Personal Narrative

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Introduction

I find myself at an intersection, looking forward, backwards, to the left, and the right. As I pause in reflection, I know that my past experiences, background, culture, language, beliefs, and perceptions will shape my journey ahead. The knowledge and full understanding of who I am brings me closer to understanding others. It is from this lens that I view the world and International Education. “Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all people cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try to understand each other, we may even become friends” (Angelou, 1993, p.12). It is through self examination that I look to uncover new directions to enhance global learning.

Culture and Upbringing

I am American by birth, but my ancestors were travelers. Each one embarked on physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural journeys. I can not begin without acknowledging this fact. My family has played and integral part of my cultural and educational upbringing. My mother is from Panamá and my father was from Barbados. In our home we spoke English and assimilated to an “American” lifestyle, but there were always underlying tones from the English and Spanish speaking parts of Caribbean imbedded in our daily interactions. As a child I remember hearing stories of the personal journeys of traveling family members who hopped about the islands of the Caribbean in search of work or better educational opportunities for their children and those who remained at home establishing businesses. I recall stories about Barbados, Jamaica, Panamá, and Cuba vividly expressing an exchange of language, culture, and struggle. My grandfathers and father used storytelling as a way of remembering the past and
valuing the contributions of my ancestors. These stories fostered in me the importance of sharing and reporting experiences for the purpose of learning. Our exchange gave me the opportunity to learn about men and women who broke the racial boundaries of segregation and who valued the liberating power education could bring for themselves and their children. Education is a part of my cultural identity.

Language or the lack of language was also something that was prevalent in my youth. As a child I loved going to the Bronx Zoo. I created any excuse I could for my grandparents to take me there. I recall one day, as my grandmother and I were riding the bus to the zoo, she began speaking with me in Spanish. I felt uncomfortable and frustrated, why was she speaking to me in Spanish? “Grandma, I don’t understand what your telling me,” I said bluntly. She was surprised, but understood and responded “your mother was embarrassed to speak with me when we first came to this country.” I did not understand this at the time, partly because I was such an outgoing child and also because even at a young age I saw the power of bilingualism. My grandmother could connect with people she did not know with comfort and ease, just by using Spanish. I wanted that. My search for language and culture differ from that of my mother and Rodriguez (1982) who stated “Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search for Mexican graveyards for ties to unnamable ancestors” (p. 5). I continue to search and value all of the contributions that have led me to this intersection.

Educational Experiences

Shortly after my father’s death I was accepted into a student ambassador program. I was twelve, sitting at the dining room table holding my younger brother as my mother and grandparents discussed whether it would be possible for me to participate in the program. It required me travelling to Australia for three weeks, which was very costly. My mother at the
time was a full time doctoral student, working two jobs to make ends meet, and depended heavily on me to care for my brother, age two. The conversation did not last long, my mother looked at me and said “you’re going, that’s it, your father would have wanted you to see and learn from the world.” That year my grandfather retired early so that he and my grandmother could help raise my brother and I went to Australia.

My journey to Australia with other American adolescents was my first formal educational and cultural exchange program. I remember being an active participant, amazed by what I saw, the conversations I had with colleagues and natives, my thoughts, and my experiences. From parliament to the outback and everywhere in between we shared experiences, visions, dreams, and consciously tried to get to know one another better. Looking back now, I see the importance of this experience in shaping my perspectives and views on global learning. I think that here is not one story which encompasses the human story, but many stories. Learning from these stories brings multidimensionality to ones own story. When all can collaborate a successful exchange will occur and thus learning unfolds.

My interest in language, culture, gender issues, and globalization took me on my next journey, to Wellesley College for my undergraduate studies. Still confused about my path I simplified my scope with what I knew and what I wanted to learn. I knew that I did not speak Spanish, but understood that learning another language was a valuable tool, which could also connect me with others. I also realized that economics and the study of its principles and policies would be helpful in better understanding inequalities and the underlying dynamics of power around the world. This educational experience shaped my thought and opened my curiosity to the world outside of what I was knowledgeable about. It also gave me the opportunity to learn from and about other women from around the world.
One of the benefits of being a Spanish major was getting to travel abroad again, this time to Spain. This experience, much like the first, shaped the person I am today. It was the beginning of my relationships with my closest friends and professional colleagues. Years later, back in Spain, this time in Seville, I was able to attend the ceremonial baptism of a gypsy girl, Luna de Alba (*Moon at Dawn*). The ceremony was held in the family’s childhood church. It was a beautiful experience, I felt honored to enter into the lives of others, without notice, without thought, without an invitation, but at the same time invited, and truly accepted.

It is customary in Spanish gypsy culture to celebrate important events for several days and this was no exception. That evening hundreds of people, members of other gypsy families, friends, and even an American acquaintance, gathered in a catering hall on the outskirts of Seville to commemorate new life. Through the air resounded the marked beat of the *cajón* (percussion box), the melody of the *guitarría* (guitar), and *el cante* (song). As everyone ate, talked, and danced I momentarily sat observing a powerful exchange of people, language, and culture.

After college, I went to Wall Street, spending what seemed like days on end in my cubicle crunching numbers and writing reports, only propagating the wealth of a few. September 11th changed everything. Fear and trauma force clarity. So, I packed my bags again, but this time with a clear goal. I wanted to change what I found to be so uncomfortable about my experience on the *Street*. It was not accessible to all. It was extremely egotistical and self-serving. At the time, the only way I could make any change would be to help educate others in hopes that they too would one day have the opportunity to participate in all global institutions. I would do this through education. I began learning how to teach English as a Second Language. After teaching in Seville for four years I returned to the United States, to George Mason
University, and completed my Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, focusing on Multicultural and Multilingual Education.

At present, I teach high school Spanish with Fairfax County Public Schools. I am in constant connection with students who are learning Spanish for the first time and native speakers who take Spanish to maintain their language and facilitate their acquisition of English, while creating cultural bonds with other native speakers. My work with both non-native and native Spanish speakers is extremely rewarding. I strongly believe that to teach is to also learn. Within my own classroom I believe that creating an atmosphere that engages students to think, explore, discover, and question fosters awareness, exchange, and learning/success for all students.

Connections

My story is a personal one, but it is also professional. I am a teacher, but know that my job does not stop there. I am professionally committed to the establishment of new policies and practices that incorporate all stories and perspectives. The education of all children is deeply personal for me. Learning for all is core to the beliefs that I hold and my family instilled in me at an early age. Travel and commitment to knowing more than what is familiar brings me here today.

Reflection

My life experiences and family background have promoted my goal of being an educator. The importance of learning for learning was whispered in my ear each night before I received a good-night kiss. For this reason and many more I find it imperative that students are seen as global entities, inseparable from their cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, socio-economic identities.
As I continue to reflect on the above experiences and others, I understand that International Education is a stimulating field whose interconnectedness is essential. Within the increasingly global world learning must encompass all people. Language, culture, and stories are the instruments that will shape culturally responsible, aware, citizens of the world, who are ready to engage in the global community.

I also realize that my personal experiences can be used as a tool for further investigation, but also have the power to cloud my interpretation. It is only through constant critical thought, reflection, and discovery that I can actively engage myself in this new research journey.
References
