



# ITLS INTERNATIONAL TEACHERS FOR TOMORROW'S SCHOOL

SYSTEM CHANGE AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INTERCULTURAL  
SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT AND MUTUAL LEARNING

## Does national culture exist – an exercise on stereotypes

### Abstract:

This activity helps participants to understand how assumptions are made based on ideas of 'national culture'.

It seeks to help them reflect on the source of these assumptions, the validity or lack of in their use and how they lead to stereotypes, prejudice and can fuel racism.

It should help them understand how notions of a national culture are used by powerful groups to promote an 'us and them' (with 'us' generally being seen as superior).

It could also lead to understanding the concept of 'othering'.

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### Type of document:

exercise

### Target groups:

teacher trainers

### Goals:

raise awareness about cultural bias and conscious or unconscious assumptions/stereotypes regarding others

### Keywords:

culture, stereotypes

## Does national culture exist – an exercise on stereotypes

As soon as one takes a closer look at intercultural or migration-related issues, one runs the risk of reinforcing existing stereotypes and clichés. Talking about “culture” can reinforce boundaries that are partly conscious and partly unconscious in society and at school.

In order to avoid such traps, it is advisable to first pave the way for a shared basic understanding of culture and migration societies. This could be done, for example, in the context of in-house teachers training, an educational day or conferences. One could start with case studies and enable an exchange of personal experiences and evaluations of these cases. Or one uses methods from intercultural or racism-critical educational work, such as the albatross exercise, to make everyday perception traps tangible. On this basis, an agreement can then be reached on the following reflection questions.

It is worth taking a break from everyday business and becoming aware of your own attitude and that of your colleagues.

- ❖ **Time:** 2 hours
- ❖ **Group:** Ideally no more than 25 to allow for discussions
- ❖ **Preparation and Resources:** Flip chart or board to list contributions

The facilitator should have a good understanding of the topic under discussion and related issues. It is likely that some participants will question the ideas as often people are led to be ‘proud’ of being of a specific nation. Thus, there may be controversial inputs that require a good knowledge base, confidence with the material and a degree of sensitivity.

### Instructions

#### ❖ Step 1

With reference to the group participating choose a category of people ie students, teachers and draw up a list of words people use to describe the group. Encourage participants to use any words both positive, negative, stereotypes etc.

#### ❖ Step 2

You should have a list that looks something like this if you use the category student:

- Studious
- Broke
- Lazy

- Scruffy
- Clever
- Loud
- Drug users
- Noisy
- Rebellious
- Left wing
- Promiscuous
- Bookish

### ❖ Step 3

Discuss the list and ask “Does this describe you?” Whilst some of the terms will relate to some of the people it will not be possible to say that the list of descriptors apply to all, possibly none of the participants.

### ❖ Step 4

Ask participants to now help draw up a list of words that are used to describe the peoples culture in the country you are in or from which the majority of participants are from. Again, these can be positive, negative, stereotypes – accept suggestions without correction or comment. If you were in Iceland your list might look something like this:

- Turf houses
- Wool Sweaters
- Choirs
- Knitting
- Sheep farming
- Language
- Fermented shark
- Elves and Trolls
- Mountain climbing
- Football

### ❖ Step 5

Take each item on the list and ask “Do we all do this? Do we all like this?”

- Turf Houses – *we don't live in these anymore*
- Choirs – *we don't all like this music*
- Knitting – *we don't all knit*
- Sheep farming – *we don't all have anything to do with this*
- Language – *we have many different forms of the same language: generational, dialect, professional discourses, elaborate or restricted codes, sign language, languages of immigrant groups, English 'creep'*
- Fermented shark – *more likely to eat pizza, shark is for tourists*
- Elves and Trolls – *claims that Icelanders believe in these are overstated, most dont*
- Mountain climbing – *some do, many dont*
- Football – *we don't all like it, we are not all good at it. Many of the national achievements in sport and other areas are due less to 'Viking spirit' than to the benefits of high levels of social welfare and the holistic approaches to education*

#### ❖ Step 6

Separate the group into smaller groups of around 5 and ask them to extract from the list what they now consider to be the 'National Culture of (chosen country)'. You should find the list now to be empty or having one or two words remaining.

#### ❖ Step 7

Ask 'What are Ziglanders like?' - no one will know as there is no such place. Make the point that despite perhaps only knowing a few or no people from a range of countries we often feel we 'know' what the people are like. The information we have built this 'knowledge' on is often sensationalised, partial, biased and certainly not possible to apply to 'all' people of a specific nation.

### Debrief and Evaluation

Discuss with the group the following points:

- Can you make accurate predictions about how a person is based on nationality?

- Immigrants are frequently asked to 'assimilate' – how can they know what it is they are being asked to assimilate to?
- How does class, gender, religion, status intersect with ideas of national culture?
- Language can be learned but does it make you an Icelander, German etc?
- Language can be attributed specifically but do different discourses exist within the same language group – dialect, argot within sub cultures, restricted and elaborate codes, historic language suppression, code switching
- How does the idea of a national culture interplay with concepts of racism, prejudice, stereotyping?
- Is the concept of national culture used in a negative way ie to 'other others' and instil notions of superiority via Nationalism?