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Culture Shock

Mr. Beezley has been an elementary school teacher for many years, but teaching school in a small agricultural town in northwestern New Mexico is a new experience for him. Although he's been in town since early July, he hasn't attended any of the social events—the chili suppers, the donkey basketball game, the fall festival organized by the high school students—in the local community. By September, he's developed a reputation as a cold and arrogant Easterner. Little does the community realize that Mr. Beezley is feeling quite overwhelmed in his new teaching position. Most of his students are Navajo children with very different backgrounds than those of his former students back in Massachusetts. He spends his evenings and weekends reading everything he can about Navajo culture, and he spends hours upon hours developing lessons and activities to meet the academic needs of his new students.

The classroom behaviors of Mr. Beezley's students present an additional challenge. Many of the children seem to have trouble staying in their seats and working independently. Mr. Beezley is quite surprised one day early in the school year when one of the boys in his class gets out of his seat to help another boy with a geography assignment. He approaches the two students to see if they need help, but they continue to talk to each other as if he weren't even there. He is shocked by their bold behavior. Back in Massachusetts, his presence alone would have been enough to silence any misbehaving students. At a loss for how to respond, he decides to do nothing for the time being.

A few minutes later, two other boys leave their seats to work with classmates. Having had enough of such behavior, Mr. Beezley reprimands them for getting up without permission. The boys are visibly shocked at his behavior, yet Mr. Beezley has never seen children so blatantly disrespectful. He angrily snatches the assignments on which the two students have been collaborating and insists that they return to their seats.

A few children are obviously quite upset by their teacher's actions, and so other children go to comfort them. Mr. Beezley can't believe that anyone has the nerve to get up after all that has happened. The continuing misbehaviors of his students utterly astonishes him.

"In my classroom, I expect you all to do your own work," he tells his class firmly. "Why are you all so insistent on doing everyone else's work?"

"We always help one another....," Maria responds.

"...Because it's the right thing to do," John continues, completing Maria's thought.

"How can we learn anything....," says Anna.

"If one of us doesn't understand?" adds Victor.

"Good grief," Mr. Beezley thinks to himself, "these children answer questions as a collective group. They can't even talk as individuals!" He is so taken aback by

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the fact that his students are rudely interrupting one another that he doesn't even hear what they are telling him.

Determined to nip the children's inappropriate behavior in the bud, Mr. Beezley goes to the main office after school to seek the advice of the school principal.

Waiting patiently while the principal finishes a telephone conversation, he suddenly finds several of his students standing in front of him with their parents.

"Come....," says one of the parents.

"-and join us for dinner....," adds another parent.

"...for it will give us a chance....," continues a third.

"...to get to know one other," finishes a fourth.

Mr. Beezley is totally confused. Does everyone live in the same house? Or, on the other hand, is he supposed to go to four different homes for dinner in a single

evening?

That evening, after following the parents' directions to the nearby Navajo Nation, Mr. Beezley finds himself at the home of one of his students. As he approaches the front door, he hears a great deal of laughter coming from the house. He expects to find a party inside but discovers that it is merely a gathering of several of his students' families sitting around a large table. The children's parents are telling tales from their own childhood, and one often interrupts another to insert additional anecdotes. They welcome Mr. Beezley to sit down, and for the next two hours he is enthralled by their colorful conversation. He discovers many aspects of Navajo culture about which he had been completely unaware—for example, how different families often live very intermingled lives.

After dinner, when a neighbor's truck breaks down, the entire group comes to the man's aid. Two parents go to town for the necessary parts, and on their return, the entire group works to repair the engine. Several people hold lights while others work under the hood and still others stand by to give advice.

By this time, Mr. Beezley feels comfortable enough that he is laughing and joking with the others. But he realizes that he still has a great deal to learn about the Navajo culture. He suspects that he'll learn as much from his new students as they are likely to learn from him in the days to come.

NOTE: Mr. Beezley spent many hours at the Navajo Nation after that, and he was always greeted affectionately when he arrived. He was frequently invited to join the Nation's sacred rituals, and he eventually became an honorary member of the community.

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Possible questions for "Culture Shock":

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Should Mr. Beezley change his expectations for students' classroom behavior in his new teaching situation? Why or why not?

In general, to what extent is it appropriate for teachers to adjust their expectations and teaching practices to the cultural backgrounds of their students?

Might there be occasions in which Mr. Beezley should insist that his students work independently?

Mr. Beezley has difficulty making sense of the dinner invitation from his students' parents. Explain his difficulty using the notion of knowledge construction.

Beginning teachers are often so busy preparing their daily lessons and familiarizing themselves with school procedures that they lose sight of the larger community within which they work. As a new teacher, how might you get to know something about the culture or cultures in which your students have been raised?