Taking account of diversity in schools is a major challenge in a multicultural society. On one level the issue is simple: everyone's heritage is due respect, and differences should be regarded as strengths on which to build rather than deficits to be stigmatized or overcome. But on another level there is an often unrecognized paradox: too exclusive a focus on group differences can "all too easily become the basis for creating stereotypes..." that blind educators to qualities that students have in common. (Fillmore, 1982, p. 242)

How can educators be responsive to cultural differences and avoid stereotypes that mask commonalities shared by different cultural groups? One way is to distinguish between different functions of culture. In this essay we distinguish between the group-defining function and the other adaptive functions to show why educators need to accommodate cultural commonalities as well as differences.

Some Functions of Culture

Culture evolves over time in response to adaptive challenges. One result of this evolutionary process is beliefs and practices that help us adapt to persistent as well as changing circumstances. These beliefs and practices are organized as models or schemas about how things work, what is ideal, and which practices are proper and helpful for individuals or groups to survive and prosper (LeVine, 1977). Cultural models are so familiar and mundane that their functions and effects are often unseen, invisible, unnoticed. The evidence of their workings are often most apparent in everyday routines in communities, homes, workplaces, playyards, and schools. What activities are carried out, why they are valued, who should participate, and the rules of interaction are coded into our cultural models.

Cultural features—models of belief and practice and their associated activities—are neither static nor rigid. As circumstances and environments change, our understanding of how things work and how to respond are modified and changed to meet new challenges. We change just enough to make things work—we are satisfiers rather than maximizers, happy with just good enough. The more our environments change, the more we try to keep things the same. The more we try to keep them same, the more we have to change (Edgerton, 1992). Beliefs and practices are borrowed from others with whom we come in contact or share an ecological niche; alternative ways of organizing daily activities are tried, adopted, and adapted.

In the modern world this process is accelerated by technologies that simplify direct contact, distance communication, and social and commercial exchanges. Changes are made slowly, gradually, and are built on existing beliefs and practices. For example, natives of Spain, Turkey, and Morocco gradually adopted beliefs and practices encountered in Northern Europe after migrating to obtain employment (Rosenza, 1994). Culture is not a straitjacket or a cake of custom, it is a storehouse of adaptive solutions to the challenges of existence (Weiner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988).

Some cultural features—beliefs, practices, and everyday activities—mark boundaries among groups—clans, tribes, ethnic, and reference groups. Which features mark boundaries are a product of many different historical circumstances. Sometimes two groups occupy the same ecological niche, or monopolize different territories or resources. In some cases ethnic boundaries arose from the interdependence of two groups, with each providing services or goods to the other, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes coerced by the more powerful group. A critical function of boundaries is to distinguish between "us" and "them."

For example, some scholars have concluded that the function of kosher dietary laws was to differentiate the Jews from their "gentile" neighbors (Harri, 1985, p. 337). Ethnic boundaries help an individual identify who is a fellow member of the "in" group, who is and is not a person with shared perceptions and understandings. (Barth, 1969, p. 15). The boundaries between ethnic groups define both self and group identity, feelings of belonging, and conti-
nity through time, shared meanings and traditions, self-assigned genealogical and social filiation, including related forms of family and group bonds (Rossens, 1994). In contemporary human history, an important function of boundaries is the political and economic advantage that ethnic unity can achieve. Is the United States, for example, ethnically defined groups succeeded in building coalitions to pass legislation requiring equity in school funding, hiring, mortgage granting, etc. The unified political action which the groups are able to achieve paradoxically, using ethnic categories to achieve social objectives (Wax, 1994). Non Edmonds, advocate of effective schools for minority students, notes that poor and ethnic groups "are far more likely to be served by policies than by any equity interests to be found in the educational research establishment." (Edmonds, 1978, p. 34). To unify a group for effective political action, ethnic identity must remain relatively impervious to changing circumstances. Otherwise, membership would wax and wane, and the advantages of collective action would be threatened.

One reason ethnic boundaries persist is that they are marked by only a limited set of cultural features the particularities of which are often a product of historical and ecological circumstances (Barth, 1959). What features mark boundaries do not depend on their persistence, or their resistance to change in many domains of belief and practice. This allows for very different practices among individuals within an ethnic group—differences that do not affect those features that define the group's "us" and "others." This flexibility regarding most beliefs and practices permits a group to remain unified around core features while allowing great variation within the group on thoughts, feelings, and behavior (LeVine, 1984, p. 125). Individuals within a group can maintain their group identity and still enjoy the adaptive advantages of many beliefs and practices, even those borrowed from "others." The borrowing and loaning of cultural features are often a two-way process between groups.

This brings us to a key idea. Two well-differentiated ethnic groups living in the same ecological niche are likely to share many cultural beliefs and practices in common: Barth (1959), Edgerton (1971), LeVine (1977). For example, many individuals emigrated from Spain, Sicily, Morocco, and Turkey to work in the factories and mines of Northern Europe (Rossens, 1994). Many religious beliefs (Rossens, 1994). These immigrants share a common culture with their new Northern European neighbors.

Even those who migrate to return to their native land adopt cultural beliefs and practices which give them an adaptive advantage in their new, even if possibly temporary, Northern European homes. They use modern medicines and technologies, take more kinds of jobs, learn new skills, aspire to higher education for their children, seek and attain material abundance, and subscribe to public social security systems, some of which entail adoption of beliefs and practices not present in their native lands.

Adapting Instruction to Culture

The behavior of immigrants to Northern Europe reflects a fundamental principle: Individuals living in the same ecological niche will adopt cultural models of adaptation if they offer advantage. What has this principle to do with adapting instruction to cultural variability within groups? It suggests that educators may expect to find many commonalities as well as differences among Us ethnic groups that attend America's schools.

Our two-pronged argument is this: Schools must deal with students from many different groups and should therefore be aware of potential discontinuities between home and school—

(1) Schools must deal with students from many different groups and should therefore be aware of potential discontinuities between home and school—

(2) But at the same time, schools should not assume that ethnic diversity always implies broad-based cultural differences among groups, or conversely homogeneity within groups. Different groups living in the same ecological niche can be expected to have many cultural features—beliefs and practices—in common. Schools therefore should also build on commonalities between schools and families—e.g., be aware of the value of formal schooling, school achievement, good behavior, and parent support and involvement. Building on commonalities is no less important than being sensitive to differences in forcing productive relations with families.

Discontinuities and Complementarities

Families who emigrate from Mexico to the United States are ethnically diverse and distinct from other families in this country. Racially, historically, psychologically, they identify with other Mexican families while at the same time reject the dominant American culture. The people Carey McWilliams (1948) wrote about half a century ago. On longitudinal studies in a California community suggest that on some dimension of belief and practice (immigrant Mexican parents are different from their foreign born children (Goldenberg & Gillamore, 1998; Roese, Balzano, Gilmore, & Goldenberg 1995).

For example, they subscribe to a cultural model of preschool child development that places a higher emphasis on moral development than on school readiness, skills, a pattern exhibited by groups with origins in small-scale agrarian communities where earning a living depends on face-to-face interactions and the co-creative work of family members (LeVine, 1986). For the immigrant Mexican parent, it is vital that a child learn to distinguish between right and wrong, obedience and respect for elders, and to be a full participant in family life. They place less emphasis in the preschool years on the uses of language and print than families which literacy is both a means of earning living and an important child develop...
We Mexicans are not like that. This is one of the customs that I don’t want them to learn.” She described immigrant Mexican families who have educated their children in the same way that they had been educated in Mexico. The result was hard working young adults who stayed out of trouble, which she said was not always true when parents gave their children too much freedom and autonomy. For many of the families in our study, their adherence to traditional values is a boundary they believe distinguishes them and their group from other groups in their communities.

Yet, even as ethnic identity remains strong, changes in cultural belief and practice were evident in the more than ten years we have been interviewing and observing in homes of immigrant Latino families:...

...education for these immigrant parents has a much stronger component of “formal schooling.” The immigrant parents in our sample clearly wish to maintain many of the traditional family values of responsibility and respect taught to them by their own parents, their target children's grandparents. But with its greater emphasis on formal schooling—for both boys and girls—these immigrant parents’ cultural model of education is undergoing change. It is adapting to the exigencies of life in a society where education—in the English sense of the word—both matters and is more available. (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995)

As they adapt to a new society they may be reaching out and adopting cultural models and practices that provide advantages to themselves and their children. But they are not abandoning all they brought with them.

Commonalities and Collaboration

Ethnic differences, therefore, should not obscure cultural compatibilities. In a study of Latino immigrants and their kin-ergardens, we found that teachers’ attempts to involve parents in children’s literacy development led both to greater parent satisfaction and to enhanced student achievement (Goldenberg & Arroyo, 1994 April; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995), suggesting again that parents have a unique role to play and shared many values and beliefs about educating children. The more teachers attempted to involve parents in children’s academic learning—by sending home activities or through messages or phone calls home—the more satisfied parents were with the academic content of their child’s classroom and with the extent to which they felt involved in their children’s learning.

In addition, teacher attempts to involve parents also predicted children’s liter-
beliefs and practices mark the boundary between groups. Yet in many contexts these limited differences are so compelling at first analysis that they may obscure substan-
tial commonalities. Indeed, the per-
spective we presented in the first part of this essay would predict this—that what we are inclined to notice are differences that mark boundaries between groups, because of the social and political func-
tions they serve. But as Filmer (1982) and Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) argued, this very predictable human re-
cipe can, when allowed to operate freely in educational settings, produce a severe response that is insensitive to underlying realities.

In the study on the effects of kinder-
garten teachers’ parent involvement ef-
forts on parent satisfaction and children’s achievement (Geldof & Arribas, 1984, April), half the teachers were Latinas who spoke Spanish fluently, and the other half were Anglos with varying degrees of skill in Spanish. When we compared the achievement change of children taught by Latinas and Anglos, there was a signifi-
cant difference. Those taught by the Latinas improved from fall to spring, whereas the Anglo teachers’ children de-
clined. At first glance this suggests the bridging of discontinuities between middle class and second generation cultures (in the form of sub-
frame-Spanish teachers) improved children’s achievement—a result that is inconsistent with previous findings that teacher ethnicity is unrelated to Latin children’s achievements (Vierra, 1984).

However, further analyses of our data suggested a more complex interpretation was required. Because they were rated overall-average, both cultures (in the form of sub-
frame-Latino teachers) were benefiting from this powerful effect on children’s achieve-
ment. When we statistically removed the effect of parent-involvement, the effect of teacher ethnicity and language contributed to communication and rap-
port between teachers and parents, but it was not the best of these shared qualities. It was how teachers behaved that mat-
tered, not the frame.

The importance of teacher action over teacher status was also the argument of one of the Latino teachers, Ms. Delgado—an argument she presented to us prior to the study. While we recognized that many children have less access to academic learn-
ing opportunities than others, Ms. Delgado also maintained strong belief supported by educational research that children of immigrant Latinos, like other children, can be taught what they need to know in order to be successful in school.

Some teachers think these kids are deprived so (they think) all we need to let them do is play all day long. That really makes me mad because I came from an immigrant Latin background like this... There kids can learn but they have to be taught. If more teachers realized this and did what they were supposed to do, more of those kids would go on to college (Goldenberg, 1994, p. 185).

**Conclusion**

Our examples and analyses raise an intriguing possibility: Is accommodating to culturally different children a matter of making changes in teaching, staffing, or curriculum that are sensitive to differ-
ences? Or can we accommodate to culturally different children by recognizing similarities and consistencies, as well as making changes if needed but rec-
ognizing similarities when they exist and not allowing ourselves to see only the cul-
tural features that distinguish a group from others. Ignoring one kind of accom-
modation over the other is not in the best interest of all children and families.

As we confront the challenges posed by this ever-present need of immigrants to the United States education system we are aware of discontinuities that must be skillfully and sensitively handled. At the same time, they must be equally sensitive to what the families, children, teachers, and adminis-
trators share.

**References**


