

## Field Experience Interview on Multiculturalism in Education (Part 1)

EDUC 723 Multicultural Issues in Education  
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### **Introduction: Statement of Purpose**

With moderate preparations and a personal invitation, on this day I was interviewing with a new acquaintance of mine, a dedicated and experience young scholar of humanities.

My interviewee (whom I hereby address as Ms. M, with she/her pronouns) is an aspiring and avid scholar of cultural studies and a student in Arts and Sciences at the University. She is with the white or European ethnic group, a *different* group than mine. In this reflective, summary report, I aim to represent our interview process which includes several layers of discussion, covering issues and specific questions on multicultural experiences in both life and education. It is a memorable conversation to me.

I was interested in learning about a/any personal life trajectory that relates to multiculturalism or the exploration of new/other cultures. To my greatest delight, the experiences of the interviewee matched right into the interest I had – she as a domestic student to the United States had gone on to international and intercultural experiences, having spoken more than two foreign languages. As I prepared into the interview, I was mainly concerned about the level of engagement in the interaction we would have. The assumptions I have include that first she is somewhat interested in the conversation of multiculturalism, and that her cross-cultural experience is based on American education and extends to the understanding of other civilizations. In addition, in regards of educational experiences, I do not assume her sharing would reveal any aspect of the “achievement gap” given her relatively regular secondary education background.

### **Descriptive Summary: Record of What Took Place**

The conversation started with some minutes of self-introduction, for each of us; my interviewee, Ms. M, was very enthusiastic and engaged into the conversation, much more than I expected, and I had learned that she was currently studying South-Asian Studies at the University. First, we talked about her early experience that she grew up in a simple southern, monolingual family that was not multicultural. What was interesting was that her father's encouraging her to explore and learn some foreign languages because he suggested that doing so would "make her doubly smarter". It was the origin where her interest on foreign languages/cultures grew.

Then we talked about the current environment she was in – Ms. M told me she currently had languages proficiency paper-proven for Classical Latin, German, and Bengali, an impressive set of achievement. Coming to the current school, she holds a very specific intent of majoring in South-Asian Studies, which she really wants to study. Prior to this, she attended a college for two years in another state where students were almost all white, specifically with a demographic makeup of nearly 98 percent of white students. Hence, the culture there was not exactly satisfactory for her multicultural mindset and interest; she shared with me that the only "other" element she had outside her norm were the times when she attended competitions and engaged in foreign culture associations. However, there were classes and professors who inspired her significantly in the understanding about discrimination in education, the legacy of colonialism, and history and philosophy, which directed her interest to the study of India and Pakistan. After freshman year, she got an opportunity to study aboard in South Africa, and later progressively developed an idea of "doing work in Asian Studies for a living". Such revelation of interest with dense, real personal experiences, with addition of academic influences, was so impressive to me as I listened to her elaboration.

Next we moved on to talk about the sociocultural aspects at Penn, her current school, and a little about the phenomenon of the digital age. We both agreed that the cultural flavor at the University is a unique one. But Ms. M pointed out that there were cultural issues with the school, and there needed to be more emphasis on “sensitivity training” – which she specifically elaborated as letting people become more empathetic and recognize more diversity and social representations in the workplace. The “sensitivity” part here refers to being international, as she pointed out that there are many students from the world who come to Penn, whilst most who do attend, including faculty, staff, and students, are domestic. The process of “unlearning” should be expected when a person immerses himself/herself into the places. We both thought it important for people to really be more respectful. In the end, as she suggested, empathy and understanding are built on a “case-by-case” basis, and they cannot bypass personal engagement.

### **How Findings Supported/Challenged Assumptions**

Indeed, my interviewee had a big enthusiasm in multicultural issues and topics; her engagement drove our conversation forward to various aspects, and it is an important and precious character for a young scholar (and anyone in general) to have because it creates an open mindset toward different people, their cultures, and their lives. Besides, Ms. M’s natural, proactive view on multicultural issues not only guided her to further exploration and studies of foreign cultures, as well as knowing people from different ethnic groups, but also enabled her to understand the perspectives of other cultures, which is a precious gift to have.

### **Connections to Readings and Class Discussions**

In accordance with one of the first claims in Nieto’s book, learning is built upon a lot of experiences one has and knowledge is like a canon; it relates to my interviewee’s personal experiences building her own openness and knowledge about multicultural exposure, which is

built upon her gradual exposure to foreign cultures, languages, and people. Although she never was in an immigrant community as she grew up, she approached socially multiple foreign culture groups to get close to people with different backgrounds than hers.

When Ms. M first attended college, she was in a somewhat “monocultural” environment, she was one of the students who stood outside of the “particularism” reality that most of her peers at school were from a similar ethnic group and were nearly all white. As suggested by Ravitch, particularism insists on people’s learning only from their same race which is generally a bad idea <sup>[1]</sup>. Meanwhile, from all Ms. M shared I can learn that there was a rich social context in which she engaged herself in, experiencing the cultural ingredients and building up her tangible, personal understanding; as in Nieto’s discussions on cultures and learning, it is as a dynamic creation, socially constructed, that culture and the learning of culture should be regarded <sup>[2]</sup>. Besides, learning different, foreign languages served as a carrier for her learning the associated cultures, -- one of the best ways to approach foreign people and their lives.

### References

- [1] Ravitch, D. *Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures*. The American Scholar (Vol. 59, No. 3) 1990, pp. 337-354 (18 pages)
- [2] Nieto, S. *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*. 2010 New York: Teachers College Press.

## Appendix: Transcript and Outline of Interview (Revised from the Original)

### 1. Growing Up and Early Experience – Was Your Family “Multicultural”?

**Ms. M:** I grew up/come from the South of the United States, where foreign languages to some degree were undervalued. Clearly speaking, mine is not an immigrant family nor “multicultural”; my parents came from North America and Europe, being mostly monolingual. But I would never associate with immigrants and was not part of a community. I went to school in rural areas in the southern state of Tennessee. However, it was primarily propelled by my father as he encouraged and motivated me to learn foreign languages. He, perhaps mistakenly, told me as a kid that if I learned multiple languages, I would become doubly smart – a bold claim to make. So, without any particular professional reasons, it was for this pure encouragement that I developed the interest on learning languages, and even about foreign cultures later.

### 2. Current Environment: Languages, Cultural Studies, and College Experience

**Me:** Then, what foreign languages do you speak or master? Could you tell a bit about your current field of study and how you got here? Or things that you are studying recently.

**Ms. M:** My language proficiency is on paper. I have about three years of language training experience in Classical Latin; I speak about at B2 level in German; and I have about two and a half years of language experience or equivalence in Bengali (Bangla), and just started taking courses in another language.

**Me:** Thanks. What about your current working environment? Are you around with people who have multicultural backgrounds?

**Ms. M:** I applied to this University with a very specific intent of majoring in South-Asian Studies, which is what I knew I wanted to study. Long story short, my freshman started in a college in New

York; it was very nice but it was with mostly white students, the demographic makeup of which was nearly 98. The only multicultural element I had straight outside of my norm were the times I spent going to competitions. My original plan was to major in anthropology and philosophy; I took anthropology and educational studies courses, and had my favorite professor of the day who is a gem of a person and introduced me to my passion for university; I learned about discrimination in education, the legacy of colonialism, racial relations, and discrepancies in education, tied together by the sound history. That paired with my philosophy class. All these studies directed me to the study of India and Pakistan; at one point, after my freshman year, I went onto this study-abroad program and I was in South Africa. And my anthropology professor jokingly said that I should study South-Asian Studies for a living. So then I later transitioned into this current program in South-Asian Studies, and it has been a massive shift for me ever since. It brings its own demographics.

Here at Penn we have a unique sociocultural flavor, and so does Philadelphia that I think in some part defines the University. There are cultural issues with the school, and there needs to be perhaps more sensitivity training, more empathy, and more diversity and social representations with their workforce. Sensitivity, in this context, is in the sense of being international: there are lots of people from the world who come to Penn, and the fact that most of the people who do attend Penn are domestic. This applies to faculty, staff, and students. There is a lot of “unlearning” involved when it comes to immersing oneself into the places – being more respectful as well as more empathetic in the process – it is a problem that is largely complicated and unspoken in the United States. We should go beyond the end of our accountability, and acknowledge that empathy is built on a “case-by-case” basis, which means you need to get to know someone and to understand them. When you say it aloud it is not too complicated, but some people do have difficulties doing

it, especially if they had never been exposed to it before. It (sensitivity training) it, also, not to be stopped but a continuing process.

Me: Thanks! It sounds a genius and precious perspective you have – empathetic, caring, and thoughtful in many ways.

### **3. Phenomenon of the Digital Age**

Me: From my impression, it seems to me people in the older generations, or perhaps for example in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, read a lot of books while in the midst of this “digital age”, we might not be learning as much/rich as people in the old days – probably because we focus a lot on progress and productivity, which are great things, instead of learning. We sometimes read things as a duty more as an interest.

Ms. M: I agree with that. The phenomenon of digital archeology: as we transitioned into the digital age, there is so much that can be recorded. For example, you have relational databases, 3-D models, presentations – all things organized or unorganized. And you have things that store them in memory, which are relatively cheap. There is so much and really difficult to organize. The immensity of all this is so much that we can do about it. It becomes tricky in the process of learning – looking up in a library catalog, refining your search, etc. – still a lot of data to come through.

### **4. People Who Inspired You in the Multicultural Context**

Ms. M: The anthropology professor I mentioned before. I also have a history major advisor, a very good friend to me whose family comes from Pakistan; she specializes in South-Eastern studies and we share many good memories together.

### **5. Do You Talk with Family/Friends about Experiences? Advice for Youths and Peers**

Ms. M: I have not got the chance to talk about multicultural experiences and thoughts with my family very much. It is likely because of the differences in lifestyles between us, perhaps better described when you think of being away from home for a long time, noticing that you have changed a lot but they remain as they were, which makes it a little difficult to have a conversation. I am though incredibly grateful to go to university for my studies – grateful of my family’s supporting me even more than what they could do.

I would suggest youths or college freshmen to “make yourself uncomfortable”. Somehow many students entering college are taken aback and might miss out many things to do. Don’t forget there is also social experience. “Apply”, “live”, “learn” – there are a lot of rights upon a university student, and it is worthwhile to try things out of your comfort zone. For me, for example, I am currently the Chair of German Association at the University, working on some German studies.