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Cultural Autobiography

Multicultural education as it relates to teachers is their ability to understand the various backgrounds their students may have and to understand how to use this knowledge to improve the students’ educational experience through discussions and interactions with other students. These interactions between students of different backgrounds will help them develop of who they are as individuals and understand how they differ with others, and gain knowledge of how variations in cultural backgrounds can be a tool to find unique and innovative ideas to solve problems in the present and future. First I would like to describe the biggest elements of my life that have shaped who I am. Then, I will discuss how these elements have affected my attitude toward each element of cultural identity.

I grew up in a relatively small city of 35,000 people called Goshen, Indiana. Goshen, Indiana is unique in the region in that there is a Hispanic community that makes up about one third of the population, which is higher than any of the nearby cities. In 2014, the year after I graduated high school, the students in the Goshen Community School System became 51% Hispanic putting white students in the minority.

Goshen citizens are strongly rooted in the Christian church. It is made apparent by how easy it is to find churches of several denominations in and around the city. There is a special concentration in Goshen of Mennonites, which is also the kind of church that I grew up in. The Mennonite denomination separates itself from other denominations by its emphasis on peace within themselves, with others, and with God. And a love of God is the medium through which peace can be achieved. My family members have been a part of the Mennonite church my whole life.

My family is a relatively small, all-white family. We value being good to one another and the importance of school, as well as being your true self. When I was younger, my family would have been considered lower middle class because my father was providing for a family of five with just a custodial job. We weren’t poor, we had enough, but we didn’t get many extras and had to use what we had. My dad changed jobs to work at the post office when I was in middle school and we have since rose to middle to upper-middle class.

When I got to college, I began spending my summers participating in an activity call drum corps. When you are in a drum corps, you spend the whole summer living with 149 other members, traveling around the country and rehearsing and performing what is essentially an extravagant marching band show. The members of any given drum corps tend to come from all over the country, with some people coming from other parts of the world, such as Japan, Canada or Europe. You spend all summer with these people, through the ups and the downs.

**Sexual Orientation**

When I was growing up in a family that regularly attended a fairly conservative church, I was always taught that I was supposed to love a woman because I am a man. That was what my parents wanted for us, and I think they learned this from their parents as well as the Mennonite church, which has taken the stance that we are all God’s children, but homosexuality is still a sin. There wasn’t a very vibrant gay community in Goshen, so I hadn’t really had enough interactions with anyone who identifies as a homosexual to actually see what it means.

When I got to college and began participating in drum corps, I began meeting people who identified as homosexuals, men in particular. I was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of spending my entire summer sleeping in the same rooms with them, but as the summer progressed, I realized that I was actually very safe and I made friends and really started understanding what being homosexual actually was. Many of these new friends had faced struggles, just like the people who struggled in the in-class videos, with ridicule from close family. But they still chose to be good people, which is really what stuck out to me.

In my classroom, I will make a conscious effort to treat my future students in the gay community with respect and creating a safe environment where the expectation is that they will be accepted by other students as well because I know that they have personal struggles with ridicule and harassment of this one part of their identity.

**Religion**

Another area in which I have really opened my mind is religious diversity. sGoshen did not have a large community outside of the Christian church. The second biggest religious group that I would have been around growing up would be the non-churchgoing community. But even then, many of them would claim that they still believed in God, so I was never faced with much of a variance from what I was taught. So it wasn’t until I got to college that I was able to meet some Jews. Again, as with homosexuals, after I met some people of a different religion and saw that they were actually still people with senses of humor and talents. I also began thinking more about religion in college and how I identify myself religiously. I learned that many religions teach very similar values, such as love, so I determined that it is not my place to decide that one religion is “better” or “the right one” because they all play a role in the world we live in.

In my classroom, I will work to ensure that all religions are respected by myself and my students. The classroom should be a place where students need to be comfortable with who they are to learn, especially because I am going into music education. Truly great music can’t be made if there isn’t trust between players.

**Race**

Again, Racial diversity wasn’t something I was exposed to until I left for college. There were many people of Hispanic descent in my hometown, but I don’t feel that it compares to the kind of diversity that can be found on a college campus. I have made friends in the school of music who have come from very different racial backgrounds than me, and very often, we become close. I understand that racial prejudice stems from a long history of inequality, but after taking this course, I feel that I can start promoting racial equality in my class. Every student will walk into my classroom with some kind of racial bias ingrained in them. And if one of them expresses a belief in inequality, I know that I need to engage that student in discussion about why they believe that and begin to work towards more open-mindedness.

I walked into this class being familiar with the idea of white privilege, how I automatically had things that others didn’t have because of the color of my skin. Although it was at first a hard concept for me to understand, I have had time to reflect on what it is. I am closer to understanding what privileges I have had in my life because of my race and gender and why I have those privileges. In my understanding, white privilege could be renamed “majority privilege.” And I understand that it is truly a form of inequality in a country that preaches of equality for all. Examples of this inequality were found in Peggy MacIntosh’s article *White Privilege*. However, this is still a concept I will continue to reflect on and develop my understanding of. I feel that even though I have made progress in understanding my own racial biases, it is still and area that I will improve on in my life and classroom.

**Abilities/Disabilities**

I understand that students will walk into my classroom with a wide range of ability. The Goshen school system uses tracking in courses like math and English, however there is not a tracking system in music. Working with a variety of skill levels in the same classroom is something that we work on in my music education courses, so I feel that I, as a teacher, will be able to accommodate my students. However, I feel that it will be my responsibility to make sure that when they walk into my classroom, we are one group trying to meet one goal, making great music. Students should not be ridiculed by their peers for their abilities because it is not something they could have chosen for themselves. I will work to emphasize teamwork in my classroom because that’s the only way good music is made. I will also hold my students to a high standard because students will work to meet whatever expectations are set for them, as demonstrated in Alex Spiegel’s article.

**Class**

As a child growing up, we were closer to the poor end of the SES spectrum. I remember that it was fairly common for me to visit my friends’ houses and see that they simply had more than I did. However, I was very fortunate in that it did not inhibit the opportunities that were presented to me. In Kozol’s article *Savage Inequalities* and *Restoring Our Schools*  by Linda Darling-Hammond, they outline the horrific disrepair and obsolete resources that are given to schools in poorer areas. As a teacher, if I find myself in a school that has fewer resources, I will understand that it is not the students’ faults. They are the victims of a vicious cycle of poor education and low resources, causing teachers to feel that they have to hold students to lower expectations, which cause them to grow up in a lower-class mentality. This cycle is more clearly outlined in the article *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work* that we read in class.

**Language**

The community I grew up in and interacted with were all English-speakers. However, the Hispanic community that I would interact with at school also spoke Spanish at home. So a degree of language diversity has always been present in my life. It wasn’t uncommon to see my Hispanic peers speaking in Spanish to one another. I never had a problem with this personally, because it felt very normal for me to hear that at school. So I understand that a student’s native language is very important to them, because it is what they learned first, the language of whoever takes care of them. This class has also helped me to understand that a language barrier between a student and me as a teacher could cause problems if they aren’t addressed. A teacher should never make a student feel less capable because of their language. It is the responsibility of the teacher to make the curriculum accessible to non-standard English speakers whether through translation or modification. Articles like *Teaching Standard English: Whose Standard?*  by Linda Christensen provide enlightenment of the importance of modifying the curriculum to accommodate language, specifically to students who are more comfortable with African-American Vernacular.

**Gender**

As I was very young, my mom stayed at home with me and my siblings to take care of us, while my dad would go to work. But when my brother and I both started going to school, my mom started working part-time. I feel that this would reinforce the idea of gender roles in my thinking more, if I hadn’t also been taught to hold a great deal of respect for what my mother was doing for us. And as I grew up and went through school, I slowly realized how much my mother actually did for me and my siblings, and I understand that women are equally as capable as men to accomplish anything, but society has pushed them to stay in the home where they have to take care of children and lose potential to maximize their abilities. In my classroom, I will hold my male, female or transgender students to the same high level. I will try to help them understand that education should not hold them back from doing something they want to do because of their gender.

**Geography**

Students almost never have any choice concerning where they grow up. As I look back, it’s an element that I saw growing up, and that I see today when I work with children. Very often, students will stay in the same place they grew up in, and where their parents grew up and so on. It is part of the reason why poor areas stay poor and wealthy areas stay wealthy. Unless you are in a city that constantly has people coming and going, there’s a good chance that students will grow up and stay where they are. This concept was explained very well in the video watched in class about the state of schools in Ohio. Education is meant to bring the resources needed to improve lives to everyone so that they can improve things where they are.

Routinely considers socio-cultural nuances, analyzes social organization and the sources of inequality in order to reduce the impact on students, curriculum and assessment including consideration of the role of dominant groups

As can be seen, there are several elements outside of the school that impact a student’s educational experience. These elements can cause a divide between me and my students as well as between my students, and if I’m not actively searching for these divides and what’s causing them, I will be doing my students and injustice. This class has opened my eyes to what these elements are and their impact on who I am, and how they could shape my students. If I can show my students the important of acknowledging and accepting that their peers in life will come from a wide variety of backgrounds different than their own, I think that I will be doing my students well in preparing them for their futures.