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Diversity Synthesis Paper

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I. Introduction

In EDU 367, we explore the subject of diversity and learn how we might experience it in our future classrooms. There are a variety of different ways we may encounter diversity. Many people mainly think of diversity as racial differences but, we may also experience cultural, religious or socioeconomic diversity in the classroom as well. After this class, I now feel more knowledgeable about why it is necessary for educators to be aware of the subject of diversity. We will be surrounded by it every day in many different ways. It is a major factor in educating our students effectively.

In this paper, I will be discussing texts we have read in class and how they relate to my autobiographical paper written back in September. First, we read the book *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask* by Anton Treuer. This book discusses the history of Indians in the U.S. and the way Indians live today. As the title states, there are many of us who have questions about Native Americans, however, we feel we should not ask them because it might be offensive to Indians. But, Treuer encourages people to ask and also urges Native Americans to welcome questions. We then move on to our next text *Finding JOY in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds* by Sonia Nieto. This was another great read. Nieto talks to us about how various teachers successfully handle diverse classrooms and gives us advice on how to meet challenges in teaching today.

In my autobiographical paper, I discuss my upbringing and where I come from. Reflecting on this is fun because it not only brings back memories but also reminds me why I am the way I am. Now that I have completed studying the above-mentioned books and classroom work, I will be analyzing how I experienced diversity in my background as a student together with how I will approach being a teacher in diverse classrooms in the future.

II. Body

White, blonde hair, blue eyes. I'm the quiet kid, surrounded by many others that look much like I look. For most of my life, that is how it's been for me. Differences are what I notice first about people-*how they look*. What color is their skin? Do they "talk funny or different?" Do they wear strange clothes? Are they quiet or do they stick out? What does the fact that I notice these things make me? Critical? Judgmental? Racist? The answer is: None of the above. I believe it is normal to notice or recognize differences and unique characteristics of anything, including other people. I am human. I have senses. As an upcoming teacher, knowing about our students, who they are, their history/backgrounds, is almost more important than what we are teaching. In any relationship, people need to know things about each other in order to make a connection and to have the relationship succeed. This includes the teacher's background too. Nieto states "All the teachers I interviewed identified the connection with students as a primary reason they thrived in the classroom" (Nieto, p.36). Treuer describes Indians as feeling "imagined not understood" (Treuer, p. 3). I never want my students to feel misunderstood. I will strive to develop these connections so that my students can share who they are and know that they are heard, understood and respected. However, there are people who come from places like I do, and think they have a right to judge others who are not like them. Treuer brings up a quote that we are all familiar with by Dr. Seuss that is "Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind." Attributed to Dr. Seuss (Treuer, p.1). Treuer uses this quote in his book when talking about feeling like he was being discriminated against in Bemidji, MN where he grew up. Treuer attempts to reach out with this book in order to break down barriers between Indian and non-Indian cultures. He says it doesn't do any good being angry all the time – even if it's justified. We have to learn about and understand each other in order to improve relationships between cultures.

While most of the kids I grew up with looked like me and came from backgrounds like mine, not all did. I grew up in a large suburb. There was a wide variety of people to be sure. There is nothing inherently “wrong” with noticing differences. In fact, like most people, while these characteristics might be some of the first things I notice about people they are by no means the only things I notice; nor are they the most important. My values, learned at home and developed through my experiences in school, in sports, and in social situations, are what shape the way I view and interact with people. Language, for example, is a huge part of how I interact with people. When I am out to dinner or shopping at the mall with my family, there have been many situations where we hear other families talking to each other in different languages. Many of us do not think of what a language can mean to a culture. Treuer explains to us that the language where he comes from is a huge part of their identity. He says “this is our language. It is the sound of the waves crashing on the shore, the sound of the wind in the pines, the rustle of the leaves in autumn. It is the sound of birds singing in the forest and the wolves howling in the distance. This is our language, from which we obtain life, our means of knowing who we are, this sacred gift, bestowed upon us by our creator. Gordon Jourdain, Lac La Croix (Ontario)” (Treuer, p.79). I thought the example of how the Ojibwe word for an old woman, “mindimooye, literally means ‘one who holds things together’ describing the role of the family matriarch” really shows how respect for elders is built into the language. (Treuer, p. 85). It’s very cool how one word in Ojibwe covers what it takes an entire sentence in English to say. Treuer sees the importance of students connecting with who they are in order get a good education. He says “we need to transform schools....designed to assimilate into schools that enable people to learn about themselves and the rest of the world.” (Treuer, p.143). The tribal schools that have done this are meeting standards on state-mandated tests. Being able to learn about yourself together with

other academic subjects seems to foster a sense of belonging in the classroom that helps students learn more effectively.

By the time I reached school age, I knew what was expected. If I did things the way my parents taught me to do them, there was a lot less trouble. In fact, good things usually happened. Most kids went about their business like me, but not all did. There were kids who always seemed to get in trouble-at first mostly boys. Some struggled in school. Others acted like it was the last place they wanted to be. Even in a well-run school district like the one I came from, it was a challenge sometimes for the teacher to keep everyone moving in the same direction. This is a big part of why a lot of new teachers are quitting their jobs. They are not prepared to handle the diverse needs of students. Nieto quotes Joan Richardson saying “when a novice teacher is in the snare of a toxic, dysfunctional system, the system will win every time” (Nieto, p.3). After reading this, I can understand why new teachers become disillusioned and stop teaching. This is similar to what Nieto said in the introduction about how “many teachers are unprepared for the demands of teaching, particularly teaching students of diverse backgrounds ...” (Nieto, p. xiii). I think many new teachers assume what a classroom may be like, but in reality, it turns out to be very difficult and they feel overwhelmed. If we don’t want teachers quitting because they have no support, it makes sense to provide support through teacher collaboration programs and professional development. We can never have “the idea that a single teacher, working alone, can know and do everything to meet the diverse learning needs of thirty students every day throughout the school year...” (Nieto, p. 27). This will never work. Improving training at the college level together with mentoring, collaboration and professional training will aid in training and retaining teachers.

As I got older, my base of experiences broadened and so did my understanding of culture. We had a few Spanish-speaking students in our school. All were very quiet. It was hard to know how well they understood the teacher. Ethnicity certainly isn't the only thing that comes to mind when I think of cultural diversity. In my home town, money is right up there with all of the others. It wasn't long before kids and parents started showing off their money-or making people think they were well off financially. Big houses, bragging about vacations, computers and the latest cell phones were some of the ways people showed off. Kids that lived in big houses on lakes tended to play with kids from other big houses on lakes. It wasn't long before certain peers, especially girls, identified and clung to others with similar material values. I thought Treuer described money in a way that was unique, yet true. Treuer stated that "Money is like health. Having it is no guarantee of happiness. But the absence of it can make one miserable. Suze Orman" (Treuer, p. 128). Money definitely is a part of someone's identity. I think, as future teachers, this is something we should be aware of. In my practicum courses so far, it is noticeable who the students are who come from lower income families and those who come from wealthier families. As I mentioned before, they associate themselves with students who come from similar backgrounds. Nieto makes a good point about taking into account out-of-school factors that affect students' learning like "poor nutrition, unhealthy neighborhoods, and limited prenatal care...without these resources, many children living in poverty are doomed not just to educational failure but also to a life of diminished possibilities" (Nieto, p.10). This is another form of diversity that may not be immediately visible but is a big part of a student's life and will profoundly affect their ability to learn.

As I moved into high school, the implications of culture and diversity started to become even more clear. I started noticing more about different groups of people. My high school had

almost 3000 students. While I was able to navigate the school as a member of the largest ethnic group, every racial, ethnic, and other group had a presence. While we had the normal groups that would tend to hang around together-athletes, drama program kids, kids in band and choir-we had other groups that tended to stick together as well. Most black students tended to stay around other black students. Asian kids with Asian parents (i.e., those who were not adopted by white parents) were a very closed group. East Indians were the same. Why was this? Without overthinking it, I concluded that, like me, outside of class and activities, the students in my school who were the racial and ethnic minorities tended to stay around those who were most like them. People hung around with those with whom they felt the most comfortable. Early in Treuer's book, he makes a statement about outsiders. He said that outsiders never "felt like he or she had any authority to ask about, much less comment on or participate in, anything happening on the rez" (Treuer, p. 2). From a personal perspective, I did not know any Native Americans at my school, however, I never asked anyone from a different race/culture about their background. As Treuer says, I did not feel like I had the authority to; I did not want to offend them. This brings me to a story about a teacher in Nieto's book named Amber Berchard. I was interested in her story because she is a white teacher in a diverse urban classroom. She does not share the same race/culture as her students but is successful because of the multicultural education practices she employs in her classroom. Amber says "being willing to talk about our differences and value our differences is very, very important. Being comfortable enough to do that" (Nieto, p.56). She has started multi-cultural clubs at the school and they also have a Culture Fair in the spring where families are invited to get involved. It's easy to see how setting a multicultural tone at a school will make everyone feel like they belong and how education will be enhanced. There are seemingly small things that make differences too as an outsider trying to

make a connection. Nieto states that teachers need to “use students’ real names and learn to say them correctly” (Nieto p.131). Changing it or constantly mispronouncing it “is an example of cultural disrespect” (Nieto p. 131). This may seem like a small thing but it makes a huge impact on a student feeling welcome in the classroom. Treuer reminds us that “it’s important that fear of sounding ignorant or racist does not paralyze communication about Indians (Treuer, p.8). He urges people who truly want to learn “to open their minds and hearts. Seek out Indians for answers about Indians” (Treuer, p.158). I think this is true of learning about any culture. Find reliable sources. I believe people will sense a person’s motives to learn and want to help you understand.

I am lucky to have been a participant in sports from a young age. Athletic teams and events have provided a diverse, culturally rich environment. I have participated extensively in soccer and basketball. Both sports are truly international games. Players from all races and socioeconomic classes play these sports. Team sports are a place where you learn quickly that there are a few basic shared values. Hard work, honesty, commitment, and listening are what make a successful team. Some of the coaches I have had have been some of the best teachers in my life. Individual interests must take a back seat in order for the team to succeed. Not everyone is going to do it your way. Your way may not be the best way for everyone. In short, you learn to compromise. This means you accept everyone for who they are, what abilities they have, and the strengths and weaknesses they bring to the team. In order to succeed, everyone must accept certain common values and goals. And everyone on the team must work together. The best coaches recognize this and they have the ability to take a diverse group of individuals and get them to work as a single unit in pursuit of a common goal. In my experience, these coaches are also the best teachers of the game. They’ve shown me that their job is not only building [our]

education and [our] intellect, but [they're] building [our] character." Carmen Tisdale (Nieto, p. 48). My character has grown because of my participation in sports and looking up to certain coaches of mine. Many lessons I have learned have come from them. I think these lessons from sports can benefit me as a new teacher as well. The story of Angeles Perez shows how building relationships with the students builds trust and makes the students want to learn. She makes it a point to learn about every student and they know that she cares about them. She says "they will work for me because they know I work for them." (Nieto, p. 38). It's like a team in that they work together, support each other and care about each other while working toward the goal of learning.

College has provided yet another level of appreciation for a culturally diverse environment. Every racial and ethnic background is represented at the University of Mary. In some ways it seems unusual to find such a diverse campus in a smaller town in the upper Midwest. At the same time, I recognize that I come to this environment with my basic values and goals. We all do. Most of the students at the University of Mary are here to earn a degree and use that degree to improve their lives and the lives of others. That said, we didn't all get here the same way. Some of us are African-American, from large urban areas in the south and southwestern United States. Others are from very homogenous communities in northern Europe. Many others are from small towns in North Dakota and elsewhere. Yet another level of acceptance of the diversity of the college community seems to be present. It is a level that shows more maturity than what I experienced in high school.

While there is still that comfort in identifying and spending some time with people from similar backgrounds-maybe someone from your home town or from a neighboring community; there is also the necessity to forge new ties. Many of these ties are to people with very different

backgrounds from what you have known before. As a student and member of the Women's Soccer Team, I live, practice, travel, play, and attend classes with teammates from Sweden. English is their second language. Customs are different. They are very far from home. I am given an up close opportunity to see how they approach the requirements of University academics and athletics coming from a very different background than I. I am sure they are doing the same with me. Some things seem to work and some don't. We share the same goals and many of the same values, yet we are different. It seems we can all achieve our goals in an inclusive college community.

Cultural differences do indeed exist. At times they clash with my own. For example, as most people are aware, ceremonies are a big part of Indian culture. Treuer describes Indian time as "we will do your ceremony until it's done. That's not an excuse to be late or lazy." Thomas Stillday, Red Lake (Minnesota). (Treuer, p.39). To Indians this means they will take as much time that is needed to do it right. Others interpret this as Indians being lazy because they don't push to finish something quickly. It's easy to see how people from two different cultures can view things so differently. Without understanding, cultures clash and there are bad feelings on both sides. As a teacher, what can I do to provide effective learning without being perceived as attacking a student's culture? One thing is to maintain the focus on the students and the goal at hand. We (the students and I) are here to understand certain concepts, to learn the material, and to successfully complete the year-together. This is a team concept. Something that is proven. Teams are able for periods of time to put individual biases and differences aside in order to achieve a common objective. Our main focus as teachers should be "Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning." Paulo Freire (Nieto, p.74). Is teaching an art or a science? Nieto describes teaching as a craft "with elements of both

science and art.” (Nieto, p.60). An important part of being an effective teacher is that teachers must keep learning.

III. Conclusion

Learn About Yourself

Nieto states that “sometimes the hardest work we can do as human beings is precisely this: to confront ourselves unflinchingly and honestly in order to improve” (Nieto, p. 150). As much as we might hate to admit it, we all have implicit biases that are ingrained in us by society. This is hard to face but I can see how this critical self-reflection will help us to be “a better teacher and even a better person” (Nieto, p.151). I am not exactly sure how to go about this but I always hear that admitting you have a problem is the first step to solving it. Reflecting on why you are who you are may lead to a desire to change things about yourself to become who you want to be. Also, it’s important to bring your identity to class with you so the students can connect with you. In the past, teachers were told to keep it professional, don’t reveal too much about your personal life. But I believe there is a way to keep it professional but put parts of your life out there so your students know who you are. Relationships are a two way street. We are discovering that developing these relationships are at the core of an effective educator.

Learn About Your Students

Learning about our students’ histories and cultures honors their identities and creates a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom. It helps to develop trusting relationships between teachers and students. Knowing who we are teaching is almost more important than what we are teaching. If students don’t feel you care about them or know them, they won’t engage in learning. I like what Amber Bechard says on the first day of school to all her students: “I value you for who you are and I’m going to make sure everybody else in here values you” (Nieto,

p.151). I understand how critical this is to being an effective teacher and the more I do to learn about my students, the bigger the payoff. My advice to myself is to get to know my students not only through asking the students about themselves but also getting to know the families and getting involved in the community. As bad as it was for Treuer, being the only Native American in his school, he said he “was truly inspired by my history teacher...whose lectures and support made a significant contribution to my lifelong interest in education and history” (Treuer, p. 2). That teacher made a connection, that teacher made a difference in Treuer’s life.

Cultivate Allies

Everything I’ve read about teaching emphasizes the fact that you can’t do this job alone – you need support. Nieto says that “almost all the teachers spoke about the importance of developing relationships with other teachers” (Nieto, p. 152). I see this as a valuable resource and hope that I can develop a network of co-workers as I go forward. I was especially interested in John Nguyen’s story of his mentor he called “the Oracle” and how he appreciated her advice and encouragement when he was first starting out. Now, he is paying it forward by mentoring other new teachers. My advice to myself would be to reach out to my colleagues and ask for help and advice. So often our society views asking for help as a weakness. It does not mean you aren’t a competent teacher because you look to collaborate. It means you are trying to be a competent teacher by asking for support that will help you to be a better educator. I also liked what Amber Bechard said about wanting “administrators to have faith in her as a teacher, as an intellectual, and as a professional” (Nieto, p.153). So often, we hear about teachers supporting teachers or outside professional development providing support. However, I can see that administrative support would be equally important. Knowing that they have confidence in you and trust you as a professional would be a great support.

Have a Life

Nieto says: “The last thing teachers should do is focus solely on teaching: in the end, they will inevitably become disheartened, frustrated, or angry. They may burn out and leave the profession, as so many have in the past couple of decades” (Nieto, p. 154). Part of my ability to be an effective teacher depends on continuing my life experiences and learning away from students, administrators, and parents. Staying active in athletics, coaching, and raising a family of my own will be some of the ways I “have a life” outside of teaching. The joy and fulfillment from outside interests are healthy, refreshing, fun and crucial to the understanding, compromise, and commitment necessary to improving myself as a teacher and a person and helping others do the same.

Works Cited

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