

Capstone Synthesis Paper

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The first word that comes to mind when I think about cultural diversity is race. When I think about it more words like location, economic class, religion, and gender arise. Throughout my life I have been exposed to multiple cultures that has shaped me into the person I am today. I grew up on a ranch on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation where I attended and graduated from McIntosh High School. Treuer describes home as the backbone for our culture. Where, how, and when we grow up sets the stage for our future lives. “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.” (Treuer, 2012, p. 79). While growing up I have traveled to different parts of the nation that has broaden my horizon on different cultures. I had the honor of traveling to Washington D.C. through a school program; and I also had the opportunity to travel to St. Petersburg’s Beach in Florida for my high school senior trip. I attended two different universities before I attended the University of Mary which exposed me to many different collegiate atmospheres.

Throughout this paper I intend to cover my life experiences and how traveling has exposed me to many levels of cultural diversity. I plan to reexamine my life as written in my autobiography and bring in new experiences and ideas found within Neito’s *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds*, and Treuer’s *Everything You wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*. I will conclude with the four pieces of advice I would give myself based on my journal and the experiences I learned along the way.

### **Growing Up**

Growing up in northwestern South Dakota I knew I lived in a very isolated part of the country. The first time I saw an African American was when I was in junior high. My experience

is similar to Nieto's description of Asians, "Their only previous knowledge of Asians had been either "the Chinese takeout delivery guy" or a particular character on a TV show" (2013, p. 66).

Where I grew up says a lot about my background, "No matter how far I traveled, the haze engulfed everyone I met" (Treuer, 2012, p. 3). I was fortunate enough to grow up on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. I grew up on a ranch near the small town of Morristown, SD; which has a population of 84 people. The town has three total businesses which includes a bank, post office, and a Bar/café. I love the small-town atmosphere and the gifts the quiet country blesses me with. No matter the places I travel to I always fall back on my small-town girl instincts.

At a young age I became very familiar with the local Native Americans. Native Americans have occupied regions of the United States centuries before the white man discovered it. Therefore, traditional Native Americans have huge pride in their land and often feel their land was removed from them unwillingly. If you talk to an elderly Native American, they would consider the area I grew up as sovereign. "Sovereignty means supreme and independent authority over a geographic area" (Treuer, 2012, p. 86). I attended school with Native American children and even played a variety of sports with them. While in elementary school I developed many lasting relationships with the Native Americans in my class and continued to stay in touch. I never thought of the Native American culture as diverse or different because growing up I was exposed to their traditions. "Indians are so often imagined, but so infrequently well understood" (Treuer, 2012, p. 1). With any race comes stereotypes, when we are uneducated on a particular race we assume they are all the same. "The word Indian comes from a mistake" (Treuer, 2012, p. 7). When Kristopher Columbus sailed the ocean, he thought when he reached the Caribbean that he was in the Indian Ocean when really, he was further west than he imagined. So, the

Native Americans got stamped the name of Indians. In addition, every race is filled with good and bad people, therefore it's important not to stereotype a race based on an uneducated assumption. Treuer states, "Indians are diverse and complicated. Not all white people are the same, and not all whites have the same beliefs. It's the same for Indians" (Treuer, 2012, p. 158). In order to fully understand a culture, it's best to get to know them individually rather than assuming.

Growing up on a ranch I have learned many life skills that I would not have truly understood if I had grown up in a more urban background. My family raises black angus cattle along with growing a variety of crops. I am the middle of three sisters. Most ranchers have a son to pass the ranch on to, but my dad was unfortunate to have a son. Therefore, he taught his three daughters everything there is to know about ranching. Teaching is about knowing how to create an environment to foster humanity, to foster human relationships" (Nieto, 2013, p. 99). And this is just what my dad did. He taught the proper techniques and how to be extra safe when operating machinery. He established a safe environment of trust and after years of practicing we all became very knowledgeable with the operation. By the time I was 10 years old I could drive a stick shift pickup, and rake hay on a tractor. With more teaching and experiences, I now can drive a semi-truck, cut hay with a swather, and run a combine harvester. Therefore, growing up in rural America has made me a very humbling, hardworking, and appreciative person.

## **High School**

Going into high school I would consider myself a sheltered person. I have not traveled a great deal neither have I seen much more than the area I grew up in. While in high school I participated in a variety of different school trips. One of the most memorable trips was going to Washington D.C. on a close-up trip. Here my classmates and I were accompanied by students

from all over the United States. Some students were from Utah, New York, Michigan, and Arizona. Each student came from different parts of the nation that influenced their identity. Cornerstones of identity, and their use keeps us recognizable to our ancestors” (Treuer, 2012, p. 81). It was very interesting to see how our lifestyles were different, but to also hear the different accents. Not only did the students look and sound different but our personalities were hugely different. While I noticed students from other states were more outgoing, carried a higher self-esteem, and seemed very boastful. I learned there are many ways to be diverse and race is just one. Students from different states preferred different foods, different music, and different clothes. Majority of it has to do with how we were raised. “Learning who students are pays off in other ways as well. If students are accepted for who they are, they are more likely to want to learn” (Nieto, 2013, p. 73). This relates to any student in the classroom.

Once we all broke out of our shells we shortly found out how not so different we all were. This quote can be referred to when getting to know anyone new. Everyone needs to be open minded and accept people for who they are. “I always tell my students my personal story, so they understand our backgrounds aren’t much different” (Nieto, 2013, p. 65). Even though we come from different parts of the nation and have different backgrounds it does not make us “different.” Once all is said and done we all bleed red. After a couple days on the trip everyone started to form relationships and respect one another as everyone “opened up.” After my trip to Washington D.C. it really made me appreciate where I come from. It was a very eye-opening experience and I am glad I was able to interact with students from many different backgrounds.

### **Senior Trip**

For my senior trip in high school my classmates and I were able to take a trip to St. Petersburg Beach Florida. While on our flight to Florida we had a connecting flight to New York

City. I had never seen the city in person. I was unbelievably amazed at the size of the city, and how over congested it looked. Walking through the airport I could not believe the diversity of people I was seeing, professional businessmen, Arabs, and Nigerian's were in abundance. Not only were there people from all around the world but the stores and food catered to all the incoming culture. I had never seen such high-class gift shops and food menus. The economic wealth of many of the travelers was also a cultural difference that stood out. "As our world becomes more diverse and interconnected we become more disconnected" (Treuer, 2016). I can't stress how greatly this quote describes this very diverse situation. As the world grows, more interracial marriages are taking place, people are becoming richer, and poorer at the same time. The world is becoming more diverse as minorities increase and majorities decrease. As society changes we are becoming more different in every way possible which makes us disconnect from each other. I continued to notice this pattern as our trip took place.

Once my class and I arrived in Tampa, the culture around us completely changed. In Florida there was a higher number of elderly people. It was no longer fast pace New York City, but rather grab a drink and head to the beach. Cubans and crab legs were in extra abundance. This also was the first time I have ever been to a beach. I also have never tried crab legs before and was really skeptical about an exotic fish. So instead of stepping out of my comfort zone I ordered a cheeseburger because I knew I would not be disappointed. I ended up regretting my decision as I sampled my classmates' crab legs. I wish I would have known Nieto's advice about stepping out of by box and trusting my classmates' opinions. Like Nieto described, "Teachers also need to be open to new experiences, think critically about them, learn from colleagues and seek their support and advice when things get hard..." (Nieto, 2013, 73). In the process of observing people of different races, tasting fresh crab legs, and seeing new geographical areas

really added to my cultural experiences. With the collection of my cultural experiences and traveling I felt I was well prepared to head to college. I knew I wanted to choose a college that was close to home, but I also wanted to make something of myself. Looking at Livingston's quote, "None of us were meant to be common, we are meant to be comets" (Livingston, Donovan, 2016, 3:53). This is how I felt when I started my college career. I was full of excitement for the next chapter and I was ready to make something of myself.

## **College.**

### **Black Hills State University**

As a freshman I attended Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota. Being a home body, I knew I would like BHSU because it was only a three-hour drive from home, and I was going to continue my basketball career which I felt very passionate about. As a freshman I had a hard time making friends that I truly connected with. While playing basketball and attending practices I was able to meet girls from different cultural backgrounds. Some of the girls were African American and Hispanic descent. It was interesting to learn about their family life and where they grew up. The girls were very welcoming and took the time to include me. It gave me a sense of family while I was away at college. It reminded me of Nieto's quote, "You're welcome into my home just as much as I hope I am welcome into your home" (2013, p. 120). The girls came from all parts of the nation, but what was humbling was the fact that we all share the love for basketball.

### **Bismarck State College**

My sophomore year of college I transferred to Bismarck State College to be closer to home and retire my basketball career. At this point in my life I was very undecided on a major.

After meeting my boyfriend of now two years I decided the best career for me would be teaching. I decided to pursue Biology Education. During my college experience I was exposed to a lot of “city kids”, which were born and raised in town. Although the kids were all very nice they were simply raised different than me. They had contrasting outlooks on life like various hobbies such as video games or shopping. Their value of money was decreased, and their education was not highly valued. “Money is like health. Having it is no guarantee of happiness. But the absence of it can make one miserable” (Treuer, 2012, p. 128). I am a strong believer that college students who pay for their own college take school much more seriously compared to students who do not. Therefore, money can provide a path, but it does not ensure that happiness is down that path.

Looking back on the situation of making new friends in college I should have used Treuer’s advice, “Communication requires a safe space for discourse, an opportunity for genuine connection, and authentic, reliable information” (Treuer, 2012, p. 5). I am not a very outgoing person so when I get into an awkward situation I tend to be quiet and keep to myself. But what I learned is to establish a welcoming environment, keep an open mind, listen to others, and be considerate of their values. Closer to the end of my first semester I met a lot of great friends who were in the agricultural program. I really connected with these students because they were raised in a very similar fashion as I was. Nieto describes that, “families are related forever” (Nieto, 2013, 120). I interpret this quote by relating it to immediate family but also close friends. Families are related forever displays the idea no matter how far we travel during our college years or our life time we will always have a family to fall back on to. The “family” I speak of may be teammates at college, coworkers, or little sisters. A year later I received my Associates in Science and Arts from Bismarck State College.



## University of Mary

My junior year of college I transferred to the University of Mary. My first couple of days at the University of Mary was almost a culture shock compared to Bismarck State College. I noticed everyone was more than welcome to help me find my way. The atmosphere was very welcoming and uplifting. Although there was not an ethical difference in the people at the University of Mary, the quality of the students made it diverse. However, coming to a Catholic university while being baptized and raised Lutheran made me uncomfortable. I attended noon mass on campus to try something new and take in the experience. During mass I was very uncomfortable and felt like everyone was staring at me because I wasn't kneeling or receiving communion. In this situation I felt the force of being a minority in a population of practicing Catholics. Although, "Despite our differences, we have more similarities than differences," (Nieto, 2013, p. 65). I really like this quote from Nieto, it shows even though we may seem different on the surface our similarities outweigh everything within us.

Up until my junior year at the University of Mary I had never found my lifelong college friend I was supposed to have in my wedding and for the rest of my life, until I met Monica. Monica is from California and was very unfamiliar with the Midwest lifestyle. She came from a very urban area where wine is the main industry. It was very interesting to learn about her lifestyle, large family, and culture. Getting to know Monica was like Nieto said, "teaching is getting to know one's students: who they are, what they know and need to know, their dreams and hopes, their struggles and frustrations. (Nieto, 2013, p. 92). I brought Monica home before Christmas break and introduced her to some of my family's Christmas traditions. We made a couple German desserts like Kuchen and lefsa. I explained to her our family business of raising cattle, and she was amazed with the amount of meat and potatoes my family ate. Monica also

had an accent that I had never heard before. Getting to know Monica was like traveling to California and experiencing it myself.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, I know throughout my short twenty-one years I have not been exposed to a lot of different ethnic cultures. But I have been exposed to a lot of diverse people. Cultural diversity is not limited to race, it includes: gender, family wealth, where we grow up, and religion to name a few. I intend to conclude my paper by giving myself advice based on Neito's teachings.

## **Learn About Yourself**

"Teachers must first of all know themselves" (Neito, 2013, p. 150). I think one of the most important pieces of advice for being a successful teacher and a happy person is learning about oneself. Learning what I like is just as important as what I do not like. Knowing myself from head to toe can give me the guidance to improve and reflect on the challenges I will face along the way. "Teachers need to evaluate not only their knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, as important and necessary as these are, but also their knowledge about and interaction with students, especially those with diverse backgrounds" (Neito, 2013, p. 150). By learning about my strengths and weaknesses, achievements and flaws it gives me the power to be a stronger goal finding teacher. Learning about myself means asking the hard questions that most do not want to talk about. It means making the change for the better of people around me and my surroundings. Knowing myself like a book prepares me to help others.

## **Learn About Your Students**

Learning about my students allows me to become a more rounded teacher. By building relationships and getting to know each student individually sets the stage for success. "Learning

about their students is unquestionably one of the most important endeavors teachers undertake” (Neito, 2013, p. 151). I need to know how to help students reach their dreams and goals. I need to learn who the students live with, what language they speak, what traditions they practice, and what values the student honors. “Learning about one’s students means rejecting taken-for-granted assumption about culture and difference” (Neito, 2013, p. 151). On the first day of school I will do an activity to break the ice and get to know everyone. I will continue to open up to the students and understand each of them as the year progresses.

### **Cultivate Allies**

“To thrive and grow, teachers need to develop allies” (Neito, 2013, p. 152). Teaching is a career where coworkers continuously work together and bounce off ideas to each other. Having friendly coworkers helps eliminate stress, be committed to their job, and be a hopeful and caring teacher. Having allies helps teachers to expand their horizons, learn from their peers, and share new ideas with others. Coming from a very small school I learned quickly that word gets around fast and it’s always helpful to have a group of trusted colleagues to discuss and vent with. Having allies is like having a family away from your home family. “Besides fostering professional learning, allies also help teachers handle the day-to-day challenges of teaching, whether dealing with the latest curriculum, difficult students, or endless mandates from the central office” (Nieto, 2013, p.153).

### **Have A Life**

Teachers have many duties besides teaching that tends to overwhelm any free time that comes with the profession. Teachers come to school early and leave late. They take papers home to correct, attend in school and out of school activities, participate in online classes, and hold

parent teacher conferences. But the important piece of advice to remember is to “Have a Life.” This means taking time for yourself and family even if you are behind on correcting and prepping. It means not stressing over the little nit-picky things that are going wrong in the classroom. It also means doing something for yourself like shopping, going for a run, or dining out. Have a life is enjoying the profession you chose and embracing every set back as a step forward.

First looking at the four pieces of advice to growing up on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, and by taking a variety of trips in high school has given me many opportunities to experience other cultures. Going to college has shown me that there are many ways to be diverse other than race. How and where we grow up has a huge impact on the type of people we will become. I am overjoyed to have attended three unique universities where I learned about many different cultures, experienced diverse people, and met lifelong friends. Not only has my cultural experiences allowed me to see many cultures; it has broadened my horizon and made me a well-balanced person.

I hope to use my experiences to help me make the best decisions in my future classroom. Throughout this course I have learned many useful strategies that I can implement in my classroom but also in daily life. Culture is all around us and it’s best to be open minded and embrace the diversity. It’s important to learn about ourselves as teachers, and the students we teach. Establishing friendly allies with coworkers and parents sets the stage for a very productive environment. Lastly, having a life and enjoying the simple things that come with teaching. Like Nieto said, “the Reward, I think, comes from the tiniest little things” (Nieto, 2013, p. 57). It is our job as teachers to prepare students for the world ahead of them. Therefore, I find this quote from Treuer very fitting. “There are but two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children.

One of these is roots, the other, wings” (Treuer, 2012, p. 138). This quote goes to show that we need to teach our children where they come from, but to also give them the motivation to discover new paths.

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