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Essay on Culture

The fashion forward girl, who carried an oversize coach purse, briskly walked down the street jamming to her own tunes from her personal Apple Ipod. She seemed to have no cares, as she nodded her head back and forth to the various beats. As she walked, she would constantly check her hot pink diamond studded cell phone for text messages and any calls. When she was not talking or messaging, she was surfing the Internet shopping for a new outfit, purse or shoes of some kind. After walking for quite some time, the girl walked into a restaurant draped in blue and white. She began greeting her enormous family, whom were either working or chatting with other family members. Suddenly a stocky old man, came from the kitchen and greeted her with open arms. “Opa! He cried as she cried back and gave him a huge hug.”

This girl seemed to be just any average girl in these times of 2006. She was a typical teen who is in style and sensible to the times. But until she graced that door of the family owned and run restaurant, no one would have guessed she was deeply involved with her large Greek family and worked at the restaurant three nights a week.

This girl, like many others, is plagued everyday by choices, decisions and differing cultures. A culture in these times consists of more than just food, clothing and holiday traditions. Culture is much more. Sadly, today many people and many Americans do not even understand what culture is and how it works.

When a person hears the word culture, they may think of Greeks, for example. They would think Greeks are a culture in themselves. They would think of characteristics of Greeks like roasting a lamb on a spit every Easter, having very large families,
attending church every Sunday, being loud and boisterous, and being extremely social. Although someone may come up with these things, it does not truly constitute a Greek culture. Yes, these might be aspects in a Greek culture, but not everyone’s. A person might think too that being Greek is an ethnicity, indeed that it is, but a culture is not just an ethnicity. Cultures encompass much more than just a person’s inherited ethnicity.

Most tend to think that only ethnicities are cultures. Especially whites or European Americans, think that whites have no culture. Why is this? European Americans tend to believe that only African Americans, Asian Americans or groups that visibly look and act different have cultures. This is saying that whites do not think they have it because it is not visibly present like skin color for example. What these people and many others need to learn is that culture is more, it is expansive, it is shared by all and most of all, it is dynamic, multifaceted, and learned.

Culture is defined by Nieto 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 region.” This definition encompasses so many ideas that it is still hard to clarify what culture truly is. Culture can be a very messy topic. To begin to clean up the idea, a person can think about culture as being ever changing and transformative.

Culture is not something that is simply passed down by generations like a quilt or precious china. Culture changes from generation to generation, although some things are kept the same. Culture is said to be dynamic. Like the girl in the opening example, she is probably very different from her great grandmother, grandma or even mom too. Although
they are all related and are part of a Greek history, they are all very different. The mother of this girl could be married to a European American who is primarily Polish. Now there are two ethnicities mixed into this girl. She is still part of the Greeks, yet she is part of another as well. She likes to listen to rap, hip hop and R & B music on her Apple Ipod on the weekdays. Yet on the weekends, she attends church because her parents make her and works at the Greek restaurant three nights a week to pay off for her cell phone bill. Times have changed.

This girl has a young sibling, she is six. She just entered first grade and is interested in gymnastics. She loves to go to church, but hates eating Greek food. Is this girl still part of her sister and grandmothers culture? Yes and no. Although she is Greek like her relatives, she is changing like her sister to be a part of a different culture. How much different is it from her grandmother? There really is no one way to measure this, but she is still part of a culture no matter what. Culture not only changes, but it changes person by person. Each person chooses to accept new things that are suitable to their needs and lifestyle. People also choose to reject things, like Greek food in this case.

Culture is like a pool filtration system. Most of the pool water remains in the pool, while some is drained out because it is dirty and unwanted. At the same time, some new water is poured in with various chemicals to cleanse and strengthen it. Culture is like this, as people choose to accept or reject elements of culture, their own personal culture changes. Culture truly is personalized and on an individualized basis.

This leads into the next term, culture is **multifaceted**. This means that people are different within the culture. And for that matter, there are different cultures that extend to different degrees. Like in the example, the grandmother may consider herself primarily
Greek and first and foremost follows all Greek traditions, including speaking Greek. The granddaughter though, although she is part of this culture, does not care to speak Greek, but enjoys the Greek food of the culture. She is still Greek though. She is just to a different degree of Greek. She might think of herself first as a sister and a best friend to someone. These things might be more important to her. Now, this is not to say that later in life she may start speaking Greek and follow many traditions too.

Like the granddaughter, people create their identities. Most people identify themselves with an ethnic background first (like the Greek grandmother). But let’s say another relative is younger and a daughter-in-law of this Greek grandmother. This daughter-in-law is bubbly, fun and certainly anything but Greek. She is primarily German, Uh Oh! Well, how does she handle this? She chooses to go to a Catholic church, but teaches her children both Greek and German. She chooses to celebrate both holidays to learn about her husband’s side and educate her children as well. This woman has accepted a new identity, but chooses to be primarily German like her background and follow catholic traditions for herself. Her children, on the other hand, will be raised as both and depending on what they choose they will develop their own identities which will eventually change as well.

Besides just obvious characteristics of ethnicity, cultures conflict with social class, economic status, and other factors like place of residence. Although two people might have the same ethnic background, they can live two completely separate lives. Each life is separate, yet they originate from the same culture. In this way, culture is multifaceted yet again. For example, the grandmother is rich and wealthy for a Greek and lives a very large house in a nice suburban community. On the other hand, her sister,
whom lives on the other coast, lives in a poor community and is part of an urban district with poor living conditions. Both of these women, sisters in fact and from the same generation, have completely separate socioeconomic status and places of residence, yet are from the same ethnicity.

In these current times, especially in urban settings, one more aspect of culture is that cultures tend to mix and integrate even more. Many young children and teens are bounded by their ethnic background. They are more open and accepting to new culture and integrating them into part of their own lives. Future generations will be even more integrated and cultures will continue to expand in the future. Currently, people are multiracial, multicultural and have multiethnic identities. In this day and age, this idea is not unusual.

Despite many beliefs, culture is learned and not inherited. This means that someone’s culture is not handed to them through the gene pool. A person is overwhelmed with various sources of input from birth. What the person is more influenced by and chooses as well, adds to their individualized culture. Culture is very social. A person picks up on characteristics from their family or friends and chooses to accept or reject them. Mostly, the person tends to accept family traditions or else bad consequences may follow. Like mentioned earlier, a person at birth starts to learn things about his or her culture. It can be proven that is not inherited for the simple fact in this example. The Greek family from the example adopts a baby from China. Does the baby grow up with a Chinese culture or a Greek culture? From evidence and research, unless the parents introduce and follow Chinese cultures for the child, the child will grow up primarily Greek. Again, this is not to say that the child will not later go back and learn about
Chinese culture and choose to follow it. Culture is learned. The child will learn the Greek culture provided by the surroundings in the environment and the parents and relatives as role models.

Culture is *learned* in the environment especially in school settings. School is increasingly a place to witness cultural diversity. Students are now bilingual and bicultural. These students may speak one language at home with their family and follow those traditions, but when they enter school it is a different world. These students are constantly code switching their language and terms throughout the day. Like in the example, the granddaughter that loves her Apple Ipod and listens to hip-hop, goes home to work at the Greek restaurant. She might speak Greek at the restaurant and to her relatives, but at school she has almost perfect English and excellent grammar skills. This example demonstrates that a student now has to be constantly utilizing either languages, or more, and backing many different cultural views.

Teachers have one of the toughest jobs, educating students and parents too. Teachers must incorporate varying degrees of diversity including vast cultures as well. Although many can tell stories of ignorant past teachers, times are changing. Teachers must now promote diversity and varying cultures. There is no norm that exists with students being from one background and ethnicity. Most students are mixed in some way and are transforming to make their own culture suitable for themselves.

Teachers can utilize books, videos, and examples from other cultures to teach children in their classroom about varying cultures. Teachers can use role play and have students share experiences to learn more about each other and their lives. Students will learn that everyone is different, and being different is beneficial. Students will learn that
they are not drastically different from a friend perhaps. They might not even know they share some traditions. Having students explore each other's history can be fun and interesting.

Teachers can integrate what students learn about each other into lesson plans and the curriculum. The teacher should always have a multicultural selection of books available to children in the classroom. The teacher should also have a way to translate writing and English if needed for ELL students. By the teacher providing and researching different cultures, the students and teacher can see that culture is dynamic, multifaceted and learned.