

As is evident from the above, intimately related to the fact that culture is bound to a particular context is that it is greatly influenced by the political, historical, and economic conditions in which it is found. It



exists not in isolation but through concrete relationships characterized by differential access to power. As a result dominant social groups in a society often determine what counts as culture. This is why, for example, a dominant cultural group unabashedly can designate itself as “the norm” and others as “culturally deprived.”<sup>16</sup> Those who are so designated may not necessarily see themselves in this way, but naming by others takes on great power; eventually many of those who are designated as “culturally deprived” may learn to believe it. Yet “culturally deprived” actually means simply that the group in question does not share in the culture—and consequently in the power—of the dominant group. The paradox of this stance is that while many Whites see themselves as culturally neutral or “cultureless,” at the same time they insist, through constant messages in the dominant ideology, that theirs is the valued and valuable culture.

The theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are significant here. According to him, it is not simply money, or *economic capital*, that determines one’s standing in the social structure; equally important are what he has termed *social capital* and *cultural capital*. Social capital is made up of social obligations and networks that are convertible into economic capital. Cultural capital, which is more immediately important to us here, can be defined as the acquired tastes, values, languages and dialects, or the educational qualifications that mark a person as belonging to a privileged social and cultural class. Just as in the case of learning one’s native culture and language, cultural capital is acquired in the absence of any deliberate or explicit teaching; it is therefore unconsciously learned. The initial accumulation of cultural capital, in the words of Bourdieu, is “the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital.”<sup>17</sup>

In essence, then, culture is deeply entangled with economic and political privilege. That is, the tastes, values, languages, and dialects that have the greatest status are associated with the dominant social class *not because these tastes, values, languages, or dialects are inherently better but because they have higher social prestige as determined by the group with the greatest power*. As a case in point, for many years linguists have proposed that Black English is a rich and creative variety of English, as logical and appropriate as standard English for purposes of communication.<sup>18</sup> Yet the conventional wisdom still common among teachers is that Black English is simply “bad English.” Thus, rather than building on students’ native discourse—what has been termed *additive bilingualism*<sup>19</sup>—most teachers simply attempt to eradicate Black English and replace it with standard English, a *subtractive* form of bilingualism. On the other hand, when expressions from Black English make their way into standard

English because they are used by middle-class Whites, they immediately take on a higher social status and thus become acceptable.

The example of Black English underscores the impact that culture may have on learning and academic achievement. Most schools are organized to reflect and support the cultural capital of privileged social and cultural groups; in the United States, that group is middle class, or upper class, English-speaking Whites. As a result of their identity and upbringing, some children arrive at the schoolhouse door with a built-in privilege because they have learned this cultural capital primarily in the same way as they have learned to walk, that is, unconsciously and effortlessly. Their culture, in this case, the variety of English that they speak, seems both natural and correct. Yet as suggested by Carol Lee and Diana Slaughter-Defoe, because of the low prestige of Black English, "the influences of language on learning for African Americans are both complex and problematic."<sup>20</sup>

This example also places in bold relief the arbitrary nature of cultural capital. Paulo Freire captured the frivolous essence of such designations when he asked, "When did a certain form of grammar become 'correct'? Who named the language of the elite as 'correct,' as the standard?" He answered his own question by stating, "They did, of course. But, why not call it 'upper-class dominating English' instead of 'Standard English?' That authentic naming would reveal, instead of obscure, the politics of power and language in society."<sup>21</sup> Further on, in discussing the same topic, he added, "This so-called 'standard' is a *deeply ideological* concept, but it is necessary to teach correct usage while also criticizing its political implications."<sup>22</sup>

One could envision another, quite different, scenario. If, for instance, through some extraordinary turn of events, working-class African Americans were to become the esteemed social group in the United States, Black English probably would become the new standard. In turn, schools would make certain that the curriculum, texts, and other materials would reflect this new form of cultural capital; in addition, only those teachers who were intimately familiar with Black English and who considered it an innately superior variety of English would be hired. Accordingly, the children of working-class African-American homes would enter school with a built-in advantage compared with other children, who would be considered "culturally deprived" because they did not have the cultural capital of Black English. As far-fetched as this scenario is, given current economic and political realities in the United States, it serves as a graphic example of the capricious nature of determining whose culture becomes highly valued.

*Culture Is Created and Socially Constructed*

As discussed previously, culture often is thought of as a product-in-place, and as something handed down that must be kept the way it is. Not only does this result in a static view of culture, but it also implies that culture is already finished. As we have seen, culture is constantly evolving, and the reason that it evolves is because *human beings change it*. The action of people on culture takes place in big ways and small, by everyday people and by those who have power. When Jonathan Kozol went to Cuba in the mid-1970s to research the successful massive literacy campaign that had just taken place, he spoke with young people in schools, many of whom had been the teachers of the peasants who learned to read. He was awed by the young people's responses when he asked them what was meant by *history*. He recounted that when he had asked that same question of students in Schenectady, New York, the answers had been fairly uniform: "History is everything that happened in the past and is now over. . . . History is what is done by serious and important people."<sup>23</sup> In contrast, when he asked young people in Cuba the same question, their answers were starkly different: "It is the past, but there are things that we do now which will be part of history someday."<sup>24</sup> These young people saw that history was not just what was written in history books, or the actions of "important people" in conquest, war, or politics. What they had done in the literacy campaign was also history.

In the same way, culture is what we do every day. Cultures change as a result of the decisions that we, as cultural agents, make about our traditions, attitudes, behaviors, and values. Were it not so, we would forever be mere pawns or victims of the actions of others. Sometimes, of course, cultural values develop as a result of victimization. The previous example of short-grained rice is a case in point. But even here, people took what they were given and made it a positive value. Without such valuing, short-grained rice would not have become part of the culture. The cuisine of poor people throughout the world is another illustration of how culture is created. Poor people often get nothing but leftovers, the parts of animals or plants that nobody else wants. What they have done with these remains has sometimes been nothing short of extraordinary. This is cultural creation in action. Put another way, in the words of Frederick Erickson: "Culture can be thought of as a construction—it constructs us and we construct it."<sup>25</sup> Culture, then, is not a passive legacy, but an active operation that takes place through contact and interactions with others. Culture is a social construction because it cannot exist outside of social contact and collaboration.

*Culture Is Learned*

Closely related to the fact that culture is created and socially constructed is the fact that it is *learned*. That is, culture is not handed down through our genes, nor is it inherited. This is very clear to see, for example, when children from a particular ethnic group (for instance, Korean) are adopted by families from another ethnic group (usually European American). Although the children may still be considered ethnically and racially Korean, they will in all likelihood be *culturally* European American, unless their parents made a conscious and determined effort to teach them the culture and history of their heritage while raising them, or the children themselves later decide to educate themselves.

Culture, especially ethnic and religious culture, is learned through interactions with families and communities. It usually is not consciously taught, or consciously learned. That is why it seems so natural and effortless. Although this process does not hold true of all cultures—for example, deaf or gay culture—we predictably learn culture while sitting on our mothers' or grandmothers' laps, standing by our fathers, listening to the conversations of family members around us, and modeling our behavior on theirs. In fact, most people do not even think about their culture unless it is in a subordinate position to another culture or—if they belong to a majority culture—until they leave the confines of home and are no longer part of the cultural norm.

That culture is learned is also apparent in the very concept of *biculturalism*. Bilingual education, for instance, very often is called *bilingual/bicultural education* because it is based on the principle that one can learn two languages and two cultural systems in order to function and even to succeed in different linguistic and cultural contexts. This point was made in research by Gloria Ladson-Billings.<sup>26</sup> Of the eight teachers she identified as successful with African-American youths, three were White, and of them, one had a White culture of reference, another a bicultural culture of reference, and the third an African-American culture of reference. However, becoming bicultural is not as simple as discarding one set of clothes for another. Because culture is complex, "learning" a culture that is not one's native culture is an exceedingly difficult task, one accomplished only through direct, sustained, and profound involvement with it. Because most teachers in the United States have not been through this process, it can be difficult for them to understand how excruciating the process is for their students. Furthermore, it is difficult to become bicultural in an untroubled sense

because it means internalizing two cultural systems whose inherent values may be diametrically opposed.

In the United States, it is generally only students from dominated cultures who need to become bicultural as a requirement for academic and societal success. That they do so is a testament to great strength and resiliency. The fact that these newcomers, in spite of being young, feeling isolated, and facing what can be terrifying situations in unfamiliar environments, nonetheless can incorporate the cultural motifs of disparate values and behaviors says a great deal about human tenacity. What they accomplish might best be thought of as *critical biculturalism*, a biculturalism that is neither facile nor uncomplicated, but full of inconsistencies and challenges.

### *Culture Is Dialectical*

Culture often is thought of as a seamless web of interrelated and mutually supportive values and behaviors, yet nothing could be further from the truth. Because they are complex systems that are created by people and influenced by social, economic, and political factors, cultures are also dialectical, conflicted, and full of inherent tensions. A culture is neither “good” nor “bad” in general, but rather embodies values that have grown out of historical and social conditions and necessities. As individuals, we may find elements of our own or others’ cultures uplifting or repugnant. That culture is dialectical does not mean that we need to embrace all of its contradictory manifestations in order to be “authentic” members of the culture.

Young people whose cultures are disparaged by society sometimes feel that they have to accept either one culture or the other wholly and uncritically. This was found to be the case, for instance, among Romani (Gypsy) youth in research carried out in Hungary (Forray and Hegedus 1989).<sup>27</sup> Prevalent gender expectations of Romani boys and girls tend to be fairly fixed and stereotypical. Yet because the family is often the only place where culturally dominated young people can positively strengthen their self-image, Romani girls may correctly perceive that breaking free of even limited expectations of their future life options also results in giving up their ethnic identity and abandoning their families. Through questionnaires collected from elementary school teachers of Romani children, it became clear that teachers’ negative attitudes and behaviors concerning the fixed gender roles in the Romani culture were at least partly responsible for strengthening the expected gender-based behavior among girls in school. Had teachers been able to develop a more culturally balanced and sensitive approach, it is

conceivable that the Romani girls might have felt safe to explore other options without feeling that they were cultural traitors.

That culture is dialectical also leads to an awareness that there is no special virtue in preserving particular elements of culture as if they existed outside of social, political, and historical spaces. Mary Kalantzis and her colleagues have described this contradiction eloquently:

Preserving “communities” is not a good for its own sake, as if peoples should be preserved as museum pieces, so that they are not lost to posterity. “Communities” are always mixed, contradictory, conflict-ridden and by no means socially isolated entities. Active cultural re-creation, if people so wish, might involve consciously dropping one language in preference for another or abandoning some cultural tradition or other—such as sexism.<sup>28</sup>

The work of the Puerto Rican sociologist Rafael Ramirez is particularly relevant here. Ramirez has suggested that we can think of every culture as a coin that has two contradictory faces or subsystems. He calls these the *culture of survival* and the *culture of liberation*, and each is important in defining the complexity of culture. The culture of survival embodies those attitudes, values, traditions, and behaviors that are developed in response to political, economic, or social forces, some of which may be interpreted as a threat to the survival of the culture in some way. They can either limit (e.g., the unequal treatment of women) or expand (i.e., mutual cooperation) people’s perspectives within a particular culture. In the case of the role of women, values and behaviors of both males and females grew out of the necessity to view women, because of their unique biology, as primary caregivers. The need to survive is thus manifested in many cultures in perfectly understandable although not always ethical or equitable ways, given the history of the species. According to Ramirez:

The culture of survival is characterized mainly by the contradiction that it sustains, affirms, and provides certain power but, at the same time, does not confront or alter the oppressive elements and institutions nor affect the structure of political and economic power that controls the system.<sup>29</sup>

Ramirez has defined the culture of liberation as the values, attitudes, traditions, and behaviors that embody liberatory aspects of culture. This face of culture, according to Ramirez, is part of the process of decolonization, and of questioning unjust structures and values, and it comprises those elements that promote a new social order in which the “democratization of the sociopolitical institutions, economic equality,

and cooperation and solidarity in interpersonal relations predominate."<sup>30</sup> In this way, Ramirez says, authoritarianism is contrasted with democracy, racism with consciousness of racial and ethnic identity, and sexism with gender equality. Human rights that are generally accepted by most societies can be included in the framework of the culture of liberation. To that end, understanding the contradictory nature of culture is important if students and teachers are to develop a critical, instead of a romantic, perspective of their own and other people's cultures.

What we do to educate our children and young people says a great deal about what we stand for and who we are as a people. The challenge is to educate all people so that everyone will benefit as articulated, not by Horace Mann or John Dewey, but by John Amos Comenius in *The Great Didactic*:

The education that I propose includes all that is proper for all men and it is one which all . . . who are born into this world should share. . . .

Our first wish is that all . . . be educated fully into full humanity, not any one individual, not a few, not even many, but all . . . together and singly, young and old, rich and poor, of high and lowly birth, men and women—in a world whose fate it is to be born human beings, so that at least the whole of the human race become educated men of all ages, all conditions, all sexes and all nations.

## NOTES

1. Adapted from *The Light in Their Eyes* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).
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