**Module 2 Assignment**

**Cultural Development: Self-Analysis Narrative**

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Everyone has a story to tell. Here’s my story of how my life experiences and conditions of how the first ten years my youth are interwoven into the teacher I’ve become; defining many practices and philosophies I use in my classroom.

***A Segregated Beginning***

My story begins when a basketball player and a cheerleader fell in love in their junior year of high school in the 1962-’63 school year at the age of 16. Henry Tutt is my “birth” father; his extended family lived on a plot of land just outside of Greenville, Kentucky, the county seat of Muhlenberg County. Their sustenance was based on making their own “moonshine” or alcoholic beverages, or obtaining it through other sources, and selling it to people in Muhlenberg County, most of which remains “dry” – not allowing for the sale of alcoholic beverages – to this very day.
 The only place where alcohol can be purchased in the county – on Sundays – is in Central City, the biggest town in the county, rivalling Greenville.. That’s where my mother, Sharon Venerable, lived with her father, sister, two brothers, and her fiercely religious and conservative mother, who could not stand the Tutts and their love for material possessions purchased with illegal booze money. In my

grandmother’s eyes, Henry would be analogous to being a drug dealer.
 Even though Central City and Greenville were less than 10 miles – and one world - apart, they attended school in Drakesboro, which was nearly 10 miles away from *both* towns. They went to school there, because Drakesboro had the highest percentage of black residents. This was ***de facto*** racial segregation - a situation in which legislation did not overtly segregate students by race, but nevertheless school segregation continued after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision mandated integration in 1954 (Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, n.d.). This was the practice until end of the 1962-’63 year. The Drakesboro school was forced to close to require integration in the Central City and Greenville schools.
 I am not sure if Henry finished his last year at Greenville’s newly-integrated high school. My maternal grandmother supported my mother being among the ranks of the first black students at Central City’s high school, even though she was going to face three insurmountable challenges starting her senior year at Central City High: (1) a vocal percentage of students AND staff were not taking kindly to black students at the school, (2) my mother learned she was pregnant with me at 16, and (3) my paternal grandmother knew a place across the border in Tennessee where her pregnancy could be “taken care of” (i.e. terminated); my maternal grandmother would NOT have that and insisted that my parents marry, which they did, so I would not be labeled as a child “born out of wedlock”.

 I was a child born into a forced situation requiring equality in my family and community. Attempts at equity would come years later.

***“A Gift from God”***

 That senior year was not a good one, especially for my mother. My mother was harassed so badly at her school by students AND staff that she dropped out that fall. The forced marriage didn’t work either. My parents separated a year-and-a-half later. My mom went into hiding from him, living with an aunt in Indianapolis, getting her diploma from an inclusive, Catholic school there. I was only to see my father three more times, at the age of 12, 38, and once more at 47. I believe that Henry passed away from complications of COVID-19 in 2020.

I spent the next five years with my maternal grandparents as my mom was sent far away to Clinton, Iowa where she pursued a clerical career through the newly created U.S. Job Corps program, which along with a system of community colleges, were created to fight the War on Poverty declared by President Lyndon Johnson. Her big brother and a fellow Drakesboro cheerleader, who was a favored cousin of my mother’s, both went to recently-integrated colleges in Kentucky and graduated to become a high school teacher and a college professor, respectively. College was not to be an option for my mother. While my mother was in Clinton, learning a trade, I was being spoiled by two grandparents, thinking they were my parents.

As I was starting preschool at the age of three, something happened that my grandmother called “a gift from God”. I started reading. Not only could I read, I could also spell, and write. Word spread quickly around the neighborhood. While the civil rights struggle was in full force in my southern hometown with demonstrations taking place at City Hall and the one restaurant in town across the street from it, a Tastee Freeze that would only let blacks place orders from the back window, there was incredible news that a “Golden Child”, who happened to be a black boy from the North First Street neighborhood, was gifted at a very early age with skills that were denied his so many of his elders and nearly all of his ancestors.
 While I was in preschool, two teachers came over to my grandparents’ house to assess my reading knowledge. I read a couple of picture books to them and wrote sentences. I remember that day so very clearly, as it was the ONLY time I’ve ever seen white people in their house! The next thing I knew is that I was in a first grade classroom. I tested well enough to skip kindergarten, and start first grade at 5 years old.

***Greg***
 Another formative set of memories had to do with Greg. Greg was a white boy in my preschool and first grade class. He lived across the back alley, between First and Second Streets, and three houses down from mine. He would walk with home with me and my First Street friends after school, and sometimes I’d come into the house and play with him.
 There was one “problem”. Greg lived on Second Street. The alley between First and Second Streets served as a “demilitarized zone” – the red line – between all neighbors black and white. Many on Second Street had six-foot high wooden fences – no chain link – to, as I sadly learned later, to minimize what they could see of the negroes on the other side of the alley.
 There was no fence at Greg’s house. And his mom was home when I’d come in to play. She didn’t mind at all.
 Two life-defining moments took place from this relationship. The first had to do with “loving thy neighbor” as my very religious grandmother would often say to me.
 I had three besties in first grade, Paul and my cousin Jackie, both African Americans who lived on First Street, and Greg. I was sitting on the porch one lazy afternoon with my grandmother, waving at passersby and playing with my dump truck when I said, “Granny, I love Greg!” After all he was my neighbor, and I loved him, like the Bible told me to.
 “You WHAT?” she answered, with a rise in her voice.
 “I think I love Greg, like the Bible tells me to,” I responded innocently.

“No, no, no, Timmy, you can NOT do that!”
 “But why, Granny?”
 “Because that is something different.”
 I was naïve in my questioning. I had no ideas of dating, romance, or marriage at that time. However, I can look back at that moment and say that Greg had become a schoolboy crush. And I learned that was something I was not supposed to have.
 The second life defining moment happened when Greg came over to my house. The first grade year had just ended, and we had lots of time to play.
 Greg was NOT allowed to come over for any reason. I knew that. This time, Greg came over, unannounced, and I was home alone (which happened a lot, but everyone on First Street had an eye on each other), and I also was to not leave the house when Grandpa and Granny were working.
 I let Greg in. We snacked on apples and started playing board games.
 I could hear the crunching of gravel on the driveway letting me know that Granny was home. I panicked. But then I calmed down enough to be honest about his coming over and my wanting to play with him.
 There was no opportunity for rationality. As soon as Granny saw Greg she threw a fit that I have never seen her have. Greg was yelled at, and he ran home in tears. I was in tears as this was all so upsetting. Then my grandmother furiously went out back to find a good thick “switch” or tree branch, and I got the whipping of my life. I often start to cry when I tell this story, not because of the pain from the whipping, but in reflecting on the confusion and hurt in Greg’s eyes, and in the fear and anger in my grandmother’s eyes, as I sense that she was in fear that someone from the Klan might come looking to whip one of us for being a little too friendly to “their kind”.
 I never saw Greg again. My mother had just remarried in Davenport, Iowa, was pregnant with my sister from my new stepfather, and she was coming to get her son back. By the time I returned to Kentucky, Greg’s family had moved out of state.
 I will always wonder where he is until my dying day.

***Learning two meanings of “Iowa Nice”***

The date was June 6, 1970. My first grade school year had just ended. My mother met Lilburn Scott at a party in 1969 at the University of Iowa, where my mother got her first job as a secretary for a college professor. They married in May 1970, and came to get me, and restart my new life in what I thought was a big city. I was joining a new family, who were wonderful, inclusive and didn’t consider me to be a “step”-anything.

My mother and stepfather rented a duplex that was two blocks from the red line that segregated neighborhoods. I was on the white side of the line this time. There were also dark-skinned people around the neighborhood that spoke another language, which was literally a foreign concept to this person who only saw people as black or white. Danny spoke a language called Spanish. Some of my white friends would teach me words from a language their grandparents knew German. I majored in Spanish in college, and am the host of the German Club at my elementary school, teaching students basics of the German language and modern culture from “Das Mutterland”.
 My new neighborhood was a working class, blue-collar, white neighborhood, and heavily political. The mayor of Davenport at the time lived two doors away. I befriended that family when one of the daughters, who opened my eyes to Downs Syndrome, caught me playing outside, and talked my ears off and introduced me to her big sister, and two brothers. The alderman for our city council lived two doors away on the other side. His youngest son and I became great friends. My parents, my new sister and I were welcomed into the neighborhood with open arms by many. Even when we moved into a house across town five years later, many of the neighbor kids and I are remain dear friends to this day.
 While my mind was opened greatly, and I now had friends who were not only black, but white and Latino, I also learned something that my protective grandmother shielded me from when I was in Kentucky: racial prejudice… the “n word”… people not letting me come into their house, and being uninvited to parties and play dates because some parents, when they learned about my skin tone, forbade me from entering their home. Fortunately, these experiences were the exception and not the rule, yet the ignorance of those parents and the ways in which their children handled helped me to realize the importance of what Martin Luther King, Jr. calls “the content of one’s character”. I

***Mr. Walker and Mr. Kaisen*** I started second grade at a new school in a new city and state. Mr. Walker was one of the kindest, most nurturing souls I have ever met. He was a Louisiana native with a southern drawl that made this new Kentucky transplant feel right at home on Day 1. He believed in my abilities and he left no child behind, as he wanted all of his students to be successful. His personal attempt at creating an equitable learning environment and making a meaningful relationship with me was quite impactful. One day, 50 years ago, in the spring of 1971, I was a line leader and we were taking a break to walk a lap around the school grounds. I said to him, “Mr. Walker, I want to be a teacher, just like you.”
 Fifty years later, I’m teaching second grade, just like he did!
 In 2015, his daughter looked me up. He was moving back to Iowa and he wanted to see me. I took a personal day off from school and went to Davenport to see him. He was 91. He remembered my family, and remembered meeting my grandmother from Kentucky, whom he loved. He referred to her being “protective” and “caring”. He also went on limb in saying that had bothered him all these years. He always sensed that my mom and stepdad, while doing the best they could for me, never fully appreciated my talents. He said that, not having seen me for nearly 30 years not knowing that I had to pay my own way through college, that they discouraged me from teaching, and after coming out having my mother say that I won’t be able to keep a job, if I even live long enough to graduate. Her last conversation with me before she died in 2019 was one of disappointment, wishing that I could have been more like another relative my age who is a successful businessman. Mr. Walker was spot on.
 He died six months later.
 Mr. Kaisen, my fifth grade teacher, in his first year of teaching in 1973, was another one of those teachers. What I loved so much about him was his energy, his genuine love for everyone in the class, and like Mr. Walker, he made going to school and learning so much doggone fun. He also did one thing that no one else did which was quite formative in the development of my teaching stle. When he saw my strengths in reading and writing, he let me work on individual projects. I particularly loved writing stories and especially plays. He honored me at the end of the year by bringing one of my plays to life, “A Day in the Life of Smartypants Wilson”, using classmates as actors, and me as a co-director. He also recorded the play on video, which in 1974 was unheard of, and to me, that use of video technology was the coolest thing I had ever seen in a classroom!
 I got to see Mr. Kaisen during the spring break of 2018 when in Arizona. That meeting was powerful, amazing, and nothing short of wonderful.

***Ten years of incredible impact*** I have only covered the first 10 years of my sordid life, and I’ve already pushed the page limit of this assignment. However, those formative years have made a definite impact on who I am today, as a man who is black, gay, as was "gifted" enough to skip a grade. (Delving into the long-term consequences of grade-level acceleration would add another two pages to this already lengthy narrative and essay.) These three aspects of my live have morphed into creating the teacher I still am after finishing my 32nd year in the Des Moines Public Schools.
 Personally, I grew up as a timid kid . The discipline I received in my formative years and my strict religious upbringing led me to not want to upset the apple cart too much. I still am that way when I advocate. I also have trouble maintaining eye contact. I do not get upset if someone doesn’t look me in the eyes when I talk, as long as I sense they are listening. My experiences growing up as a black boy in a Jim Crow town, moving to a city in a working-class white neighborhood and a going to a very diverse school opened my mind and heart immensely to “love thy neighbor”. Learning that some choose to not love only firmed my resolve to keep my mind and heart open to getting to know others. It also helped me in my coming out process, becoming confident in being an out gay man in the the summer of 1985, as an earlier pandemic (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS) had many, regardless of their sexual orientation, living in fear, denial, ignorance, and/or hatred.

 Professionally, my experiences with Mr. Walker and Mr. Kaisen led me to want to teach. They were the original models of making the curriculum meaningful, and at times fun. I try to do the same, as it keeps me engaged with the job I have to do. However, their biggest impacts on me were (1) their sense of equity, wanting to see each child learn and grow, regardless of their background and life experience, (2) making real human connections with their students. I am still stunned at Mr. Walker’s assessment of my family dynamic 45 years after being in his class. (3) Mr. Kaisen exposed me to differentiation and individualized, project-based learning.

Due to my life influences, even from my first ten years’ experience, I believe I have excelled at making connections real with my students and most of their parents while they are in my classroom. One of my nephews is stunned at how many former students stay in touch with their second or third grade teacher. I will say that I am fortunate to have quite a few alumni maintain and value those connections.
 I have one huge concern in this day and age. The stories I’ve told in this narrative are a big part of who I am. I am very concerned that some will misunderstand my efforts to create safe spaces where differences in our life experiences are to be respected. I want to students to be able to claim their history, and discover the histories of other without reprimand or repercussion. I will always continue to insist that any classroom where I teach will be an equitable space. My primary means of providing an equitable classroom is to use my abilities and the curriculum resources that I have been given to (1) meet students where they are, (2) learn what “super powers” each child has, (3) help them realize and excel at them, and (4) guide them to grow in other areas, and perhaps, develop other super powers as well.
 My providing an equitable classroom is not striving for everyone in class is doing the same thing and getting a passing grade. Providing an equitable classroom is about making sure I know what everyone needs to be the best student she or he can be.

***Final thoughts***

Completing this assignment has been a mind-opening and soul-searching process. As I started my first draft, I gained new perspectives in from my family history and upbringing, putting some aspects of my formative years in a context that makes sense. This personal realization alone is a definite reminder of the importance for me to consider the Race for Success questions, the Privilege Walk and the Race Race videos.

 I’m also redefining what it means to establish a relationship with each student. This has always been key to my success with individual students and with my overall career as a teacher. After what I’ve gained this week to accentuate my 32 years of teaching, is that establishing a relationship is not only about establishing a rapport. Congeniality can be nice, but that niceness without getting to know what really makes a someone tick – or not – can be interpreted as superficial. If that happens, then that can be read as superficial. I’ve known this, but this week’s work has put words to my thoughts while providing a framework for me in making relationships meaningful.

 In conclusion, I know that I’ve gained so much in my most varied life experiences, as I acknowledge being in the twilight of my career as a teacher: as an advocate for students, a union advocate for students and colleagues, as a civil rights advocate for justice, from my learning at least one language spoken my a group of people that some political leaders ostracize, from being shunned by parents, from being recognized by other parents colleagues as I’ve received awards. (By the way, the awards I’ve received doesn’t make me a better or superior teacher, it’s just a very public acknowledgement that some stakeholders get what I’m trying to do for children, their families, and for the public education.) My big realization and commitment for my remaining years in education, whether it’s in the classroom or as a teacher leader helping many classrooms, is to keep my eye on the prize… student achievement - using an equitable framework for each child.

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**Me & Mr. Kaisen (March 2018)**



**Me, Mr. Walker and his daughter, Julie (Sept. 2015)**

