

*Autobiography*

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Twenty-one years might not seem like a lot in the grand scheme of things, but in my life so far, I have had many experiences that have deepened my understanding of diversity and how I can teach in a such a way that helps all students, no matter their background. Before giving myself advice on how to be the best teacher I can be, I will explain how four major groups of events have helped me better understand cultural diversity.

### **Teaching and Tutoring**

My earliest exposure to the effects of cultural diversity was in high school when a lot of Somalis started going to my school. A lot of these students ended up in special education settings. After graduating and then coming back as a substitute paraprofessional, I had the opportunity to work with these students. The most difficult part for me was trying to help them understand what was happening in their classes when they did not fully understand the English language. One particular student I helped could barely write his own name (in English), and he was supposed to be in seventh or eighth grade. I feel like the language barrier can be a huge struggle for students, especially when their first language is not Spanish. Like in my practicum experience this past fall at Bismarck High School, Spanish-speaking students might have interpreters that follow them around to help them and the teachers have a better learning experience. At least in my school district back home, there are no interpreters or even ELL teachers that can speak the Somali language. As I learned through a more personal experience, Somalis were not the only students struggling at my school because of the language barrier.

Another instance of cultural diversity that had to do with the language barrier was a student I tutored who moved to Minnesota from Romania. I helped her with math (and other subjects as needed) for an entire school year. The biggest struggle for her seemed not to be the

actual math, but the terms and notation that she had to try to connect with what she already knew. Helping her connect English terms and notations with what she knew from Romania was a great experience in helping culturally diverse students. In addition to my experiences in my own school district, I have also encountered diversity in college, especially through athletics.

### **Diversity in Athletics**

Going into college, I had minimal experiences with people from other countries. There were a handful of foreign exchange students at my high school through the years, but I was never really close enough to them to better understand their culture. In college, I have had the amazing opportunity to spend time with two of my new teammates who are both from Mexico. One of them has been in the United States for a few years, and the other is struggling through the cultural shift. One of the biggest things I have learned from the second teammate about the Mexican culture is that they are not punctual people. Dinner at 5:00 might mean they will show up sometime between 6:00 and 7:00. This individual is now a sophomore, and though she is still the last one to get places, she is usually only a couple minutes late. Watching her grow and helping her along the way has helped me to better understand the slow process of adapting to a different culture. Through this process of growth and understanding, I have learned better patience and to not judge people too hastily. When I first practiced and competed with her, I thought she was kind of rude and ungrateful, until it came to my attention that people do not cheer at swim meets in Mexico or offer encouragement or congratulations after races. Knowing this truly helped me be more patient with her and more understanding in future circumstances.

Another thing I have learned from diversity on the swim team is how to adapt to language differences between similar cultures. For example, one of the girls on our team is from Canada,

and where she is from is not drastically different from the culture here in North Dakota. However, there are many phrases she uses to describe certain things that I have never heard before. Understanding different dialects of one language is also important for teaching, especially with all the new words kids are using these days. My teammate also speaks fluent French. Having taken two years of French in high school, and Duolingo intermittently after, I figured I could try to communicate with her in French (just for fun). However, just as Spain Spanish and Mexico Spanish differ, so do France French and Canada French. Most of the words are the same, just the pronunciations are different. I think this concept is also important to consider when conversing with students in different languages. In addition to my exposure to diversity in athletics, I have also had the opportunity to encounter diverse groups of students through my first practicum experience this past fall at Bismarck High School.

### **Practicum I**

The classes I was able to attend for my practicum experience were extremely culturally diverse, especially first, second, and fifth periods. In addition to the many Native American students in the first class, there were also two or three Spanish-speaking students who had an interpreter. The next two classes had a large percentage of Native American students in addition to other cultural backgrounds. Many of the students in the second period class also struggled with in- and out-of-school suspensions. Being able to work and connect with these students was an amazing opportunity that opened my eyes to culturally responsive teaching. As I mentioned above, language can be a huge barrier to student learning, but I think another part of it is that students struggle with the importance of the class. One of the most important things a math teacher can do is explain and demonstrate how the math is relevant to the lives of the students.

This idea has also come up in discussions related to the capstone project because students are more likely to listen and stay engaged if they think it is relevant to them personally.

In addition to the real-life applicableness of content, it is also crucial to develop positive professional relationships with these students. My practicum teacher is basically a mother figure for one of her students, and that meaningful connection could be the deciding factor in that student's success. Especially for the under-represented students who may come from difficult backgrounds, it is important to develop those relationships and help students realize their potential and the possibility of post-secondary education or the trades. Through my ELA class this spring, we are doing a pen-pal project with the fifth graders at the elementary school in Lincoln, essentially developing the relationships as early as we can to help the students develop a more positive outlook on life. This pen-pal project is also developing a connection with the students that promotes the unity of diverse groups of people, just like the powwow celebration this past Monday, the 20<sup>th</sup> of January.

### **UMary Midwinter Powwow**

The midwinter powwow held on campus was a great way for me to learn more about the Native American culture because previously, I fear I had only a single story of Native American cultures. Knowing that I will be guiding students through Native American history later this spring, I was able to focus and try to understand the meanings behind their traditions. I loved witnessing all their traditional (and more contemporary) dances and music. It was so fitting to have the powwow on MLK Jr. day since it promotes unity amongst all peoples no matter their cultural background. I found the idea of the sacred hoop of life especially meaningful and relevant in the spirit of the holiday.

Drawing from all my experiences of diversity thus far, there are four areas in which I will give myself meaningful advice for the future: learn about myself, learn about my students, cultivate allies, and have a life.

I think perhaps the most important piece of advice is to learn about myself. I know that I am passionate about teaching math, but I struggle with voicing my other strengths as well as my areas for improvement. I feel like right now, my sister probably knows more about myself than I do, which will not help me when I get into teaching. Learning more about myself will help me to be a better teacher by knowing what I need to improve and how best to do it. Once I know myself, I will also be better able to know my students.

Learning about my students, especially in the context of cultural diversity is extremely important. I do not think I will struggle with this aspect because I want to get to know my students so I can better support them and help them experience success. Learning about the backgrounds of my students is perhaps just as important as learning about how they learn best. In this learning process, I will also need to cultivate allies.

My dad is a great example of cultivating allies in the workplace. One of the first things a new teacher must do to make life easier is to befriend the janitorial staff, the secretaries, the lunch ladies, and any other support staff at the school. My dad has an amazing relationship with the janitorial staff at both of the schools at which he has taught in the district and I hope to develop similar relationships with support staff. It is also crucial to make allies of fellow teachers, especially in my particular department, because they could be my strongest support group. In addition to developing positive relationships in the workplace, having a life outside of work is also crucial for success.

Having a life outside of work is crucial for success for any career path. As much as I love teaching, I will need to have a method of relaxing and destressing from all that teaching requires. Exercise is a great method of destressing in a healthy way. As I hope to someday train for and run a full marathon (I have run two half-marathons already), I think running will be a perfect method of destressing. Getting involved in the community outside of school will also be important for my life outside of work. Whether it be getting together with friends for a game of cards or volleyball once a week, or getting involved in some community organization, having a life will be crucial for my success and for the prevention of burn-out in my first few years of teaching.