Service learning has been an eye-opening experience like none other for me. I had the privilege to complete my service learning hours at Storybook Stables which is a horse riding farm for children with special needs. I would like to share how my culture from where I grew up differs from the culture I witnessed at Storybook Stables (question 1); I would also like to share how my service learning experience challenged the roles of teachers, parents and the community volunteers and their involvement with the kids at Storybook (question 3). Lastly I would like to share how I reached out of my comfort zone in order to be able to complete my service learning efficiently and appropriately (question 4).

Cultures are different everywhere you turn, there are thousands or even more cultures than that here on Earth. We witness different cultures everyday even though we might not recognize this, they surround us on a daily basis because no person is the same and they all have different morals and values that they uphold daily. The culture that I grew up in I would say is normal in my eyes; the skin color of those around me were of all different colors honestly so I was used to seeing different races and those that were different than me and that never bothered me. Actual races though I can say I saw more of Caucasians, African Americans, and Mexicans than any other race, though, at Storybook I got the privilege to witness so many other races such as Korean, Chinese, Asian as well as the Caucasians, African Americans and Mexicans. Religions that surrounded me were that of Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, and the Church of God; my family and I though attended and are still currently attending Faith Baptist Church which is an independent Baptist church in my current hometown. I am not really familiar with the religions of the students, we were not allowed to ask them personal questions such as these, but I can guarantee that there were so many different religions that every student upheld in their home and in their private life. Different cultures often come with different food specifics and holidays; I know for me I have lived in the south my entire life, so you get a lot of vegetables, bread, steak, fried chicken and other southern style foods. The kids at Storybook all having different backgrounds probably all liked different kinds of foods and their families probably all have different types of special food dishes they make for their family that is important to their cultural background. Important holidays for me and my family were those of New Years, Valentines, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas; these are the ones we do anything for. We cook big meals for New Year’s Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving and Christmas; we go shopping on New Year’s Day after we eat. Easter there is always a big Easter egg hunt for all the little kids. Fourth of July is always spent at my cousin’s house in South Georgia around their pool and we grill out and have lots of summertime tasty meals. Thanksgiving is either spent at my Meme’s house or at my cousin’s house in South Georgia, we rotate who’s house we go to every year whether it is in my hometown with my grandparents or at my mother’s sisters house in Georgia. Christmas, we just about go everywhere, we spend it with my Meme and Pops and my dad’s side of the family at a certain time, with my family in Georgia and my mother’s side of the family at a certain point and then Christmas Eve is always just my immediate family and I. Storybook hosting so many different kids and their ethnical backgrounds there are so many different holidays that can be celebrated and I am one hundred percent sure that not all of them celebrate all the same ones I do, granted some may celebrate the ones I do, but with the little kids from Korea, China, and Japan there are sure to be different holidays that each child celebrates differently with his or her family that is related to their own cultural background.

Working at Storybook can be a different experience for some, given that the kids that come to ride the horses have special needs and need certain help and different kinds of attention. I feel that Storybook challenges the involvement of the community to those that come to help volunteer there during the semesters they ride. Storybook creates a place for these kids to come and feel like they have their own special “thing” or “sport” if one were to call it that. These kids are such a joy to watch and to get to know and they can brighten and change your life for the better if you let them. Storybook challenges the volunteers in so many ways such as involvement and interaction one on one with our students as well as equal responsibilities from the parents and the volunteers. I can earnestly say that even though the parents are not down in the ring with the volunteers and their kids, they are just as important because they are the transportation for their children to come to Storybook and most of our parents are sitting on the sidelines and cheering their kids on a taking pictures and just encouraging them and it is such a powerful thing to see. The volunteers that come to help, which I had the ultimate privilege of getting to be, help the kids ride and are there to also talk to them and encourage them to open up and for once get to be a “normal” kid. This experience also showed us all that were involved to be active listeners and to listen to the kids and what they had to say. The more you listen to these kids, they would show you parts of your heart one did not even know even existed; after listening to some of my students I began to realize the kids knew they were different, yet they tried so hard to fit in and talk to you like there was nothing wrong with them. They were always so eager to hold conversations with us and to feel important and that’s exactly how we treated them, we treated them like normal people or the “normal” that society claims is normal in the first place. I got really attached to one of my students named Maggie, she was such a blessing to me and my life and I could not be more thankful I had the experience to get to do this, she showed me so much more than I could ever have imagined about kids with special needs. She would always run straight to me when she arrived and hug me and then we would walk over to see her horse, Mr. Smee and that last day was heartbreaking for me because I did not want to let her go.

Lastly, I was able to really reach beyond my comfort zone at Storybook Stables. I have always loved horse and the idea of having horses, but if one were to tell me I would have to muck a stall or be locked in the stall with a horse that is so much bigger than me to do barn chores, I would have looked at them crazy, so this I feel is where I really reached out of my comfort zone. The girls and guys running the farm explained the best they could as to what is expected of me and the other volunteers each time we were there, but that first day when I was asked to even go groom a horse by myself alone in a stall with a horse that stood at least two to three feet taller than I am, I died a little on the inside and I did not feel as if I had proper instructions. I soon adapted to the idea of how chaotic events at Storybook would be and I just soon learned what to do when I arrived each Friday. I learned very quickly how to muck stalls, to “tack” up or “saddle up” the horses, to groom them, how to fill hay nets and place them in the stalls, to bathe a horse, how to clean out their hooves, how to get away with walking behind a horse, how to lead a horse, how to calm them down if they are acting crazy, the proper way to fill a water bucket and so many different other tasks. By learning all of these different tasks I began to enjoy being at the farm and helping out, even sometimes staying later than I had to because I just wanted to help out for the enjoyment of myself. I still go to the stables to do barn chores as well because I find it very fun and enjoyable. I love being around the horses, even the ones with the bad attitudes that sometimes can be terrifying, but then again I learned to act like the horses’ behavior did not bother me because if they could sense that it was making me nervous they would only act up worse and I learned that this never ends good.

Overall, having this opportunity to be able to go and complete my service learning at Storybook Stables was one for the books. Storybook and its students gave me such a great experience and knowledgeable insight on how to communicate effectively, how to be an active listener and brought out the best in me and I had the opportunity to be the best me I could be while I was there. By reaching out of my comfort zone I have learned who I am to a whole other level of happiness, because every single child that I witnessed at Storybook were so happy to be living the life that God intended them to have and it showed me and helped me with my personal life and connection with him that when I think I have it bad there is someone who has it worse and they are happy with who they are and that I should be too. I will be volunteering spring semester at Storybook as well because I loved it so much this fall and I cannot wait to be able to see all my kids again and to be reunited with Maggie again.