

EDU 367 Sythesis

Ashley Becker

Professor Mike Taylor, Ph.D.

Introduction

Throughout the current semester, I have been studying about diversity, specifically the diversity we encounter in a classroom. What I have learned this semester through reading course texts, my diversity practicum, and other diverse experiences, I have grown in my diverse experiences in which I will give specific examples throughout the course of this paper. I will be connecting and shedding light on these experiences with my autobiography that I wrote at the beginning of the semester.

I will begin by connecting experiences from my youth, then move into more recent high school, traveling abroad in College and then current experiences. To conclude I will be giving myself advice by learning about myself, about my students, cultivating allies, and having a life.

Connections

Early Life

Riding four-wheelers, milking cows, and harvesting fields with the combine were all very familiar scenes for me growing up. Tradition is grained deeply in my bones. I live in the house that my great grandfather built, we use the barn my great-grandfather built when he purchased the original land that we still currently live on and work with. Most of the trees around my home were planted by the hands of my ancestors. Not only my physical being is rooted in tradition, but so is my spiritual being. Growing up in a catholic family, tradition is a huge part of me. My grandparents were the children of immigrants. My grandparents even continue to speak German. They were never taught to write German, but they still know the language and as my grandpa says, grandma brings out her German when she is angry. Being near and respecting those older generations was something instilled in me. "Respect was a value deeply embedded in my being from my upbringing and cultural experience. Lines on her face showed the wisdom of age and

experience” (Treuer, 2012, p. 4) I was able to learn about my ancestors and their hard work. I also have learned a great deal of wisdom from my grandparents. They were very hard-working people who have many lines on the faces and hands, but those are lines of much wisdom!

I grew up in a whole family in a small, rural town in North Dakota. Things were very consistent. Most of those around me grew up similar to myself. None of my friends even came from divorced families. Not that each family wasn't unique and had its own share of joys and suffering, but all very similar. “All human beings have dark chapters in their personal histories” (Treuer, 2012, p. 31). I may not have grown up around what one would think would be average American families, there was a great deal of suffering in our town over a short period of time. There were a number of shocking deaths, a school secretary, teacher, and a student all within two years, and also other key members of the community. Coming from a small community, the community really came together for support of one another during this dark chapter of personal history.

High School

In the 8th grade, I started to spend a lot of time with a cousin of mine in Bismarck. He took me under his wing and introduced me to new people, especially those in youth group. During this time, I encountered people where their faith was not just another hobby, but it was integrated into their whole life and webbed out into everything they did. “Prayer is not a weekly event arranged by others but a daily event that is self-orchestrated” (Treuer, 2012, p. 53). I was able to relate to Treuer and see that the faith of the Indians would have been really important to them and that it was a way of life. I was able to see this in action with those other young people whom knew their faith and lived it out.

In addition to my cousin, high school provided new opportunities for us. My English teacher took us to the powwow which was a cool experience. We spent a whole unit on an Native American culture then was able to see it in close up in action, especially dancing. “Men’s ‘fancy dance’ [has] dancers display rapid footwork and even gymnastic moves, spinning, cartwheeling, and jumping. Among the most popular styles to watch, it is much more widely practiced at competition powwows than traditional ones” (Treuer, 2012, p. 72). Even though we spend a unit on the Native American culture, I do not remember being able to pick out the differences in dances but we did see competitive dances, so I am sure we saw the Men’s fancy dance.

Also at the Powwow, I enjoyed some freshly squeezed lemonade and an Indian Taco. While reading Treuer, I realized that an Indian taco wouldn’t have been what they considered to be a luxury as we often do. For them it was being resourceful. “Fry bread was created by resourceful Indians who were trying to subsist upon U.S. government rations of lard and flour” (Treuer, 2012, p. 45). It is interesting how different foods at different times for different people can be very in the sense of luxury or simply surviving.

One experience in particular that has stuck with me, is that for two years, I participated in a program called YTM-Youth in Theology and Ministry, at St. John’s University in MN. This encouraged my interaction with those from other states, not only was it small, passing conversations, but I got to know some from Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and even Alaska! Also on this retreat, the first year you have a mission project. I was assigned to Casa Guadalupe. At Casa Guadalupe, we literally went to a little park outside a trailer court. Parents were generally at work and just their kids were left at home. A lot of these students were also Hispanic, and most were bilingual. This experience really opened my eyes to the simple poverty around me but also a short introduction to the Hispanic culture. “My passion was in teaching and laying down the

path for many other bilingual students to be able to embrace who they are not just as English learners but as speakers of Spanish or any bilingual student” (Nieto, 2013, p. 81). This was my first long longer term of being exposed to a different language and a little girl would teach me new Spanish words everyday and I was able to see them embracing their culture and that they were not just EL students, but bilingual students and that they know how to express themselves in a larger variety of ways!

Abroad in College

During sophomore year, I did take a semester to study abroad in Rome. Being 4 months in a foreign country is much different the 10 days one takes to visit a foreign country. It always for one to become more accustom to culture and even to embrace it. Granted, with the awesome opportunity UMary provides, it is still a bit separated from an emersion into the culture. With this experience, we had different professors come to us and teach us for weeks at a time. There was a much greater collaboration among our professors and they would touch on other parts of other classes and other field trips. Also, having two of the professors married, they really were able to collaborate and cover a larger number of topics in different subject areas more efficiently. “...Greater collaboration among teachers and school leaders would lead to major improvement in student achievement. Also in schools with a culture of higher collaboration, teachers were more satisfied with their career. Yet, on average, teachers spend less than three hours a week in structured collaboration with other teachers” (Nieto, 2013, p. 26). I was able to be on the receiving end of teachers collaborating well and it really did enrich my experience and lead to greater achievement for myself. I was able to see upfront the importance of collaboration.

Also while we were in Rome, we had a professor from France who was an awesome professor. At times, you could definitely tell that she was different a little bit from us and our

way of life. But, she brought her whole self to the classroom everyday and was able to share with us a new culture as well. As Nieto as "...Leaving my cultural baggage at the door—in essence, leaving behind my identity—was not only difficult but also impossible, because my identity, knowledge, and experiences were the best ways to connect with my students" (Nieto, 2013, p, 33). She knew that the best way to connect with us students was to bring her whole self and leave her cultural baggage at the door.

We were actually able to learn all the more being our professor brought her whole self into the classroom. She also knew how to teach students that are different from herself. "Too many teachers feel unprepared to teach students that are different from themselves" (Nieto, 2013, p. 20). I know we were not her first class and I am sure it was a bit intimidating her first few classes of teaching students different than herself, but it showed that she has become more comfortable overtime! I do not think I will ever be fully be prepared to teach students different than myself, but that I can always take it as a learning opportunity and work on establishing that relationship so that I am more comfortable teaching that individual student which may or may not help me with other students in the future.

In Rome, we had a tight knit community. We were learning Italian and how to be "Romans." At first when we got there, it was a bit awkward and no one wanted to mess up in Italian class with Dr. Franko but we all did want to learn. As the semester went on, we grew a lot more comfortable with one another and started to learn some basic Italian a lot faster. "... Creating a culturally responsive space. We have to build a community of trust before we can even get there" (Nieto, 2013, p. 57). This shows the importance of forming community of trust to get to that culturally responsive space.

AVID

AVID is a class that works with students of diverse backgrounds. The basis of being a tutor with AVID is to facilitate conversation and to help guide a student if other help cannot be given by other students. Tutorial days with a tutor are set up in small groups where students ask each other questions in different subject areas to help them get to an answer. The population of the students in AVID are most likely first generation college student, low SES, or in a race minority. With the variety of students, it is essential to have a culturally responsive space so that the students are comfortable with one another to continue to learn. “Regardless of all decisions about labels, however, it is most critically important that we respect one another and create an environment in which it is safe to ask any thoughtful question without fear” (Treuer, 2012, p. 8). There should be room for any thoughtful question to be asked without fear in any classroom. This isn’t just on the teacher’s end but teaching the students how to treat each of their classmates with respect is essential.

In a class that is surrounded by connecting with others in order to go beyond the curriculum, there is a large need for open communication where the students, teachers, and tutors are able to connect authentically. “Communication requires a safe space for discourse, an opportunity for genuine connection, and authentic, reliable information” (Treuer, 2012, p. 5). Once the connection is made, then can more authentic, reliable information be transmitted from one person to another.

Practicum

During a practicum experience for my related major, I was with a teacher who worked with a large number of diverse students. Diverse in culture, home life, SES, and intellectual ability. Her core motto was “Fair isn’t everyone getting the same thing, but everyone getting what they need to be successful. I think this is key for working with students of diverse

backgrounds. This also relies on her relationship with her students and knowing them. She is able to respond to continue to have high expectations for them, but also knows their limits and abilities. "...Believing in students, showing interest in their well-being, demanding only the best from them, having high expectations of them, and supporting them in meeting those high expectations" (Nieto, 2013, p. 34). A teacher plays an essential role of demanding the best from her students and should work closely with all her students to support them in her expectations for them.

My teacher did a great job of recognizing who was in her class and responding to her students and makes them each feel unique and valued. "Teach in ways that respect and honor their students' identities and transcend gender, race, and experience" (Nieto, 2013, p. 44). I hope to follow her example and those whom I have read about with Nieto. For example, there is a student from Iraq and he learned to read right to left so every now and again, the teacher will go through problems on the board from right to left just to change things up and to show that she recognizes where this student comes from and makes it a bit more familiar.

Conclusion

Learn About Myself

In teaching, we do not teach just a topic, but we teach ourselves, our values, beliefs, etc., "Knowing oneself is a key ingredient in being able to connect with one's students" (Nieto, 2013, p. 100). As Nieto simply says, it is a key first step as well to get to know and connect with one's students as well. A part of knowing oneself, is to have time for reflection, reflection both personally and professionally. Reflection is a key element of even getting to know oneself and then improving one's self to better not only a job, but life as a whole.

In learning about myself, I must learn of when to step in and take action. I will probably encounter many situations where I may not know what to do, but it is essential that if there is something to be done, I have the courage to do it. As Treuer says, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing” (Treuer, 2012, p. 164). I do not want evil to triumph over any individual student, my class, or the school. It is important to be aware of myself and where I lack in confidence so that I can work on it and better serve my students.

Learn About my Students

I hope to learn about my students, to get to know them on a personal level, and to encourage them in their life where they are. This could be as simple as being present, to attend events that my students hold dear, to be a listening ear, and encouraging them with my words and actions for their interests that are unique to them. A large part of teaching is surrounded by relationship and that is not something that can always be taught and planned for, but it is an acquired skill. “It was not about knowing how to do a lesson plan. It’s always about knowing how to create an environment to foster humanity, to foster relationships. When you do that, the context will be so much easier to transmit because you’re in a conversation with people telling a story” (Nieto, 2013, p. 99). Having a the basis of relationship to get to know my students will allow for easier classroom management, motivation for achievement, and desire to know the content. Telling and sharing of a story, the story of myself and my values and beliefs, can be pretty easily seen by my students and they can learn a lot from it.

Getting to know my students allows me to help find their vocation and guide them to a path of success. As a teacher, I hope to help my students get to know themselves and hold themselves at a high value. I hope all of my students can know that they are valued by me, even on days when they do not see it themselves and that I am their to help shed light on their own

value. “They valued who they are and they valued their stories” (Nieto, 2013, p. 52). Coming to know of the purpose for one's life and that each person's story is worth being heard and fully lived out.

Cultivate Allies

I hope to cultivate allies through relationships. I have already started cultivating allies by being connecting with different mentors and practicum teachers. I also am connecting with allies of other future educators. This is something that will continue to happen as my life goes on but I hope to be intentional and not to be afraid to admit when I need help. “Having colleagues to share ideas and resources and learn from one another really made me feel that I could teach” (Nieto, 2013, p. 61). There is a great burden that comes with teaching and forming other's lives and how much that lightens the workload when the heavy cross can be shared!

Have a Life

Lastly, I must have a life. Teaching means giving so much of one's self, the entirety of one's self. You can't give what you don't have. I must get to know myself and also seek refreshment, for me especially in prayer. “...She was exhausted but fulfilled... Alicia's experiences at the school were draining, eye-opening, and gratifying” (Nieto, 2013, p. 68). Teaching is exhausting, eye opening, and also very fulfilling. Seeking intention refreshment is a must in order that I can continue to give. It is also important to make time for my priorities, God, my family, and my friends, and to give them time. Some ways I seek refreshment is through daily prayer, playing cards with my family (specifically on Sundays), and making intentional time to eat meals with those friends whom I love. In addition, to intentionally make time for things that I enjoy. These are all ways I hope to discover life through taking trips, trying out new hobbies, and fostering new relationships so I may become a better teacher.

References:

Nieto, Sonia (2013). *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds*; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Treuer, A. (2012). *Everything you wanted to know about Indians but were afraid to ask*. Saint Paul, MN: Borealis Books.