

Synthesis Paper

Autumn Alt

Dr. Michael Taylor, PhD.

Introduction

“Culturally responsive teaching is thus purposeful and has specific goals: to affirm who students are in order to have them connect with school, accept and relish who they are, and succeed academically” (Nieto, 2013, p. 140). Cultural diversity is a term that is continuously being used in today’s classrooms. Developing culturally responsive teaching methods will be beneficial to the overall classroom environment. This quote embodies what teaching students with diverse backgrounds entails as well as what it means and requires, which will be discussed in different aspects throughout the paper.

In reference to my autobiography that was created at the beginning of the semester, I grew up in an area in North Dakota where there was little to no cultural diversity within the community, or so I thought. This paper integrates elements of my autobiography and incorporates the knowledge I have learned not only through readings and class discussions, but through my time spent in the practicum setting getting to understand students of diverse backgrounds. Although I had little experience in this area, the information that has been provided to me through these different experiences has taught me how to bring joy into my classroom while teaching classes full of diverse students.

I find it interesting to see how my views on cultural diversity have developed through different settings that I have been exposed to. Throughout this paper, I will re-examine aspects of my autobiography through different bolded themes. Everything I have learned throughout this semester is backed by information presented through Nieto’s text and Treuer’s text. By having these incorporated into the curriculum, my eyes have been opened to a new light that has helped me develop an understanding for how to teach students with diverse backgrounds in my own

classroom.

Elementary School

I grew up in a small town in southwest North Dakota with a population ranging around three hundred people. For the first few years of my life I lived in Bismarck, but those years are very distant in my memory. Being from a small town, there was very little cultural diversity, or at least that's what I thought at such a young age. In elementary school, I thought cultural diversity was simply those who were a different race than I was; however, I was not exposed to different races at this age. Whether it was riding my bike around town or going to school, the population was Caucasian (white).

For the first few years of my schooling in the elementary setting, I don't recall being taught much about cultural diversity. "What teachers know and do is one of the most important influences on what students learn" (Nieto, 2013, p. 14). When I came across this quote from Nieto, it made me think back to what I was taught about cultural diversity at such a young age. I can remember sitting in my second-grade classroom discussing different cultural practices. We even had a day set aside to practice some things other cultures did! This left an impression on me and would be something I want to include in my classroom someday. However, one thing I would change is getting my students exposed to this outside of the classroom. There is a difference between obtaining the information and actually having a personal experience with cultural diversity, and I want my students to feel comfortable being around those who are a different race than themselves and who have different practices than they do. This was an experience that I didn't have, and looking back at my elementary years, it shows. What teachers know and do really is one of the most important influences on what a student learns, and I want to embody that for my students.

It wasn't until my third-grade year in school when I started being exposed to diversity and came to add a new definition to what I had already known. Third-grade started out just like any other grade in elementary school. I was excited to organize all my supplies in my desk, excited to see my friends again, and excited to see what teachers I had for that year. Everything seemed to be exactly the way it should be. A couple months after school started, we had two new students join our class. The girl always wore a dress that looked older, and she wore a bonnet on her head at all times. The boy wore older shirts, always had black pants on, and had to wear suspenders. They wore clothes like this every day. Because of that, I associated them as being different from me, and I wasn't comfortable around them.

Getting comfortable around these new students in our class took me some time. I remember being partnered up with the boy for a project, and it was unsettling for me. It wasn't until I began to get to know both of them that my perspective on what diversity is started to grow. I came to understand that these students lived in a colony and are recognized as Hutterites; which is a different type of religion that they abide by. At this age, this concept was bizarre to me. I honestly had no idea such a thing existed. It occurred to me that this world we live in is so much larger than I had pictured it to be. "We need to expand the notion of diversity as it is generally understood" (Nieto, 2013, p. 139). Up until this point in my life, I only understood diversity in a way that related to the race of others. Never would I have considered religious practices to fit into that category, but it most certainly does. As a future educator, I have come to the realization that I will need to expand the idea of diversity beyond how it is generally understood.

The next few years of my elementary school experience seemed to be the same, except the next year the Hutterites left our school to attend another. Therefore, everything seemed to go

back to the way it was before. Now, being from a small town and going to a small school sometimes required a little extra cooperation. Being enrollment was low, our school ended up having to co-op with a school in a neighboring town about fifteen miles away. When I reached fifth-grade, my class grew from six to a class size of almost twenty. This caused a lot of anxiety for me, and I wasn't prepared for what I thought this change might bring.

Overall, the experience wasn't as bad as I had anticipated, but there was more diversity within this class than there had been in any other of my elementary classes. After the co-op began and our classes combined, I found that the Hutterites that were in my class before were now in my class again. This was also my first experience having class with an African American student. I knew by this point in my life that there were people of different races; however, I had never interacted with anyone of a different race until our two classes combined. For me, it was unsettling because I didn't know what to expect per say. Was this person going to have different values than I did? Was I going to have common likes/dislikes with this person? It was all new to me. Not only did I have a classmate of a different race, I had a gym teacher who was also of African American descent. I remember that getting accustomed to these differences in my school didn't take long. It was more of an initial shock that the community around me was changing. This experience helped me grow as an individual because I was now being exposed to more diversity within not only the community, but the world around me.

“The best way to be prepared to teach students who embody all these differences is to develop a social justice approach to teaching... It requires being open and flexible, willing to learn, and humble” (Nieto, 2013, p. 20). When I look back on my elementary school years, there was much more diversity within it than I had ever thought at the time. This quote relates to how I feel I have grown as a future educator. The key factor being the willingness to learn. I know I

have a long way to go when it comes to understanding diversity completely, but if I am willing to learn about and from my students, I am on the way to developing that social justice approach to teaching.

As I am preparing to be an elementary educator, there was a quote by Nieto I found to be of great advice. She said, “The best piece of advice I received during my teacher preparation program many years ago was to ‘start where the kids are at’” (Nieto, 2013, p. 33). Of course, this could be referring to academic content, but I also transferred this into the terms of cultural diversity. When I am teaching my students about cultural diversity, I need to start at the level that they are at. I need to grasp their understanding so I am able to teach them and expose them to different aspects of diversity. Looking back at my elementary years, I feel this would have been very helpful for my own personal understanding. However, now I know or have a better idea as to what I need to do for my future students in order to expose them to diversity, as well as incorporating it into the classroom.

Middle School

There were many changes that occurred throughout my elementary school years; however, as I moved into the middle school setting, the overall environment didn't seem to change a whole lot. My classmates and teachers stayed the same throughout this time. The big experience I remember during my middle school years was when my family took a vacation one summer to Yellowstone National Park. My family is one that likes to drive when we take vacations, so the drive through Montana and Wyoming was exciting for my sisters and I, although it seemed to take forever. When we arrived at the park, I was shocked to see how diverse this area of the country is. There were busses of people from different continents and several different languages being spoken. This was my first large encounter with cultural

diversity. This is when I really began to accept the fact that the world is a much bigger place than I would have ever anticipated. "...lose the arrogance of thinking that one way of seeing or understanding the world is the only possible way and recognize that there are many different ways of naming and understanding the world" (Nieto, 2013, p. 113-114). This is when I began to grow more comfortable being around people who show different characteristics than myself. There are several different ways of understanding the world, and my definition of what diversity grew to be recognized as race, religion, and geographic location. I came to understand that we might show different characteristics on the outside, but that is what makes us unique as individuals. When I understood that, I became more comfortable having these encounters with diversity.

High School

After the experiences I had between elementary and middle school, high school didn't bring about many changes. The only large change I had experienced was going to school in another town. Being we had to co-op, my high school education was fulfilled at the neighboring school. The change didn't scare me, but I did wonder if it was going to be different than what I was used to. Change is something that I usually have a very difficult time with, but the transition seemed to go smooth and I had no problem. Coming into the high school setting, I had grown accustomed to what little diversity there was between the two towns and accepted the diversity in the world around me.

As I reflect back on my high school years, I can't help but think about how my teachers' teachings incorporated culturally responsive teaching practices. "But what about teachers who don't share the same culture as their students? Many teachers have had neither personal nor professional experiences with students whose identities are different from theirs and may not feel

comfortable trying to be culturally responsive” (Nieto, 2013, p. 56). There were some teachers that I had that didn’t share the same culture as some students. Many of us come from German backgrounds which would be incorporated, but I don’t recall them incorporating other cultures within all aspects of learning. This would be something for me to reflect on for my own teaching purposes to make sure that I am incorporating the backgrounds of all students within the learning environment.

College to Current

As previously mentioned, change is usually difficult for me to adjust to. Moving out of my house to go to college was a scary thought. I was excited for the road ahead, but I wasn’t going to be in my safe, small little town that raised me to be the person I am. After adjusting to my new life, things began to get easier and I wasn’t so overwhelmed. I started off going to college at Bismarck State and held a job at a daycare in town. What was interesting was that I thought I knew what I needed to know about cultural diversity, but I was wrong. At the daycare, I was working daily with a Native American girl. I was worried about how this would go. In this part of my story, Treuer’s quote, “Indians were imagined, not understood” (Treuer, 2012, p. 3) comes into play.

What is interesting is that this was not my first encounter with a Native American. Sports have played a large role in my life. While I was in high school, there were several times a year that we would play against girls from the Standing Rock Reservation. That never seemed to bother me. Maybe it’s because we were just rivals on the court? I’m not sure. This experience though felt different to me. I think I was more scared of offending her than getting to know her. I had only ever imagined what Native American’s were like. I learned about them in school but learning about them and actually getting to know them are two different things.

“Communication requires a safe space for discourse, an opportunity for genuine connection, and authentic, reliable information” (Treuer, 2012, p. 5). By communicating with this person, I began to understand the person she is and the cultural rituals she grew up on, she became a very close friend of mine. This experience reminded me that our differences mean nothing. We might come from different places and have different practices, but when it comes down to it, that’s what makes us who we are, and there’s nothing to be ashamed of in that. Sometimes all it takes is to find something in common to start building a relationship and understanding, and that’s exactly what we did. This made me think of another quote I came across by Treuer. It reads, “It is important to realize how divergent some of the origin beliefs held by native people are, and it is also critical to know that the people who hold these beliefs, like all other people of faith, are firmly convinced of their truth – and they are as deserving of respect” (Treuer 2012, p. 18). While getting to know her, I learned a lot about her cultural practices and beliefs. Most of the time we had similar beliefs, but there were times where it was hard for me to relate, just as some of my beliefs are hard for her to relate to. Even when it’s hard for me to find a relation, I still realized that her beliefs are important to her just as my beliefs are important to me. I know I want people to respect my beliefs; therefore, I in turn respected her traditions because that is what she grew up on.

I haven’t had much experience with Native Americans, but there is something I have come to understand. Where we come from is our home. “A reservation is the place that many native people call home, and even those who live elsewhere associate strongly with their home reservations” (Treuer, 2012, p. 12). We all associate strongly with where we come from. I constantly associate the person that I am today with the area I grew up in. With little to do in a small town, I grew up using my imagination and making the most of what I had. I have reached

the understanding that this is the same for Native Americans. Their homeland, or reservations, are their home and that has shaped who they are just as my home has shaped the person that I am.

During the spring of 2019, I had the privilege of being a part of two practicums. Both of these experiences have showed me what being a teacher is really all about. “Teaching is about relationships. It’s not about knowing how to do a lesson plan. It’s knowing how to create an environment to foster humanity, to foster human relationships; when you do that, the content will be so much easier to transmit because you’re in a conversation with people and with that conversations you are telling a story” (Nieto, 2013, p. 35). I think this is so important. Teaching is about advocating for your students and creating lifelong relationships with them so they are willing and wanting to learn. “Advocacy also involves cultivating relationships and giving students hope and another vision for the future” (Nieto, 2013, p. 134). When we advocate for our students, we help them see their capabilities. We help them see that they are loved and cared for and we only want the best for them. By advocating for them, we also teach them how to be advocates for themselves. It is a powerful and timely process, but well worth the time and effort when we see the outcome.

Through each of my practicum settings, I have had the privilege of learning more about Native Americans and their culture. Treuer’s book has played a large role in my understanding. “Hair was a manifestation of spiritual strength or power but also a visible symbol of that power, and thus a source of pride and even vanity” (Treuer, 2012, p. 39). In both of my practicum settings I have noticed that most Native American students have very long hair; even the boys. This has always been something I wondered about. Thanks to Treuer, I now have an understanding as to why that is. Their hair is very important to them and is a symbol of power. It

is something taken seriously in their culture. I was glad to have come across this for it provided an answer to a question I have had for years.

Conclusion

Culturally diversity was something that I thought I knew all about at one point in my life. This is not the case. I have been through different experiences throughout the life I have lived thus far, changing the way I think about cultural diversity. It is not only something that focuses on racial or ethnic differences, but it also focuses on religious views, geologic location, and much more. The experience that impacted me the most would be working with the Native American girl at the daycare. I was constantly learning about the traditions that she holds close to her as well as learning about her Native American heritage. This was so beneficial for my own understanding of Native Americans because as Treuer states, “Indians were imagined, not understood” (Treuer, 2012, p. 3). Understanding this variation made a world of a difference regarding my understanding of cultural diversity, and it is only expanding.

Through the life I have lived thus far in the experiences I have had with cultural diversity, I am amazed to reflect back and see how much my idea and definition of what cultural diversity has changed and how it has changed me as a person as well. Throughout the remaining portion of the paper, I will be discussing factors that have played into my understanding and awareness of diversity. I like the quote Treuer includes in his book, “Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind” (Treuer, 2012, p. 1). To me, this says that people are either going to accept who you are as a person or they aren’t, but that doesn’t mean you should change yourself to get the approval of others. Be who you are, because the people who love you for who you are, are not going to care if you are different. They are going to embrace it because that is what makes you unique. This also can be applied in the

classroom. I firmly believe that the students should be who they are. They shouldn't have to feel like they need to change themselves to fit in. I want to foster an environment that is going to embrace all types of diversity so the students feel comfortable in their own skin and with each other. I know there is still much to learn about cultural diversity, but I would like to conclude on what I have come to realize as well as what I would like to do in my future classroom.

“Teachers’ actions, even if they are subconscious, reflect how they value or do not value their students’ cultures and identities” (Nieto, 2013, p. 130). Students are able to feel if the teacher is willing to understand them or not. They know if you genuinely care for them from the way you portray yourself to be. That is why we have to be aware of our actions when we are teaching. I have learned that the background each student come from is unique, and we have to value their identities because that is what makes them who they are. As I have spent more time in the classroom and worked on the Heritage Center capstone project, I have realized how important recognizing cultural diversity in the classroom is. This is something I am still working on and trying to figure out, but my actions are going to reflect how I value the cultural differences in the classroom. Now that I am recognizing the true importance of understanding diversity, especially through this capstone project, I am striving to learn how to incorporate it more within the classroom setting.

One key aspect that I have learned is what culturally responsive teaching is all about. “Culturally responsive teaching is thus purposeful and has specific goals: to affirm who students are in order to have them connect with school, accept and relish who they are, and succeed academically” (Nieto, 2013, p. 140). I cannot stress enough how important I have found relationships in the classroom to be. Being I have now had some experience with students of different cultures in the classroom, I have really come to realize that having a relationship with

each and every one of them is a key part of teaching. As a future teacher, I have learned that making a connection with students is a way we can help them connect with school easier, we can help them accept who they are, and we can help them succeed not only academically, but as a person of the future as well.

After everything I have learned, there are some points from Treuer's novel that I would like to touch on because they are things that I want to teach and instill in my students as they are in my classroom throughout the year. "However, it is important for all countries and all individuals to examine dark chapters in order to learn from them and prevent them from reoccurring" (Treuer 2012, p. 31). I think it is very important that students realize that we all go through dark times in our lives, but that doesn't define who you are a person. I want them to realize and learn that these dark times are only a place for us to grow. It might be difficult, but as we learn from these times in our lives, we gain knowledge and learn how to prevent such times or events from reoccurring.

Another aspect I have taken away from this class is that cultures are constantly changing. "All cultures change over time. What it meant to be French a thousand years ago, a hundred years ago, and today are all different" (Treuer, 2012, p. 42). This quote taken from Treuer is the exact reason that we have to keep continuously learning about our students and their cultural backgrounds. This again leads back to building relationships with our students. When we understand who they are as a person and what makes them who they are, the students will be more willing to work for the teacher because they know they are cared for and they know that they are respected. This is something that I want to remember as I am finishing up my educational journey to become a teacher. I want my students to know that I want to learn about them as well as their culture because they are continuously changing over time.

Being I had little experience with cultural diversity growing up, there has been so much information retained from reading through different materials and through class discussions. Perhaps the most surprising thing for me was how certain things affect a Native American every day. “A lot of times for people of color, there is a little dot every day. You don’t have to connect the dots; it’s a solid line” (Treuer, 15:17). This quote from Treuer spoke deeply to me, and it made me open my eyes more to the world of cultural diversity and how it affects those around us. I used to play “Indian” sometimes on the school playground. It never occurred to me how that might make others around me feel. That it might make them feel as if I (or others) don’t understand them. It might make them feel as if they are a joke. I never realized that for them, you aren’t connecting the dots, it’s just one thing after another, one thing each day that happens. It really opened my eyes as to how others might feel even when playing a game on the playground. Diversity isn’t something that is going away. As it continues to grow, we have to respect it and embrace it.

“Often, only half of the Indian youth in a given school district are passing their state-mandated tests in English and in math. Everyone is scratching their heads trying to figure out how to remedy the situation” (Treuer, 2012, p. 143). This is another quote that has stuck out to me throughout this course. State tests have always been something I understood, but yet they continuously define our students, and that shouldn’t be the case. Everyone is trying to figure out the remedy, but again I feel this all filters back towards having relationships with our students. We have to understand their culture and transform the content into a way that they can make sense of it. I think that is a large problem of the state testing standards we have today and is something I have thought deeply about now that I am understanding cultural diversity to a larger context.

Before concluding, I want to talk about one more quote from Treuer that had a huge impact on me after reading. “Keep asking questions, reading, listening, and advocating for change. Don’t tolerate stereotypes, and don’t be afraid to ask everything you wanted to know about Indians” (Treuer, 2012, p. 164). I felt this is so powerful and is something I want to make sure I do and use within my classroom. I want to understand the cultural backgrounds of my students and I want to advocate for change. There is no reason we should tolerate stereotypes because our backgrounds are what make us each unique as individuals. We shouldn’t be afraid to ask questions because that is what is going to help us form the relationships with our students. When we get to know them, they understand that we care for them and that we will be an advocate for them, and that is something I want my students to know when they are in my classroom.

My definition of cultural diversity has grown tremendously over the course of the semester, and I know it will only continue to grow as I continue my journey to become an educator. I know I have a long way to go in terms of completely understanding cultural diversity. There are so many opportunities I never received as a student, and I want to provide my future students with the opportunities I never had, such as having more opportunities to be around cultural diversity so they are more comfortable around it and understand it. Applying what I have learned, there are four pieces of advice I want to give myself that stem from Nieto’s text (Nieto, 2013, p. 150):

Learn About Myself

I want to continue to learn from the different experiences that will be presented to me throughout this challenging yet rewarding journey. These experiences are only going to help me grow and continue to understand the diverse world that surrounds me. I also want to keep an

open mind when initiating self-reflections. This is going to tell me a lot about myself, and it is going to help me realize areas that I can work towards improving. Self-reflecting is going to help me understand my values, experiences, and even biases. After all, I must first know and continue to learn about myself because this is going to hinder the relationships that I create with my students.

Learn About My Students

I want to pay close attention to how my students interact with others. It's important to take the time to get to know them as individuals because I can then learn from them as they will learn from me. Once I get to know them as individuals, then lessons can be planned and adapted to perhaps introduce certain practices or cultural backgrounds of others that continue to expose the students to cultural diversity. I want to be a thriving teacher for my students. "A thriving teacher is somebody who's there for the long haul, who believes in what she's doing, who is competent, who is effective with the children, and who loves the children she's teaching" (Nieto, 2013, p. XIV).

Cultivate Allies

I want to be able to branch out and make friends that are different from me. By getting to know those from different cultures and practices, I can invite them into my classroom to talk about their culture to the students to help them understand that being different from others is what makes us who we are, and we should embrace that. I find this quote from Nieto to fit in with this quite well; "Culturally responsive pedagogy is not a specific set of strategies to use with students of a particular background but rather a mindset that respects and honors students' cultures, experiences, and histories and finds way to include them in the curriculum" (Nieto, 2013, p. 53). I want to cultivate allies to give students the exposure to diversity that I was never

given in school.

Have a Life

“You need to have your own personal space and personal time. It’s nice during your first few years to be so obsessive about teaching so it gets you better, but there also has to be a time when you have to step away from it. It’s hard to do” (Nieto, 2013, p. 65). Through all the stress teaching can bring, I need to remember to have a life of my own as well. I need to make time for myself to maintain my own well-being. It might be hard to do as a new teacher because there will be plenty for me to do and learn, but it is necessary to take the time to enjoy other things along the road of life as well.

Currently, I am struggling with having a life. There are times I set aside for myself to go on a walk or spend time with friends and family but working on school work always seems to get the best of me. This is something I am trying to work on now, so that when I am teaching I will know how to make sure that I am still taking the time to relax and do activities that I enjoy.

Heritage Center Reflection

Throughout this semester, there has been several hours of planning put into the Marketplace for Kids presentations at the Heritage Center with our groups. There were constant revisions that were being made and lesson plans were being adjusted in order to create the best presentation we could throughout the Adaptation Gallery. As the day has been reached and now concluded, there are some aspects of this experience that I would like to reflect on.

Overall, I thought our groups presentations went well. Even though there was some readjusting needed between the groups of students, we were organized, professional, and engaged the students as much as we could. Making adjustments in between sessions was very helpful to our group because we were able to then adjust our plan to make the time spent in the

gallery more engaging and interactive. An artifact that our group decided to use was a crossword puzzle. The students would carry this with them throughout the gallery and fill in the answers as we would present. Giving hints seemed to help some students, but then there were some students who did not pay close attention to the crossword. A student had brought to our groups attention that they would have enjoyed a word search more than a crossword, which would be something to consider for future reference.

Relating to my presentation on climate change and extinction in the gallery, I think there were some areas I could have improved on. Since I am going into teaching, I didn't feel the need to use notecards during my presentation because I wanted to engage in eye contact with the students while I was presenting rather than constantly referencing a note card. Through the information that I presented, there was a few times that I forgot to mention something to the students, which in this case note cards would have been helpful. Although I believe the students understood the overall concept of climate change and extinction, I think I maybe should have done a little more planning for what I was going to say and in what order for my presentation that what I did.

In the end, this was a great event and experience for me to be a part of. All of the planning throughout the semester payed off. Receiving feedback from peers and Dr. Taylor was also crucial in helping our group create a successful presentation for the different groups of students that we had throughout the day. This was a great opportunity to apply what I have learned throughout the semester, and I definitely recommend doing this with future classes because it is a big help in developing different skills needed in the world of education.

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