

CHAPTER 5

What Is Culture?



Figure 5.1 At lunch, after school, on the weekend — just like young people everywhere — Atlantic Canadian teens love to hang out, enjoying each others' company.

You are meeting your friends outside the corner store. Maybe you will just hang out. Maybe you'll take your blades. You like the wall by the corner store. It is a good place to sit, to watch. There is a Chinese restaurant two doors down, where you and your friends can order eggrolls and stay as long as you like.

You talk. Your friend Dan tells about the new videos he saw, and Mu Ching tells about the fashion models in a new teen magazine. You discuss how unfair it is that Janet is not on the school volleyball team. Audrey tells her grandfather's story about the one-eyed sea captain who used to live on this corner, years ago.

The street corner where you and your friends meet, the wall where you sit, the restaurant where you hang out — these are some of your centres of culture. Much of your conversation — whether it's about videos, volleyball, or fashion models — deals with matters of culture.

- But what is culture? What different forms does it take?
- Where does our culture come from? How is it transmitted from one person to another, and from one generation to the next?

DEFINING CULTURE

Culture is a reflection of who and what we are. It refers to everything connected with the way humans live in groups. It includes all the ways people respond to their physical environment, their history, their economic life, their social life, and their political life. Culture includes arts and entertainment such as video-making, as well as beliefs such as what is or is not fair. It includes organizations such as city governments and schools, as well as behaviour patterns like hanging out after school.

Physical environment

How do people interact with their physical environment?

History

What are the origins of the culture, and how have events brought changes over time?



CULTURE

Social life

How do individuals and groups within the society interact? What are their religions, values, and traditions?

Political life

How do people in the society organize themselves so that they can live together in peace and security?

Economic life

How do people make a living? How do their occupations influence their lifestyle?

Source: Adapted from R. Neering, S. Usukawa, and R. Kubicek, *Exploring World Cultures* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988).

Figure 5.2 Aspects of culture. You have already learned about the physical environment of Atlantic Canada. In this unit, you will focus on the cultural impact of social, historical, economic, and political life.

Culture consists of all products of human work and thought. It includes the clothes you wear, the food you eat, the places where you live and shop, your beliefs and the things you value, the way you spend your leisure time, and the technology you use.

Culture is what earlier generations transmit to later ones; through a story of a one-eyed sea captain, for example, or through instructions such as “Keep your elbows off the table!”

Although culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, it is separate from genetic transmission of traits, or characteristics. For instance, you may have inherited your grandfather’s broad shoulders. You may have inherited your mother’s ability to play musical instruments by ear. These characteristics are not cultural. The clothes you wear over those shoulders, however, and the songs you play on the piano are based on your culture.



Figure 5.3 The ability to roll your tongue into a U, as shown here, is an inherited trait. About 70 percent of people can do it. The other 30 percent cannot. They could not do it even if their culture strongly encouraged the practice!

Culture: A Global Perspective

Scientists who study human cultural characteristics are known as **anthropologists**. Anthropologists have pointed out that there are important differences among cultures; for example, among the cultures of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Atlantic Canada. In other words, there is **cultural diversity**. They also emphasize, however, that there is a lot of cultural similarity. One American anthropologist, George P. Murdock, made a long list of characteristics he found in every culture, all over the world. Some of these are shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Some common cultural characteristics from Murdock’s list. Which five are most important to you? Why do you think these characteristics are common across cultures?

Art	Hairstyles	Music
Beliefs about good and evil	Hospitality	Numbers
Calendars	Housing	Personal names
Community organization	Jokes	Religion
Cooking	Kinship groups	Sports
Co-operative work	Language	Toolmaking
Education	Law	Trade
Folklore	Marriage	Visiting
Government	Mealtimes	

Figure 5.4 Although cultures are diverse, they share many characteristics. In addition, their characteristics may change over time.



EXPLORATIONS

REVIEWING THE IDEAS

- Which of the following have to do with culture?
 - Eye colour
 - Eating with chopsticks
 - Values and traditions
 - Long fingers
 - Fingernail polish
 - School rules
 - A keen sense of hearing
- Choose two cultural characteristics from Table 5.1. Use drawings, diagrams, photographs, or clippings from magazines to explain how these characteristics are expressed in your culture. For example, you might show your culture's hairstyles. Make a class display of your work.

APPLYING YOUR SKILLS

- What do you do in your spare time? Explain how the way you spend your spare time is a reflection of your culture. Be sure to include some of your centres of culture and some cultural topics that you and your friends might discuss.

CONNECTING AND EXTENDING

- Assume you are an anthropologist. Choose any culture other than your own. From Table 5.1, choose three cultural characteristics to investigate in the culture you have chosen. Share the results of your investigations with the class in an oral or written report.

MEETING OUR NEEDS

All people, no matter what their background, have needs. We all have **physical needs**, such as the need for food, water, clothing, shelter, and safety. We also have **emotional needs**, such as the need for friendship, a sense of belonging, love, self-esteem, knowledge, excitement, and self-expression.

While all people share these needs, their ways of meeting them vary greatly. To a large extent, the

culture of a group develops as people find ways to meet their needs. In the process of meeting their needs, they often adjust their physical environment, social environment, or both.

As you read the following examples, discuss which needs the people are meeting in each case. In addition, discuss how they are interacting with their environments.

- ◆ Every autumn the people of Twillingate Island, Newfoundland, hunt sea birds known as turrs, or thick-billed murre. These meaty birds were once an important part of the winter food supply.
- ◆ In the 1800s, many large, stately houses were built in Fredericton, New Brunswick. They are now regarded as some of the most beautiful homes in North America.



Figure 5.5 In many northern communities you may be teased or congratulated by your friends, depending on what kind of snowmobile you have.



Figure 5.6 One of Fredericton's beautiful old houses

- ◆ Prince Edward Island has powerful winds, and researchers at the Atlantic Wind Test Site at North Cape experiment with ways to harness this wind power to produce electricity.
- ◆ The Newfoundland economy has a growing high-tech sector. Companies in the province sell such products as telephone equipment, navigational programs, and computer files.
- ◆ There is a large community of Celtic background in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. By celebrating their music, sports, and crafts, members of the community seek to preserve their Celtic heritage.
- ◆ Early New Brunswick settlers built covered bridges across the province's many rivers. The roofs of these bridges kept snow and rain from rotting the planks.
- ◆ Many young members of the Baptist Church in Atlantic Canada belong to a nation-wide organization called Canadian Baptist Youth (CBY).
- ◆ In 1982, Buddhist leader Chogyam Trungpa urged his followers in Colorado to join him in establishing a new Buddhist community in Halifax. He chose Nova Scotia because he believed traditional family values were important here. Today Halifax boasts the world's largest non-Asian Buddhist community.

MATERIAL AND NON-MATERIAL CULTURE

To understand cultures better, anthropologists examine their material and non-material aspects. When you look through your pocket, knapsack, purse, or school locker, what objects do you find? There might be a comb, a wallet, money, a photograph, a library card, a sandwich, a notebook, a pen, or a calculator. All these are part of your **material culture** — the physical objects produced and/or used by the society to which you belong.

Non-material culture, on the other hand, refers to the elements of culture that are not physical. It includes spoken language, ideas, stories, myths, legends, religious beliefs, and ways of behaving.

Among the most important aspects of non-material culture are our **values** — the ideas, beliefs, and ways of behaving that are valuable or important to people of a particular culture. One culture, for example, may value being exactly on time for appointments and social events. Another culture may value the wisdom of older people.

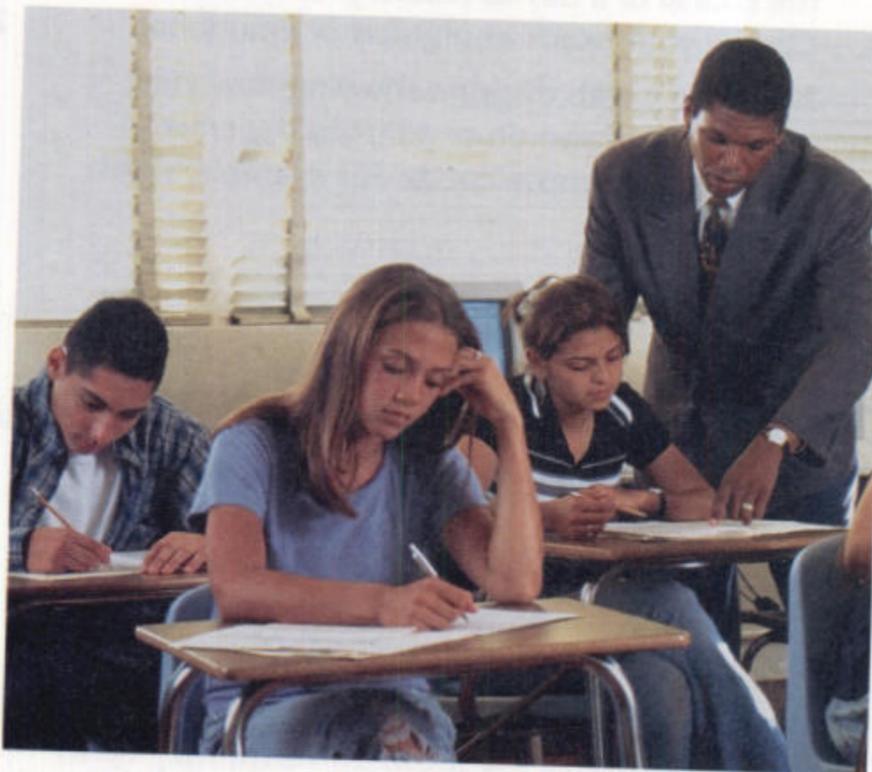


Figure 5.7 The teacher's wristwatch is one element of material culture in this photograph. What others do you notice?

Celtic culture in Cape Breton

Frances MacEachen is a tall woman in her twenties, sitting in a cluttered office in Mabou. She is editor and publisher of *Am Briaghe*, a newspaper of Celtic language and culture written in English and some Gaelic. Its 2000 subscribers span the world. It has a proper home in Mabou, where the sign on the post office says *Tigh Litrichean: House of Letters*. The Mull Restaurant serves Scottish oatcakes — bannock — and *marag*, a spicy white Scottish sausage....

The Celtic ideal has to do with honor and courage, with music and poetry, with hospitality, with loyal pride in family and ancestry....

Source: "Re-Gaeling Cape Breton" by Silver Donald Cameron in *Canadian Geographic*, January/February 1996, pp. 62–71.



Figure 5.8 Frances MacEachen. List five examples of material culture given in the article. List five examples of non-material culture. How many of the examples of non-material culture are also values?

DID YOU KNOW...?

Many cultures enjoy bannock. Members of First Nations and African Canadians share the pleasure of this biscuit-like bread with people of Scottish descent.

EXPLORATIONS

APPLYING YOUR SKILLS

- Keep a detailed diary of your activities over the course of a day to record your needs. Classify your needs as physical or emotional.
 - Make a web diagram showing how your culture has drawn on or adapted the environment to meet those needs. For example, what resources have been harvested to meet your needs? Are your needs affected by the climate of your area?
- Look back at Table 5.1. Divide the cultural characteristics listed in the table into material and non-material.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE GLOBAL CONNECTION

You have seen that culture is often transmitted from one generation to the next. The customs, beliefs, opinions, and stories passed down from one generation to another are known as **traditions**. The older the traditions, the more powerful they often become.

For many years, people in your community may have harvested seaweed, or made sauerkraut from cabbages they grow themselves. For many years, they may have worn British woollens, made pewter jewellery, told Glooscap stories, or held annual rowing races on a local lake. All of these are examples of traditions. The **traditional culture** of a group is made up of practices established over many generations.

If your family belongs to a Christian Church, you may recently have had your *confirmation*. If your family is Jewish, you may recently have had your *bar mitzvah* or *bat*

mitzvah. These are further examples of traditions. Such ceremonies, or **rites**, are part of the traditional culture of a family and the religious group to which it belongs.

The world has many traditional cultures that vary from group to group. There is, however, another, more widespread kind of culture, **popular culture**. This is the culture shared by many groups in Western society, both in the city and in the country. It is also shared, increasingly, all over the globe. Do you listen to popular music? Do you watch situation comedies on television?

Figure 5.9 Rowing race at the Royal Newfoundland Regatta on Quidi Vidi Lake, St. John's, Newfoundland. The Regatta, North America's oldest continuing sporting event, is part of the city's traditional culture. The Regatta has been held here since at least 1826.



Do you buy brand-name clothes, drink brand-name soft drinks, eat at fast-food restaurants, or admire internationally known sports stars? If so, you are participating in popular culture.

Suppose that you had a penpal in any one of the following places: Manitoba, the United States, Britain, Portugal, Jamaica, or Russia. You would probably find your penpal liked similar music, TV shows, brands of clothes, and sports stars.

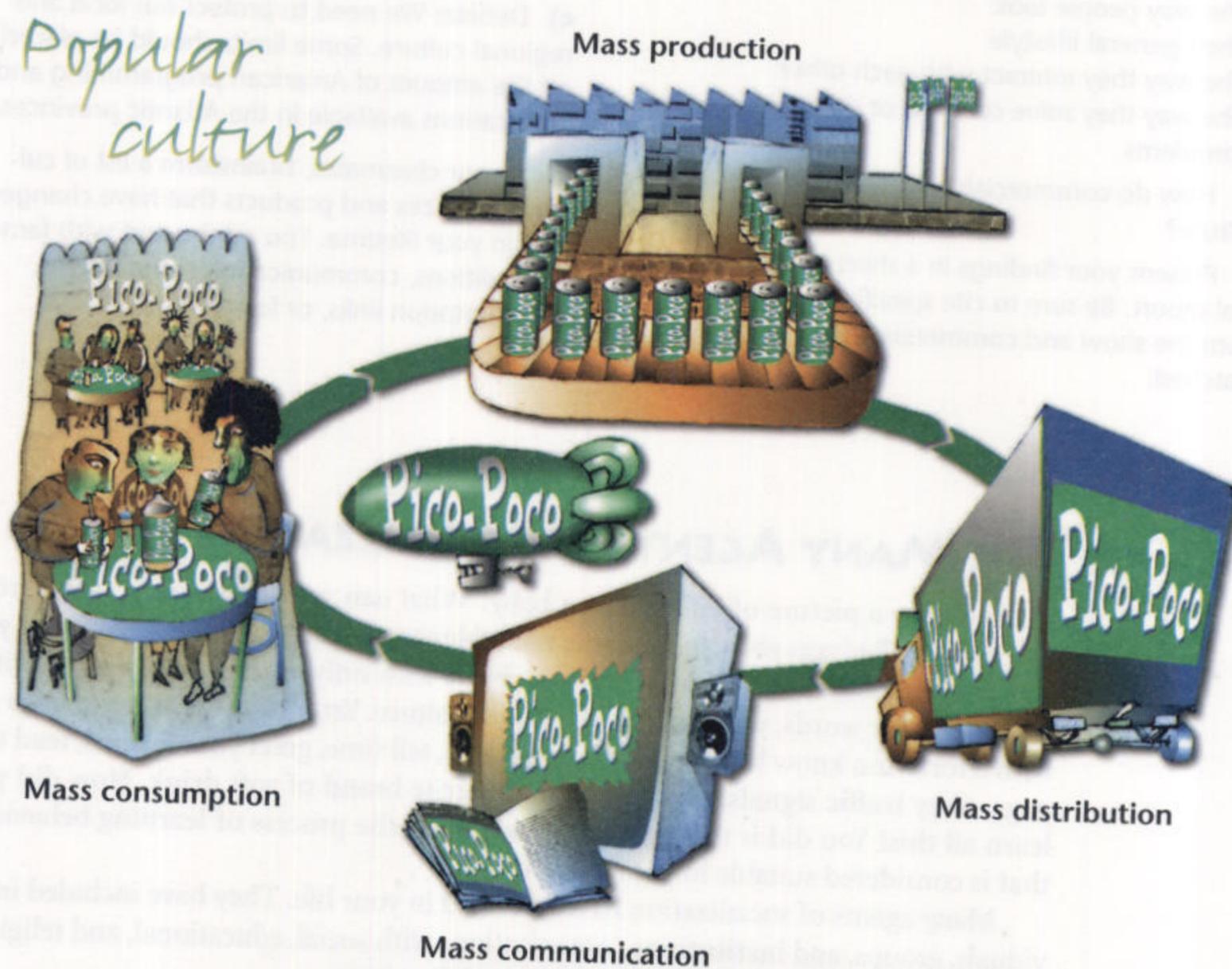
The spread of these elements of popular culture in the modern world has much to do with technology. For example, popular culture spreads through the mass media — including television, radio, compact disks, newspapers, books, and movies. It spreads through communication and information technologies such as computers, fax machines, and telephones. It also spreads through transportation links such as expressways, ferries, causeways, bridges, undersea tunnels, and air travel routes.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Most of the popular culture shared by the people of the world comes from the United States.

- In Canada and in many other countries, most of the television programs people watch and most of the music they listen to are American. In Canada, most of the magazines we read also come from the United States.
- There are McDonald's restaurants in over 100 countries of the world.
- The American news service CNN World News is available on suitably connected televisions in all English-speaking countries of the world.

Figure 5.10 How does popular culture depend on each of the factors shown here?



Source: Adapted from W. Sproule, *People In Perspective* (Scarborough: Prentice Hall Canada, 1994), p. 203.

EXPLORATIONS

APPLYING YOUR SKILLS

1. Last Friday, Sharilyn helped her parents make the dinner her family always eats on Fridays. Then she tried out the cologne she had ordered from an ad on the Internet. After watching a TV show featuring her favourite popular singer, she read her younger brother a book about the Egyptian pyramids.

In what ways was Sharilyn taking part in traditional culture on that evening? In what ways was she taking part in popular culture?

ANALYZING AND REFLECTING

2. **a)** Analyze one television drama or situation comedy, focusing on how that program transmits elements of culture. For example, what values are evident with regard to the following?
 - the way people look
 - their general lifestyle
 - the way they interact with each other
 - the way they solve conflicts or other problems**b)** How do commercials transmit elements of culture?
c) Present your findings in a short written or oral report. Be sure to cite specific examples from the show and commercials you have watched.
3. Analyze one television show that you consider to be educational. How does this show transmit elements of culture?
4. **a)** Make brief notes on what you might do during an evening at home. Which of your activities relate to traditional culture? Which relate to popular culture? How many of your activities might be influenced in some way by American popular culture?
b) How do you think popular culture affects traditional culture? For example, do fast-food restaurants decrease the tendency for people to cook and eat traditional meals at home? Are we losing valuable aspects of our local culture as we adopt the American values and lifestyles we see in the media? Or is popular culture a unifying force? Discuss these questions in a group. Make brief notes on your discussion.
c) Debate: We need to protect our local and regional culture. Some limits should be placed on the amount of American programming and publications available in the Atlantic provinces.
5. With your classmates, brainstorm a list of cultural practices and products that have changed within your lifetime. You might start with family traditions, communication technologies, transportation links, or fashion trends.

THE MANY AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION

Do you have a picture of yourself as a baby? What can you tell about yourself from that picture? Perhaps you can see some resemblance to other family members, but you probably can't tell much more. You were born with only your genetically inherited traits. In other words, you were born without culture. Yet today you may prefer to eat with a fork. You know how to put on your socks, tell time, greet your friends, read this page, obey traffic signals, and buy your favourite brand of soft drink. How did you learn all this? You did it through **socialization** — the process of learning behaviour that is considered suitable in your culture.

Many agents of socialization have operated in your life. They have included individuals, groups, and **institutions** (organizations with social, educational, and religious purposes). They have probably included the following:

- ◆ **Family.** For most people, socialization begins in the family. Your father, for example, may have taught you to wash your hands before meals. Your sister may have taught you to ride a bike. Most importantly, the values and attitudes you hold come most often from your family.



Figure 5.11 This baby could learn any language. Will it be French? Japanese? English? Gaelic? Inuktitut? That depends on the baby's family and other agents of socialization.

- ◆ **Schools.** They teach knowledge — what culture is or what history is, for example. They teach skills, such as reading and solving problems. They also teach attitudes and behaviours, such as cooperation and curiosity.

- ◆ **Peer groups.** Your peers are people of about the same age, who have similar interests to your own. Many of your friends, though perhaps not all, are your peers. From your peers, you may have learned such things as what clothes are in style, how to dance, and how to get a babysitting job.

- ◆ **Clubs, teams, and similar organizations.** Girl Guides may have taught you crafts and consideration for others. Playing on a hockey team may have taught you to be a good sport, whether you win or lose.

- ◆ **Community.** A summer job in a community business or other organization may have taught you skills such as running a cash register and dealing with the public. A community arena may have provided you with the opportunity to learn figure skating.

- ◆ **Government,** including government figures such as police and politicians. A warning from a police officer, for example, may have taught you not to walk alone in a certain park at night. A politician speaking on

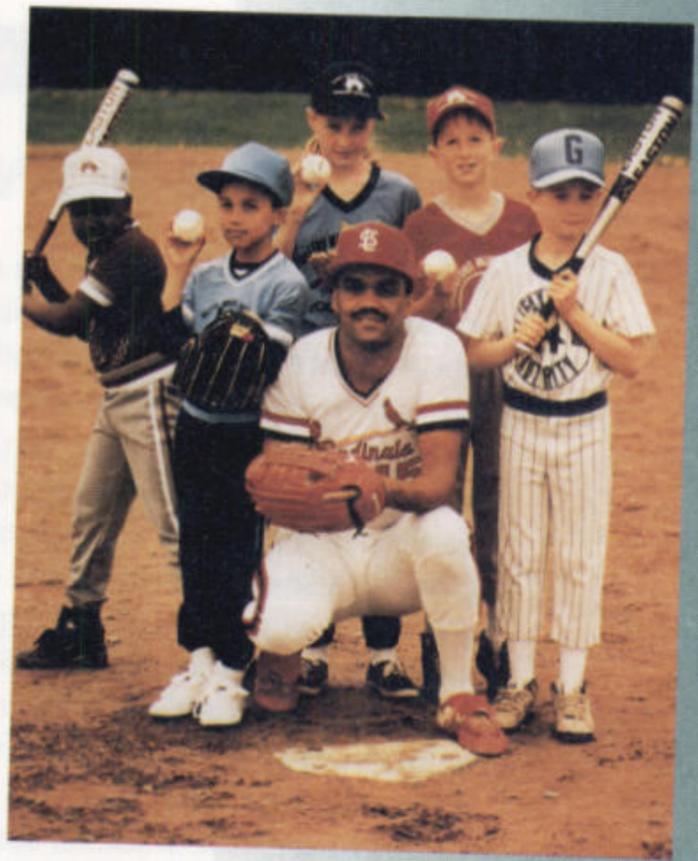


Figure 5.12 Cape Breton native and professional baseball player Curtis Coward takes time away from the St. Louis Cardinals to coach young students in Halifax. Why are sports figures powerful agents of socialization?

TV may have shown you how your community's recycling program works or how an offshore oil discovery might affect your province.

- ◆ **Religious groups.** From these you may have learned values such as honesty, kindness, and forgiveness. You may have learned the meaning behind special occasions such as Diwali, Christmas, Yom Kippur, Ramadan, or Kwanzaa.

- ◆ **Mass media.** As you have already seen, the mass media are an important means of spreading culture, especially popular culture. They are also becoming an important tool for education, as you will see in Unit 4.

The Role of Language

Christine Saulis is a Maliseet language teacher who regularly sees the power of language to socialize. She was hired to teach the language to Maliseet students who had been educated in English. "From day one the children ran to my room and did not want to leave. I still have to shoo them

out of here every day. So obviously it's more than language that they are getting. It's — 'I can be myself!... I don't have to pretend to be anything or anybody else.'"

Source: R. M. Leavitt, Maliseet & Micmac: First Nations of the Maritimes (Fredericton: New Ireland Press, 1995), p. 59.

School Culture: What Difference Can It Make?

In many ways, your school is a microcosm — a miniature model — of the society around you. It has a culture influenced by staff, students, and other members of the community. Various **formal**, or organized, groups contribute to that culture. These might include the chess club, a basketball team, or a student council. **Informal groups** also contribute to the culture of the school. They might include a group of students who meet after school to go skateboarding together, students who often eat lunch together, or students who volunteer to help out in the library during recess.

Most teenage students associate themselves with a group, either formal or informal, within the school culture. This is because most teens have a powerful need to “belong.” While young people develop independence during teenage years, they still need to be part of a group — usually a group of their peers.

Many groups make a positive cultural contribution to your school. Think of a sports team, for example. How do the students, as a group, feel when the team wins a championship? How does the atmosphere of the school change? How does a student council help with the running of the school? On the other hand, some groups can have a negative effect. You may know, for example, of someone who has been excluded from a group — perhaps he or she was not included in arrangements to meet after school. How would this person feel? Why might he or she be excluded? What can happen when understanding and communication between groups break down? What can happen when

understanding among members of the same group breaks down?

What role does the culture of the school play in these cases? In many cases, schools encourage interaction, cooperation, and communication among students. They value the ability to resolve conflicts. Usually they focus on three types of interaction: dialogue, problem solving, and mediation. Look at the lists in Figure 5.13 to learn more about these forms of interaction, and work through the activities below to analyze how the culture of the school can contribute to a positive environment.

ANALYZING THE ISSUE

1. Identify factors that contribute to the culture of your school.
2. **a)** Identify groups that are part of your school.
b) Do you think any of these groups are misunderstood? If so, brainstorm ways in which they could improve understanding within the school.
c) Show how various groups could work with each other to make a more positive contribution to school culture.
3. Role play a dispute between individuals or groups that might happen at your school. Are the guidelines on page 77 sufficient to resolve the conflict?
4. Discuss ways to improve communication and the quality of life for students at your school, at home, and in the community. Act on your ideas!

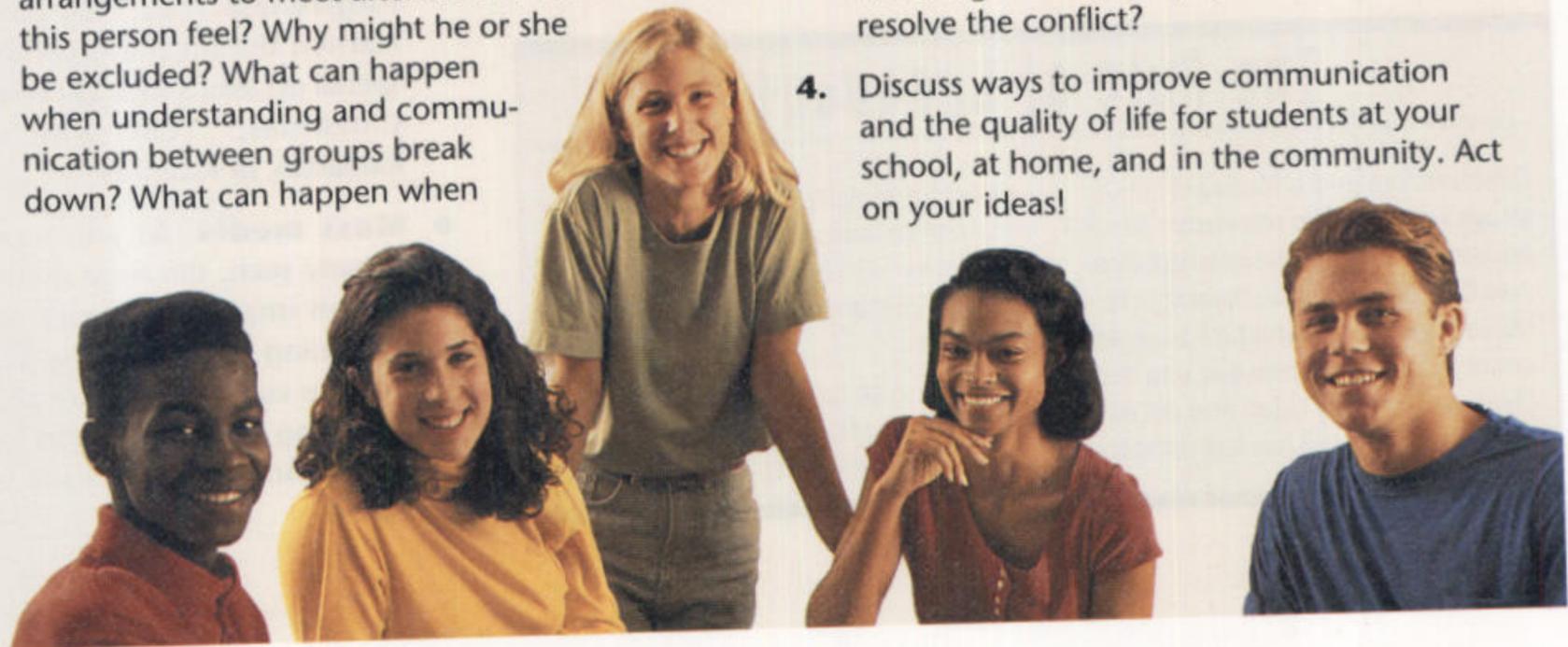
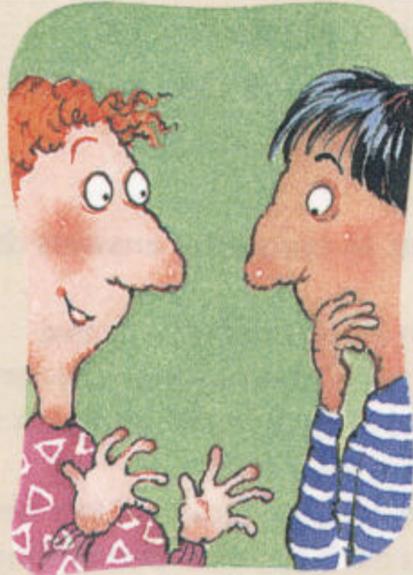


Figure 5.13 Resolving conflicts: Some basic guidelines

Dialogue



dialogue: interchange and discussion of ideas, usually between two parties

Basic rules

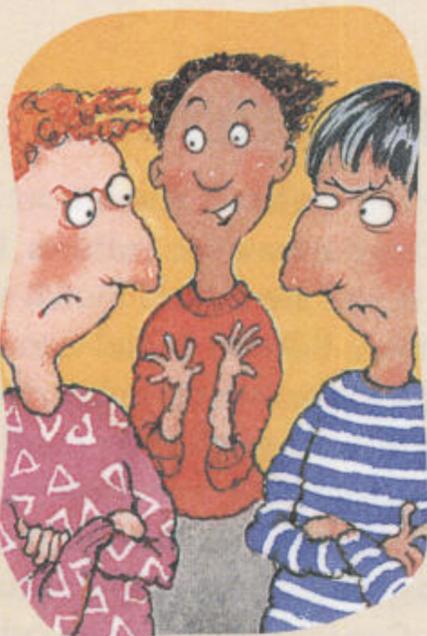
1. Listen to each other. Both parties have a chance to explain their position. Both parties must listen to each other.
2. No blaming. Parties must give their point of view about what happened without blaming the other.
3. Tell the truth. The object is not to blame one party or the other, but to find a solution. Therefore, there is nothing to be gained by not telling the truth.
4. Try to solve the problem in such a way that both parties feel better.

Problem Solving



1. When tempers flare, stop and think. Stay calm.
2. Identify the problem; collect as much information as possible.
3. Identify feelings. How do you feel? How does the other party feel?
4. Decide on a goal.
5. Identify as many possible solutions as you can.
6. Consider the consequences of each one.
7. Evaluate the options, and choose the best solution.
8. Think about possible obstacles, and make a plan for overcoming them.
9. Try your plan, and see what happens. Did it work?
10. If the first plan didn't work, try to find out why. Then try again.

Mediation



mediation: settling a dispute between two other parties in a diplomatic or friendly manner

DO

- Listen carefully.
- Be fair.
- Ask how each party feels.
- Let each party explain what happened.
- Treat each person with respect.
- Keep what you are told confidential.
- Mediate in private.

DON'T

- Take sides.
- Tell the parties what to do.
- Ask who started the dispute.
- Try to blame anyone for the situation.
- Ask, "Why did you do it?"
- Give advice.
- Look for witnesses to the dispute.

Source: Adapted from Earls Court Child and Family Centre, *Peacemaking Skills* (Toronto, 1990).

EXPLORATIONS

REVIEWING THE IDEAS

1. Look back over the list of socialization agents on page 75. List all the agents in order of their influence on you. Beside each, give an example of something you learned from that particular socialization agent.

APPLYING YOUR SKILLS

2. Imagine yourself as a parent some time in the future. You are faced with the task of teaching your child appropriate behaviour, such as how to share toys with others or how to eat with others at the table.
 - a) What types of behaviour would you model for your children?
 - b) What you choose to convey to your child reflects your own culture. How does this culture reflect that of your parents? Your community? How does it reflect your personal convictions? Discuss these questions in a group.

ANALYZING AND REFLECTING

3.
 - a) With a partner, investigate different ways in which you could respond to peer pressure. For each of the situations described, use the following problem-solving approach to reach a recommended course of action.

- i) What is the problem?
- ii) What are the possible solutions?
- iii) What are the pros and cons of each?
- iv) What is your plan of action?

Situations

- Your friend wants to copy your answers during a test.
 - You are out with a group of four or five friends one evening. Two or three of your friends have cans of spray paint and plan to spray some graffiti on a wall.
 - A group of three or four students have been "cornering" you each day and demanding your lunch money.
 - You have noticed a group of three or four students "cornering" another student each day and demanding his lunch money.
 - Your brother or sister is four years younger than you are. You have been given permission to go out with your friends as long as you take your sibling with you.
 - You are out with your friends when they suggest going to the video arcade. You are not allowed to go to the video arcade.
- b) For one of the situations above, prepare a flow diagram, cartoon, or skit to show the problem-solving process. Display the finished product in the classroom.

MAINSTREAM AND CONTRIBUTING CULTURES

Can a person have more than one culture at the same time? What if you are an Irish Catholic urban Newfoundland Canadian? You probably have at least five cultures: Irish, Catholic, urban, Newfoundland, and Canadian. What if you are a rural Dutch vegetarian New Brunswick Canadian? Or a francophone Prince Edward Island Canadian involved in theatre? Or a female Baptist African Canadian active in local politics? What would your various cultures be? How might they overlap? How might they conflict?

Mainstream culture is the general culture of the majority of people. Flowing into mainstream Canadian culture are many **contributing cultures** — cultures of smaller groups of people. A mainstream culture in a local area may be a contributing culture in a larger region. Like brooks running into a larger stream, Canada's contributing cultures add to and enrich the mainstream culture. You will learn more about contributing cultures and their relationship with the mainstream in the chapters that follow.



SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

1. Work in a group to predict changes that might occur in the culture of your area in the next

decade. Organize your predictions into economic, social, and political changes. You might choose to complete this activity as a "jigsaw," by assigning the three different categories to different students, and then sharing and combining your findings afterwards. Consider the following topics:

- clothing
- food
- shelter
- family structures
- transportation
- communications
- entertainment

- medicine
- music
- sports

Make broad, sweeping predictions. Will a rich natural resource be drained or discovered? Will people migrate away from your area or flock to it? Also make very specific, detailed predictions of changes likely to take place over the next ten years. Will the pen you write with, for instance, be disposable? Will it be recyclable? Will pens be obsolete?

- 2.** Present your findings in the form of a chart, diagram, or other display.
- 3.** Compare the predictions of different groups. Are there any common threads among all the predictions?