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Cultural Autobiography  
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The various meanings for culture can be defined as anything from the qualities of a person, to the improvement of one's mind. Because there is not one precise answer to what culture is, it is sometimes difficult to define your own. But, throughout a person's entire life, it is possible to have a collection of ideas and experiences that make them who they are, and this is my personal definition of where culture comes from. From my childhood to now, there have been thousands of events that have shaped my individual culture, and their specific significances are extremely important. When I think of culture, I think of family, religion, dreams, beliefs, customs, friends, and so much more. In each of those categories there are countless stories to tell, but the most noteworthy have molded me into the person I am today.

Presently, I don't think about my childhood all that much, but it is a major part of my culture. The first experience that comes to mind when thinking of culture would involve my religion. As a child, every Sunday my family and I would attend the Presbyterian Church of Livingston with my grandparents. I always remembered it being fun to put a dress on and go see my friends at Sunday school. But, when I look back, church meant a lot more to me than playtime. Although I am not a religious person, I believe that the gathering of all the people at my church was what made us feel like a community in its own. Not only did I learn the importance of being close to a group of people, but I learned how much each person relied on the others. This can also be seen as something that will help in my future as an educator. What we have been talking about in TCL1 all year was how important it is to have a learning community. But, there were several aspects that had to be present in order for that community to work. One of the most important was family involvement in the schools. In Sophia Nieto's book, *Affirming Diversity*, it states that "In programs with strong family involvement components, students are consistently better achievers than in otherwise identical programs with less family involvement"(Nieto

115). Nieto feels that family is just as important in the school setting as in the home, and in fact that they relate directly to each other. As a teacher, this experience in my church will remind me how important it is to feel as though you are part of a group. Family involvement can be related to this because my family was active in all that went on in that church. I feel the same aspects are important in any setting, such as sports and after-school programs. Looking back, I could almost call those people my family, and family is another imperative part of culture.

My family would probably be the number one influence on my culture. Much of what I believe in has come straight from my parents and relatives. I have learned so much from the people that I lived with for eighteen years of my life, including manners, the way I speak, the food I eat, and the hobbies I have. Family is important for the obvious reasons such as love and support, but there is a lot more behind that which has a large effect on our culture.

Normally, a white, middle-classed family, might have trouble adapting to other races in a community that is not very diverse. But, because my family made it so I was exposed to different races at a young age, I had no question of why we were different. An example of this would be of a man that came into my life when I was around twelve years old. My grandfather lived alone and started to need some help doing daily activities. My father hired a man named Levani. He was from a country called Georgia, in Europe. When I first met him, I thought everything about him was interesting. I wanted to hear stories upon stories about his family, traditions he had, and what it was like in another country. Because my parents encouraged all the questioning, it made it easier for me to understand that it was a good thing to be learning so much about a different culture, so different from my own.

This experience would be helpful in my future as an educator in the way that it is going to be extremely important for me to be accepting of other cultures because my students and myself will be so different from each other. The book *Affirming Diversity*, states that "...new teachers of students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds assume that they cannot expect very much of their students, especially if these students are also economically poor..." ( Nieto 157). Some teachers are thrown into districts that are so culturally different from

what they are used to, and they use this as an excuse for why their students may not be doing very well. But, the opposite of this should be true. It is imperative that a teacher be accepting of different cultures and not believe in the rumors they have heard before. Because I had the opportunity to be so close to a man who was so different, I knew from a young age that different cultures could learn an incredible amount from each other. This experience alone, had an impact of what my culture was like in the way that I believed, that it was a good thing to learn from other people.

The last experience I feel as impacted my culture, involved both my high school and college years. There was a class called Target Teach, made specifically for those in high school thinking of working in the education field. Because I had worked a day care previously, I had an idea that I wanted to work with children, and this was the perfect opening for me. I was assigned to a first grade classroom that changed my life. Everyday I would go into the classroom and feel as though I was actually part of their own learning community. The children would greet me as a teacher, and treat me as a teacher. But, the most influential part of this experience was working with the teacher I was assigned to. Not only did she make sure to include me in their everyday activities but she taught me so much that I have taken with me today. This class alone prepared me for my field experience in TLC1.

The field experience in TLC1 was just like Target Teach but more advanced. I felt more prepared going into this class having experienced an elementary level classroom already. But, I did not know then what I was in for. I was placed into a Bilingual classroom, with all Spanish speaking children. The first day I was a little scared of how I would move along in the class not knowing Spanish at all. But, as time moved I grew to enjoy watching how these children interacted with each other, speaking Spanish, and with me, not speaking Spanish. This class alone, taught me so much about my culture, and theirs. My cooperating teacher made sure to adapt each lesson to what the children were familiar with. In Nieto's book she states that "...when schools become more attuned to children's cultures, children's academic achievement improves" ( Nieto 152). I directly saw this in my field experience this year. For example, while doing a math lesson using money, the teacher asked what

the children saw when they went into stores like the Dollar Store and K-Mart. Small additions like this can have a large impact on how comfortable the children feel in the classroom.

Another important part of culture is the perspective in which someone looks at things. Both of my field experiences, in high school and college, have shaped my views on how I look at the students. I think that there are some teachers who come into classrooms with automatic biases, and this is the wrong way to go about things. If I had entered my bilingual classroom with assumptions about Spanish students, I wouldn't have gotten as close to the children, much less the teacher, than I did. It was my culture that led me to believe that going into experiences with an open mind is the only way you are going to learn about other people, and possibly learn more about yourself.

Writing this cultural autobiography has forced me to look deeply into everything that is important to me. In fact, before I started writing this paper I wasn't even sure of exactly what my culture was. Looking back on all these experiences that have shaped who I am today, only makes me realize that certain things, like family and religion, have helped me to discover my identity. Now, I can clearly identify myself as someone who is willing to learn about and accept other cultures, cherishes the relationships in their life, and uses every bit of information learned. At first, this cultural autobiography was hard to write because I could not think of certain experiences that had a large effect on my specific culture. But, after looking at the big picture of my life, the things that stood out to me the most, were all events that changed me.

Being a teacher means that there are going to be a lot of responsibilities thrown your way. My future as a teacher cannot be predicted but it can be looked at in a positive manner. Now, after having so many experiences that have and will continue to help me in my education major, I can get a feeling of what kind of teacher I want, and hope, to be. Taking into consideration my experiences with family, church, and other cultures, I feel that as a teacher I will try to be very excepting of the other cultures surrounding me and truly consider the learning community style of teaching. With the thousands of influences I've had in my

lifetime, I think it was very hard to pinpoint the few that impacted me the most. This cultural autobiography has taught me more about myself than those experiences did, and that is why I have come out of this assignment feeling as though something significant has been accomplished.