A Journey Towards Cultural Proficiency: Lessons Learned From Africa

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Abstract

This autoethnography tells my story as a French American woman who lives in the United States and worked with hundreds of school leaders in five African countries over a period of six years. Using a cultural proficiency continuum, I illustrate my learning and changing frames of references pertaining to cultural differences. Movement along the continuum indicates an alteration in thinking that progresses from marginalization to inclusivity. My experiences, mistakes, and lessons learned contribute to the discourse on cultural difference. For six years, I spent more time on the African continent than in my American home. These extended stays allowed me to observe and alter my understandings of cultural values related to colonization generational trauma, the notion of personal space, community, verbal and non-verbal communication, and the importance of culturally relevant leadership and teaching in order to serve refugee and immigrant students across the globe. It is my hope that this autoethnography will encourage school leaders across the world to adopt an empathetic mindset towards students and families coming from different cultures. Taking into account culture is crucial as schools in the United States are becoming more and more diverse racially, ethnically, and linguistically.

Keywords: Autoethnography, cultural proficiency, adult learning, PK12, leadership

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Introduction

My mentor and doctoral dissertation chair used to call me the Indiana Jones of Africa because I had so many adventures during my six years in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Rwanda. My stay in Africa was the richest time of my life. I gained a greater understanding of various African cultures and reflected on the differences with the Western beliefs, norms, and values I was most accustomed to and knew.

It was another wet July day in Monrovia, Liberia. July is the pinnacle of the rainy season. If one ever wonders why the nature in Liberia is so lush and beautiful, the answer would be the large quantity of rain. But the rainy season in Liberia is not just about the amount of rain, it is also about the flow. Locals refer to the moment when it is about to rain to: "the sky is about to cry" because when it rains, it does not just pour or storm; it is as if the sky cries with an unimaginable force and all at once with the tears it cannot contain. Prior to coming to Liberia, I had never seen such strength, passion, force, and vigor in a rain outburst. Every July night, I witnessed this magnificent show of lightning and thunder accompanied by torrential rain falls. I often worried that my roof would fall off or that the water would take me away while I was sleeping. Every night was dramatic, intense, and magical.

I had come to Monrovia to facilitate leadership events for my Liberian school principal colleagues. At the end of the sessions, I was scheduled to fly back to Ghana. That was the plan, and it was solid. The ride to the airport was scheduled, my seat in the plane confirmed, and given that it was the rainy season, I had been advised to live five hours before the scheduled departure time. That had always given me enough time to get to the airport, go through the necessary procedures, and wait for a couple of hours before boarding. This time was different and one of the best days of my life.

I was well on the way to the airport when the car suddenly slowed down and then brutally stopped. There were people in the middle of the road yelling and signaling for us to halt. I sat in the back seat and could not see what was happening. The driver was stoic, and my colleague was speaking Liberian English to him. I could not understand a word except stop. I knew the situation was serious when my colleague, Calvin, turned to me and say: "There is a flood ahead and the road is closed but do not worry." "Do not worry" is sort of the motto of Liberia. I have come to learn that this sentence embodies many of the cultural values Liberian hold, such as their faith, their community spirit, and their positive outlook on life. I had known Calvin for 4 years, and if there was one thing true about him, it is that he was a problem solver. In fact, after this adventure, I gave him the nickname of The Expeditor because he truly expedited my trip to the airport against the odds, and I did catch my flight to Ghana that day. Calvin knew that it was important that I get back to Ghana for work and also because I was to collect the data for my doctoral dissertation and needed to catch a flight from Accra to the Ashanti region. So, he used his magical skills on my behalf. The community helped him to push the car through waters that were hip high, and then he managed to find another car that had more power and transferred me and my soaked luggage to that other car. A man I had never met and did not know was at the wheel. All I could hear was Calvin talking to his brothers and sisters, and all I could see was the water rising in the car, quickly reaching my waist. The villages along the way were swallowed by the waters and mud. Feeling helpless, the only thing that came to mind was to protect my computer because it contained all my work in Africa and my doctoral materials and writings. I put my laptop on my head, hoping that the water would stop rising. This flood was later reported as the largest flood ever seen in Monrovia (Pictures 1-2).

Pictures 1-2

Flood in Liberia (2016)

Surprisingly, I was calm throughout the whole experience. I felt safe, loved, and taken care of. I also was humbled by the community, their hopeful spirit despite trying circumstances, and their eagerness to help. I never quite understood how someone typically quite anxious could remain so serene amongst such chaos, destruction, and danger. I was calm because I was with The Expeditor and his people. I learned a lot about the Liberian's values during this adventure.

Methodology

In this autoethnography and using Lindsey et al. (2018) cultural proficiency continuum, I write about an epiphany related to my understanding of various aspects of several African cultures (Ellis & Bochner, 2011; Winkler, 2018). This narrative stemmed from working with hundreds of school leaders, and observing their cultural practices in five different African countries over a period of six years.Ellis (2004) described authoethnographers as first looking through "an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience and then … look[ing] inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (p. 37). Creswell (2013) affirmed that autoethnography is "written and recorded by the individuals who are subject of the study…[and] contain[ing] the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual's story" (p. 73). In this sense, autoethnography is a relational pursuit in which the writing draws upon the experiences of the author and researcher in order to extend sociological knowledge and understanding (Sparkes, 2000). As a result, auto-ethnography "requires a reflexive examination of conceptions of both self and culture in terms of writing" (Denshire, 2014, 5). In general, this approach begins with a personal story. The visibility of the researcher's voice is the essence of autoethnography, and by reflecting on our own voice as we analyze our own experiences, we discover who we are, and "[w]ho we are changes what we write about and how we write" (Brearley, 2000, para.1). My story is drawn from working, conducting several large longitudinal research projects, and gathering rich data (Geertz, 1073) in five African countries over a period of six years. This story is about my transformation related to my understanding of cultural values.

Hammond (2014) suggested that the brain is the hardware and culture is the software that programs it. Our cultural values program our brain on how to interpret the world around us (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2005). In his book, Sue (2016) tells the story of a White elementary teacher in Nigeria. This story illustrates how some cultures regard the world linearly while others view it non-linearly.

> *Teacher: There are four blackbirds sitting on a tree. You take a slingshot and kill one of them. How many are left?*

> *White U.S. student (raising hand excitedly): Teacher, teacher, I know the answer! This is too easy…four take away one is three!*

> *Nigerian student (interrupting): No, no, no… that's not right teacher! The answer is zero! Teacher (puzzled): I am afraid that is the wrong answer. Four take away one is three* (p.67-68).

Sue (2016) posited that using an empirical and linear framework, the American student would be correct. However, the Nigerian student operated from an experiential reality and lived experience. To him if you "shoot one bird, the others aren't stupid enough to stay around. They will all fly away" (p. 68). During the trip to the airport, I told Calvin to turn around and said I would take another flight later. I was operating with from a linear framework and Calvin from a creative one. He knew that he could pull the community together to get me through. He would try all he could to expedite my trip to the airport. He and his people had learned and lived through far worse during the 12 years' civil war that ravaged the country. His experience with adversity and living through various challenges had taught him to think outside the box.

When I was in Africa, I reflected about the bird story regularly as I grew in my cultural understanding of cultures and worldviews. As I first visited schools and interacted with school principals, I recall operating from a linear lens. At the beginning, I was culturally blind. During my first trip, I could not help but notice everything that was not done properly according to my Western standards. For example, students did not have to lose instruction time to stand and greet everyone coming in their classrooms. They did not have to repeat and copy things ten times. I recall having that deficit mindset and writing pages and pages of notes of things teachers and leaders should do differently, based on my knowledge, skills, culture, and a Western view of education.

Lindsey et al. (2018) defined culture as "everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you" (p.29). Lindsey et al. (2018) stated that being culturally proficient is a mindset. It is not about knowing everything about every single culture. Seeking to becoming culturally proficient requires people to be vulnerable, curious, humble, courageous, open and reflective. These authors offer a cultural proficiency framework with nine guiding principles that serve as core values:

- Culture is a predominant force in society. We all belong to cultures.

- People are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture.

- People have group and individual identities.

- Diversity within cultures is vast and varied.

- Each cultural group has unique cultural needs.

- The best of both worlds enhances the capacity of all.

- Systems must recognize that marginalized populations have to be at least bicultural and that this status creates a distinct set of issues to which the system must be equipped to respond.

- Inherent in cross-cultural interactions are dynamics that must be acknowledged, adjusted to, and accepted.

The framework also proposes barriers to cultural proficiency that serve as personal, professional and institutional impediments to a socially just and diverse society by being resistant to change, being unaware of the need to adapt, not acknowledging systemic oppression and benefiting from a sense of privilege and entitlement. Finally, the framework offers a Cultural Proficiency Continuum that portrays people and organizations who possess the knowledge, skills, and moral bearing to distinguish from unhealthy to healthy practices as represented by different worldviews. The continuum is comprised of six phases: cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural precomptence, cultural competence and cultural proficiency. Progress along the continuum indicates an alteration in thinking that progresses from marginalization to inclusivity. The continuum can be used as an assessment tool to determine an individual's or organization's place on the continuum based on expressed values and behaviors and enacted policies and practices (Lindsey et al., 2018).

Lessons Learned from Africa

Living and working in various African cultures allowed me to travel along the continuum and strengthen my advocacy for cultural differences.

Cultural Destructiveness is characterized by individuals who see the differences in cultures and stomp them out. Cultural destructiveness often involves macro aggressions. Extreme examples are genocides, slavery, and placing children of first nations people in boarding school where the goal was to eradicate their language and culture (Lindsey et al., 2018). Although, I never participated in the destruction of a culture, my ancestors did when they colonized a large part of West Africa. During my first visit to the continent, an elder Burkinabe school leader reminded me what the colonizers did to his country, his people, and his family. What he shared has significantly impacted my outlook on life as well as my goals. He said:

> *For a while, the only White people we saw were the ones who came to rape our wives and daughters, take our children away, take our lands and possessions, and redesign our country's boundaries to leave us without any major water access. They destroyed us physically, emotionally, cognitively because they forbid us to speak our native languages, and psychologically. But one thing they did not take is our faith.*

As a student in France, I had learned what the French educational system wanted me to know about colonization, a biased view. This colleague had given me another lens with which to look at history. He had shared a traumatic lived experience. This story was re-affirmed in Ghana when I visited the slave castles and saw the conditions in which the African men and women were treated. I threw up in the castle and swore on the spot that I would never go back. That was then. Upon reflection, I decided that my discomfort should not stop me from educating others on the past. Now, I cannot wait go back and bring my dad, niece, and nephew to see these castles. I want them to learn what is not in the textbooks. I want them to feel, hear, visualize what our ancestors did to innocent people. I want them to challenge the way history is taught and expose them to the realities of locals. In other words, I want them to know what they do not know and will never fully comprehend unless they become more culturally competent, learn from locals, and hear their stories.

What I realized during my extended stay in Africa is that with what I had or had not learned in school about colonization, I was perpetuating cultural destructiveness 60 years later. Burkina Faso gained its independence from the French in 1960 and Ghana from the British in 1957. Realizing and seeing in person the psychological, social, economic, and educational effect of colonization made me a fierce advocate for the continent, its people, and its cultural heritage and values. It also made an equity warrior. My role as an educator is to make my students, colleagues, and others I encounter more culturally proficient.

Cultural Incapacity is portrayed by extreme bias and belief of superiority of one's cultures and beliefs (Lindsey et al., 2018). An example can be the belief that being heterosexual is inherently better than being homosexual. My stay in Africa taught me a great deal about colonization, about the strength, resilience, interior and exterior beauty of the African people, and also their traumas. I also understood that the trauma my Burkinabe colleague had shared with me did not just end with him and with the survivor sin his immediate family. Rather these deeply rooted traumatic experiences formed generational trauma. Generational trauma is exactly what it sounds like: trauma that isn't just experienced by one person but extends from one generation to the next (Sue, 2016). Although the study of generational trauma is relatively new, we know that families transmit heirlooms to each other such as genetic conditions, and physical characteristics. Sigal et al. (1998) found that grandchildren of Holocaust survivors were overrepresented by about 300 % in psychiatric care referrals in Canada, in comparison with their representation in the general population. According to the authors, any type of extreme, prolonged stress can have adverse psychological effects on children and/or grandchildren, resulting in anxiety and depression, if not more serious illnesses. Although slavery was formerly abolished with the 13th amendment, the racial injustices and inequities still occur in the United States, another form of slavery and trauma. I often reflect on the cultural incapacity of many who see the

White race as superior and hence continue to overtly and covertly traumatize African-Americans and other people of color, adding to the generational trauma they already carry.

Being from France, I had not fully understood the significance of the African people in the history of the United States - one more case of not knowing what one does not know if one is not exposed to it. All of a sudden, my lived experiences in Africa combined with the literature, discussions, and realities of America made sense. I am appalled at the amount of deliberate, on-going, unethical and malicious cultural destructiveness efforts some White people continue to perpetuate when their ancestors had founded the country on the work of Black slaves for the benefit of the white race. I am furious at the daily injustices and inequities, and micro aggressions, that are more macroaggressions, towards people of color or anyone else not fitting the white norm. Racism is cultural destructiveness and unfortunately, I see it every day with inequities in education, health, justice system, economic statuses, and the lack of opportunities for some due to an ethnocentric monoculturalism that exits in the United States (Sue, 2016). Today, some people continue to believe that the White American way is the way and the default. For example, the kind of English White American speak is the right one, the tone of voice people use is the only appropriate one when in fact each culture has its way of communicating, resolving conflict, dressing (Saad, 2020; Sue, 2016). My work in Africa made me a more culturally informed, humbled, and compassionate person. I realize how fortunate I was to be born White, in France, and middle class. In the United States, I never wonder if I will be shot for no valid reason when pulled over by a police officer or when walking in the streets. My opportunities are not dependent on my skin color and its amount of melanin. That is the sad reality and a reality that many would rather avoid talking about by hiding behind statements such as "I do not see color; I only see people." By not talking about it, these individuals perpetuate the structural, institutional, and personal racism. School leaders and teachers at all levels of the educational system need to understand that in this case silence speaks volume. It conveys a message that the Western or White way to do things is the right way and only way when it is not. Encouraging individuals form all cultural backgrounds and heritage to express themselves and learn in the way they know how to learn best benefit all students, schools, and communities. It enriches us all.

Cultural Blindness is when people see cultural differences and dismiss them (Lindsey et al.,2018). In this phase, people often say things like: "Color does not exist" "I do not see colors." In education, we hear "I only see and teach students and I do not care if they are black, white, or yellow." My stays in Africa allowed me to realize that I was culturally blind at one point of my educator's career. I am not proud of it, I am even ashamed of admitting it, but reflecting is part of my cultural journey. In Burkina Faso and all the other countries, I visited, schooling is conducted differently than in the United States. First, the school building itself, when there is one, does not always have four walls or electricity. It is possible to find classes that are held outdoor or under bamboo walls (Pictures 3-4-5).

Pictures 3-4-5
S*chools in rural Burkina Faso (2016)*

Toilet for students

Possible classrooms

Classroom blackboard

As the pictures of the classrooms show, students often study in extreme heat and school is often cancelled when it rains cats and dogs. Teachers lack resources and do not often have teaching and learning materials and other pedagogical materials. It is common to find 70 students in a classroom with one teacher lecturing the students. Students typically recite their lessons, copy from the board, and are expected to sit still and in silence for hours at a time. Although corporal punishment is illegal, teachers often carry a cane to point to the board or to discipline students. Culturally, parents expect teachers to discipline their children if they do not learn or if they misbehave in class (Brion & Cordeiro, 2019).

As a result of these cultural differences, immigrant and refugee students from Africa experience several difficulties in American classrooms. The first one is the language barrier. The second one has to do with cultural differences. For example, students are used to a collectivistic culture where community is key to the success of the individual. Students and parents alike are used to the help of others which contrasts the individualistic culture of the United States. In addition, in some cases students have experienced large amounts of trauma. Refugee students may have spent years in refugee camps before moving to their new home country. They often experienced violence, physical and emotional hurts, and extreme poverty. Back home or at the refugee camps, students attended school intermittently because of on-going violence and lack of family resources. In addition, students did not always have enough to eat. When they did, the meals were not balanced. As a result, students often suffered from malnutrition. When I think back of my long list of what leaders and teachers should do differently, I shake my head and realize how culturally blind I was. Today, I advocate and train leaders on these cultural differences because if students' cultures are not respected and advocated for, students will not learn and be well physically, emotionally, and psychologically (Hammond, 2015). Learning is a social process and as a result school leader must advocate for culturally responsive teaching and leadership (Hammond, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lindsey et al., 2018).

I also learned about cultural blindness when I started to teach in a predominantly White, private school. There, I taught French as a second language for grades 4-8th. I loved that school because of its diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, abilities, and religion. We had students from South America, Asia, Canada, and Mexico. We also had some African-Americans and Asian American students.

As a teacher and person, I have always been passionate about other cultures and wanted to develop that curiosity in my students. In my classes, students regularly worked on cultural projects, I organized a French Club to discuss culture, and I brought families to France. I also organized a large cultural event every year that served as a fundraiser for my French program. Monies raised were used to purchase extra materials and to help students who could not afford my summer French camps. The event was not just about tasting foods from different countries and regions, but it was also about learning about that country or region. Students prepared poster boards, recorded presentations, organized cultural games, and taught short language classes when they were English as Second Language Learners. The first event was demanding for myself and the students. Many chose to help me in the one evening a week to prepare the event over the course of two months.

The first cultural event was a success when it came to attendance, funds raised, and students' involvement. Students were learning, collaborating, laughing, and playing. It warmed my heart to see new friendships formed and hear several languages spoken. The only people who did not seem to enjoy the event were a small group of parents from the dominant race who did not partake in any of the activities. There were only four of them, but the message they sent was enormous and problematic for me and the event. Two couples were seated at a table together and were eating. When I came to the table to greet them and thank them for coming and contributing, the response was "We did it for our kids because our kids like the international and students of color. We, however, understand they come from different cultures, but we do not see a need to understand their cultures. We have our hamburgers here and we are comfortable. To us, our kids' friends are their friends, no matter where they come from. The friends' culture does not matter to us." I was stunned. I wanted the cultures of their children's friends to matter, to be seen, and celebrated. That was the whole point of this event, to be sure to expose everyone to cultural differences, adults included. My face became red as I was processing the man's comment. It took me a minute to react, and finally, I decided to go find a supportive parent and asked her to talk to the two couples. She gladly accepted and cheerfully walked to the table and invited the parents to partake in the dancing that was taking place. She also faced some resistance to which she replied, "With due respect, the purpose of the event is to learn about cultural differences, and my hope was that as adults, we can model that understanding, respecting, and advocating for differences is important." This day will be forever engraved in my memory because it was the first time that I had experienced such blatant and conscious cultural blindness. Cultural blindness maintains systemic racism and oppression and the status quo because it prevents us from doing the hard self -work necessary to challenge the worldviews, norms, and default ways of thinking that we grew up with and that the media, education system, and policies continue to feed us.

Cultural Pre-competence: In the cultural pre-competence phase, people recognize what they don't know. This phase is about the awareness of one's limitations when interacting with other cultures (Lindsey et al., 2018). An example could be hearing teachers say: "We are not adapting our teaching to the new demographics and to our refugee and immigrant students; we just do not know how." In Africa, I witnessed colleagues being at the pre-competence stage and through their realizations and reflections, I learned as well. There is one instance in particular that struck me when. I may have been at the cultural competence level because I had worked in Burkina Faso before, but my colleague had not.

Citizens of Burkina Faso greatly value traditions. For example, it is not unusual for Burkinabe to have an opening and closing ceremony when there is a training. Usually, journalists attend, and authorities give formal speeches. As a facilitator of professional learning, it was important for me to understand and respect these customs. I learned to schedule my trainings, accordingly, prepare the room for the festivities, and include the ceremony in the invitation sent to the participants prior to the event. Being French, I could hear the formality of the French language during speeches. It would be easy for anyone not accustomed to these rituals to form judgements and that was what my colleague did.

At the end of the training, I could see my colleague pacing up and down the room with her bag ready to leave. She came to me several times to ask me what we were waiting for, and why there was a need for a ceremony. I could tell she became increasingly frustrated. I attempted to explain to her that it was the way they did things. It was important to the participants that these cultural ceremonies added value to the training. My colleague was not having it, she said things like "ridiculous", "not needed" or "it is taking too long." I was surprised by her reaction because my colleague had always been respectful of other cultures. Then, I realized she did not know and understand the Burkinabe culture. She later recognized that she had handled the situation poorly, partly because she did not understand the language and also because she was afraid to miss her flight. It turned out that she was at the airport on time and that her flight left with an eight-hour delay due to a civil uproar in Ankara, Turkey, her first layover. I admire my colleague because she was reflective and had realized her limitations and was willing to work on them. Through her experience and her modeling, I challenged myself to always look at my own limitations and reflect regularly on my position on the cultural proficiency continuum. I am acutely aware that I may be culturally competent some days in issues of race and digress to being culturally blind on other days. I also know that I may feel more comfortable with some cultures than others due to my lived experiences. For example, I do not know much about what it means to be disabled, because the closest experience I have had to being temporarily less able was breaking my ankle in Ghana. As a result, I recognize that I must learn about that culture.

Cultural Competence: People see the differences, understand, accept and respect those differences when they are culturally competent (Lindsey et al., 2018). In education, examples of cultural competency are when leaders adopt culturally relevant leadership and/or curriculum and advocate for changes in policies. In Africa, I learned about different communication styles. For example, I learned the power of hissing. When I was in Ghana, I remember asking my now husband what it meant when he hissed at people in the street. He explained that it can be used to stop a taxi, or depending on the tone of the hissing, it could be saying hello, or even a third hissing sound can be trying to catch someone's attention. In Burkina Faso, I realized that while French is the national language, Burkinabe use their own words and expressions. This was very helpful to know and adapt to when I conducted training and also conducted research. It helped to gain people's trust and to show them that I was there for them and to learn from them.

I also comprehended that the notion of personal space was vastly different from the one I knew. Personal space was expressed through greetings. As a French person, I am used to kissing people on the check all day long to say hello and good-bye. And while this requires close contact with someone, the Ghanaian hugs first took me by surprise. I grew to love the long, tight, and very close embrace in which you truly feel someone's happiness to see you. In Burkina Faso, there are several greetings depending on the tribe. One that I learned is from the Mossi tribe. Their welcome involves greeting with the head and, similar to the French, kissing on each cheek. The Mossi bump their heads to greet each other. I was also told that there are several greetings depending on age and gender. Besides the greetings, I also understood the notion of space better when I visited hundreds of schools where there are 80 children in one room, and everyone is so close to each other they can hardly move or in the "trotro" or local bus where people are packed closely together. So, while in some cultures, it is not appropriate to touch someone, particularly a woman, in Africa, people touch each other through greetings and daily life.

I learned about community. There were so many examples of the power of community in collectivistic societies. The community came to offer its support when I fell into a sewage ditch in Ghana and broke my ankle. As I was going with a Ghanaian friend to his village radio station to support him in recording an advertisement for his new school, I jumped out of the van and landed on a sewage pipe. I fell about five feet. I think I heard my left ankle snap but recall the pain vividly. My friend helped me to get out of the sewage ditch. The rest of the evening is a blur, but I recall being in pain and not sleeping at all that night. The next morning, when I woke up, it seemed as if the whole village had been informed. There was a long line outside my room. People came to see my hurt foot, pray over it, bring ointments for it, and offer words of encouragement. I felt loved and cared for. Three days later, I was back in my apartment in California where no one offered to help me with my mail, dogs, or chores.

There are many other aspects of the various cultures I grew to understand, respect, love, and advocate for that were not instinctive to me. It is only with time, learning, asking questions, and being open to other ways that I became culturally competent on most days and in those particular contexts.

Cultural Proficiency: In this last phase, people respond positively to differences, advocate, and continue learning (Lindsey et al., 2018). Reflecting on my experiences, I can say that prior to going to Africa, I was mildly aware of the vast differences in worldviews and cultures. I would place myself at pre-competence stage on the Lindsey et al. (2018) continuum. My prolonged stays in Africa not only allowed me to understand the local cultures but also the history and racism that exists in the United States. Today, I am continuing my journey towards cultural proficiency and have moved towards cultural competency. I am always striving to learn more about various cultures and expand my frames of reference and worldviews. When I teach courses on intercultural proficiency at the doctoral and master levels, I strive to do my service work lobbying for cultural differences including in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, abilities, economic status, religion, and all other aspects of identity. I continue to use the cultural proficiency continuum in my work and personal life to assess my progress, the progress of others, of departmental policies, and organizations. I use it as a reflection tool helpful to keep me growing. I also often refer to Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth.

Yosso (2005) posited that diverse communities nurture cultural wealth and various funds of knowledge. Yosso (2005) asserted that communities of color provide cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. The author affirmed that these capitals build on one another to create a community's cultural wealth.

Aspirational capital pertains to the ability to hope when being confronted by difficulties. Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual, social, and communication skills gained by speaking more than one language. Familial capital deals with community spirit, collectivistic culture, and the belief that families nurture, maintain connections with the community, and educate. Social capital can be understood by the networks of people and community resources that provide emotional support among other kinds of support. Navigational capital refers to knowing how to maneuver through social institutions, including structures that are inherently biased against people of color. Lastly, resistant capital is the knowledge and skills that someone has to challenge inequities and transform oppressive structures (Yosso, 2005). When students and adults learn from each other by having genuine conversations with people from different backgrounds, experiences, and belief systems, people gain greater understanding of each other's cultures. As a result, people alter their mindsets and frame of references. However, when people do not know and do not seek to know, deficit mindsets form.

Conclusion

Writing this autoethnography gave me the opportunity to reflect on my experiences. In this way, I learned from my experiences in Africa a second time. Through my observations and with the help of the culturally proficient continuum, I learned about the impact of colonization on locals. I also became more educated on generational trauma. In addition, I better comprehend cultural differences related to the notion of personal space, community, verbal and non-verbal communication, and the importance of culturally relevant leadership and teaching in order to serve refugee and immigrant students across the globe. Being culturally proficient is a journey, it is a mindset, and it is a lens through which we view the world. A wise man once told me that the word safari means journey in Swahili, the lingua franca in East Africa. Because of my love for the African continent, I often say that I am on my cultural proficiency safari. To observe animals in their own setting takes time, patience, curiosity, and determination. Sometimes safari travelers see the animals they expected to see, and they make progress on the road. Other times, they stay still or even have to backtrack to reach their goal. I believe it is the same for cultural proficiency. The process of achieving cultural proficiency is non-linear and requires patience, learning, and determination. As our schools are becoming more and more diverse, it is crucial that leaders develop their cultural proficiency and advocate for differences in order to ensure the success and well-being of all students. Based on the lessons I learned from my stays in Africa, I recommend that policy makers and practitioners prioritize cultural proficiency as a topic and an on-

going theme for their professional learning. Future studies could utilize a cultural proficiency lens to understand other cultural practices in different parts of the world as to better serve students who immigrate from these diverse cultures and attend schools in their host countries.

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