

Where I'm From: Reflections on Teacher Identity, Culture, and Experiences

Part of the mission of the Knowles Teacher Initiative is to improve education for all students in the United States. One way that we approach this goal is by supporting teachers in developing their practice through inquiry into equitable teaching practices. We see identity and teaching practice as intertwined. The what, why, and how we teach are ultimately impacted by our identities and the experiences that shape us. They become a filter through which we perceive ourselves, our students, and the world around us. In order to best support all students we must first recognize these filters exist and try to locate their origins.

During Year 3 of the Fellowship, we ask Fellows to write a Where I'm From poem. This poem has been adapted from writer and teacher **George Ella Lyon** who wrote this powerful poem as a snapshot of memorable experiences from her childhood. Since then this poem has been used as a template by many to drive explorations of childhood, family structure and culture, and much more. We use it as a template to have Fellows drive explorations and reflection of their identity and the experiences that shape who they are as teachers. Below Sara gives us a snapshot of the identity and experiences that have influenced her filter.

Where I am From...

I am from Los Angeles, California.

From apartments and houses full of family, love, anger, struggles, and laughter.

From car rides with sounds of cumbias, Vicente Fernandez, Selena, and Juan Gabriel.

From oraciones católicas, limpias de huevo para repeler la mala energía, novelas, y helado de café.

From hopes of turning financial insecurities into properties through hard work and education.

I am my grandmother's granddaughter.

From an immigrant aspiration to find a better life in a new country.

From a willingness to learn and adapt to a new culture and language.

From sassiness, intelligence, stubbornness, independence, and resilience.

From a feminist urge to pave paths for women in the workforce.

From a fierce battle to leave behind generational traumas.

I am from UC Berkeley College of Engineering.

From the growing pains of being the first person in my family to leave home for college.

From classes filled with mostly white and Asian male students.

From the realization of my educational deficits in math and science.

From finally learning what an engineer actually is and meeting one for the first time.

From the loss of confidence in my abilities to accomplish my educational goals.

From the guidance and support of mentors to get me through the dark times and help me regain my courage to continue with my degree.

I am from corporate America.

From emails, digital calendars, Excel sheets, Powerpoint presentations, and video calls with global business partners.

From inflated salaries, stock options, retirement plans, and bonuses.

From free lunches and coffee, free sports events and concerts, and domestic and international travel opportunities.

From offices dominated by white males where I was

often silenced.

From 14-hour work days, 3 am calls into the lab, and the pressure to compete with and outperform my colleagues.

I am a victim and survivor of modern colonization.

From hiding my ability to speak my native language in front of my friends.

From concealing my Ana Gabriel and Bronco CDs and lying about being a Britney Spears and NSYNC fan.

From the embarrassment of the cooking smells in my house.

From the insistence to reject my identity and assimilate to whiteness.

From the revelation that my culture is worthy of humanity and greatness.

From the reclamation of my heritage, my food, my music, my language, my being.

If you knew me you would know I am an educator, scientist, engineer, social justice advocate, daughter, niece, sister, aunt, friend, and a lifelong student.

From the love, appreciation and pride of Where I am From.

(Coming soon) I am from South East High School . . .

Sara Valdez

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Sara's poem describes the multiple layers of identity, culture, and experiences that have undoubtedly influenced her perspectives and thus her teaching practices. We, as teacher mentors, encourage Fellows to not only reflect on but interrogate their perspectives. It's not just in the writing of the poem but in the sharing with others that our teachers see the multiple and different perspectives that teachers bring to the classroom.

In small groups, teachers reflect on the following prompts

What themes emerged for you? For your group?

What revelations did you have?

What was difficult?

What was easy/obvious?

From these reflections, we've noticed the following themes:

Sharing parts of your identity and experiences with others requires vulnerability

Hearing about the identity and experiences of others is valuable

Individuals hold multiple identities and these identities do not exist in isolation

Experiences influence perspectives of yourself and others

From the collective reflections on this experience, we have evidence that investigating their own identity helps Fellows:

think about the aspects of themselves they choose to bring to their classrooms and why,

reflect on how the parts of themselves they choose to bring to the classroom may work to privilege some and at the same time marginalize others, and inquire into equitable practices and the development of a more inclusive classroom environment.

From Sara's poem, we were left with the following noticings and wondering.

Sara felt silenced and pressured to outperform and compete in corporate America.

How do her experiences mirror the experiences of some learners in schools?

How do we as educators inadvertently perpetuate these experiences in our classrooms or learning spaces?

Sara's revelation was that [her] culture is "worthy of humanity and greatness."

How does this realization empower us?

What can we create in our classrooms from a place of shared humanity and greatness?

How does this reflection empower us to expand our view of ourselves and others?

How does this expansive view help us teach more students to be doers of math

and science?

It is through our ability to see our own lens, our own filters through which we view the teaching and learning of math and science that we can acknowledge who doesn't fit into our view. It is through these reflections that we can push ourselves to consider who is and isn't served by our model of teaching and learning. And it is through this final realization that we can return to our mission to support all students in being doers of math and science. The awareness can lead to the expansion and inclusion of more students, but this requires each of us to acknowledge where we are from.

As a teacher mentor, these poems are more than enlightening. They provide insight into who our Fellows are and how that has informed their identity as learners, teachers, and humans. These revelations also show how much their personal, cultural, and ethnic histories influence their present-day identity and characteristics.