Neil Diamond wrote the song “Brooklyn Roads” as an autobiographical tribute to growing up in Brooklyn during his childhood. Brief descriptions of his home, family, neighborhood, and early school years appear in the song. The descriptions are based on the socio-economic culture that encompassed Brooklyn during the years of his childhood. The neighborhoods with their unique people, customs, and cultures were the essence of those Brooklyn roads.

Flatbush is located in central Brooklyn. The Dutch first settled it in 1652. A large amount of the settlement was farmland. The land was acquired from the Canarsee Indians but the Rockaway Indians also claimed it. To avoid conflict the Dutch paid both tribes for the land. The town derived its name from the Dutch word *vlackebos* meaning (wooded plain). It is one of the original six towns that made up Brooklyn. During the 1700’s, it was converted from farmlands into fashionable urban developments. Types of housing included brownstones, row houses, four to six story apartments, and flats located above businesses. Until the 1960’s, Flatbush was largely inhabited by Jewish immigrants who settled there and established business along Flatbush Avenue.

Neil Diamond was born in this neighborhood on January 24, 1941. His father was a Jewish immigrant and a dry goods merchant. From all indications, his mother did not work outside of the home. This was a common custom of the times and not unique to Diamond’s family. The father’s worked long hours in order to support their growing families and provide a stable income. The mother’s took charge of the daily tasks of child management. They were expected to teach their children moral and religious values, assist them with their schoolwork, attend school functions, and provide a stable home environment. We know this to be the case with young Neil. In the lyrics of his song he refers to his family and his home.

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1 Brooklyn, The Neighborhoods of: John D. Manbeck
Home is located two floors above the Butcher Shop, first door on the right. (Lines 12-13) It is suppertime and his mother is callin’ “Neil, go find your brother. Daddy’s home and it’s time for supper hurry on.” (Lines 3-5) The song talks about the smell of cooking in the hallways. This suggests that the custom of the mother being at home was common throughout the neighborhood. The neighborhood was the center of the child’s universe. Most children in Brooklyn seldom traveled out of their own neighborhood. They walked to school, attended church or temple, and played in the streets near their homes. Their total cultural experience came from their neighborhood. Even today, there are children who never experience the world other than from their own Brooklyn Neighborhood. Neil and his brother walked to school and played in the streets with the other kids. At the age of ten Neil and a group of boys formed a band called the “Memphis Back-street Boy’s.”

At the age of thirteen he ran away from home to sing in folk groups in the Midwest. After two years he returned home to his parents and Brooklyn.

The song alludes to the fact that he did not do well in school. Lines 21-28 refer to a teacher’s conference during his elementary school years. Report cards were a problem. He was afraid to show his grades to his mother. When his mother took him to the teacher’s conference he sat there crying. This suggests that he was both afraid and traumatized by the whole experience. He may have been wondering what the teacher would say to his mother and what kind of punishment he would receive for his grades. We are not told why he does poorly in school. We only know these lines from the teacher; “He’s just not trying. He’s got a good head if he would apply it.” Perhaps he does poorly in school because he is bored, not challenged, or needs to be taught the subject matter in a different way. The teacher offers no suggestions to his mother how to remedy the situation. Unfortunately, this type of teaching occurs all too often in our schools and causes children to dislike school and some will eventually drop out because of it. We need to find ways to challenge our students and bring new teaching methods into the classroom.

Some of these new methods could include more student participation in lesson planning, multicultural education teaching units, and parent participation in the classroom.

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2 Neil Diamond Tribute Page
If Diamond’s teacher had used student participation to teach lessons he or she would have realized Neil’s talent and potential for song writing. He could have written lyrics about the neighborhood, which could be used to teach lessons in geography, neighborhood history, cultural diversity and economics. This could have been developed further into a unit of study about cultural diversion. Other students in the class could share stories about their families and bring in objects from home relating to family traditions. Parents and people from the neighborhood could be invited to talk about their businesses, local community government, and social programs to help both the student’s and their parents. This will not solve all of the problems that occur in the classroom but might introduce a new way of reaching students. Boredom was then and continues to be a major problem for students and teachers. If a student is bored they invent ways to pass the time in class. Some students create fantasies as Diamond did, while others engage in disruptive behavior. The traditional lecture format is not enough for students. Lessons must be informative as well as interesting. The challenge for the teacher is to create this environment in the classroom while adhering to the guidelines of the curriculum. Usually this is difficult due to large classes, demands to teach to the curriculum, and the fact that an increasing number of students now have special learning needs.

During Diamond’s early school years the same problems existed. Classes were large in the Brooklyn Schools. The teachers did not have the same educational advantages of today. They were not taught how to deal with diverse cultural and social needs of children. Also because of the economics of the neighborhood, the schools often lacked the needed supplies to teach the students properly. The parents were often unable to help the students with their homework because of limited education. They were however interested in their children’s education. Neil’s mother attended the teacher’s conferences. They were interested in their children’s welfare always trying to give them a better life than they had. Diamond describes the feelings he has for his parents in the song.

He describes “Racin’ up two flights of staircase, squurmin’ into Papa’s embrace and his whiskers warm on his face. He also wonders as an adult where these feelings of love and security have gone. He describes his mother somewhat more vaguely. He talks of obedience to her and fear of her punishment. He enjoys the smell of cooking in the hallway and the familiar objects
found in his room. He feels safe and secure in his environment but dreams of being somewhere else. “I built me a castle of dragons and kings and I’d ride off with them as I stood by my window and looked out on those Brooklyn Roads.”(Lines 29-34) Like other boys he is using this fantasy to escape from his neighborhood and imagine what it is like in other places.

Diamond did escape from his neighborhood. When he ran away at age 13 he spent two years away from his family, friends and familiar surroundings. At age 15 he returned to the place he called home. He realized in order to survive he needed to finish his education and have the support of his friends and family. It took him an additional two years to finish school because of this delay. He continued to write music and perform in neighborhood coffee houses. He still disliked school but excelled in music. He performed in the Erasmus High School Choir with Barbra Streisand. Many of his songs have lyrics that describe places and people that have influenced his life in Brooklyn. He has recorded over 40 albums and has written over 100 songs. His songs range from pop to rock to jazz but always are consistent with his folk songwriting style.

Diamond still remains in close contact with his parents. He has provided them an early retirement home in Arizona and pays their expenses. He considers them to be a “great influence on my life and a significant force in my career.” He also credits them with doing a good job raising himself and his brother. As an adult he longs to return to Brooklyn and relive the memories of his childhood. He realizes that this is not possible and laments this in the song lyrics. “Thought of going back. But all I see are stranger’s Faces, And all the scars that love erases. But as my mind walks through those places, I’m wondering what’s come of them.” He also wonders if another boy comes home to his room and dreams about what he did. He wonders what the boy sees as he looks out on Brooklyn Roads.

The strong influence of family, neighborhood, culture, and school all combined to provide the roots of Neil Diamond and his music. His songs refer to his childhood, his old neighborhood, and his Jewish heritage. It is these things that made him the unique person he is today. He will be forever tied to the Brooklyn Roads he grew up on.

3 Encyclopedia of Pop Rock and Soul
In that respect we are all like Neil Diamond. Our families, our neighborhood, and our socio-economic status influence each of us. The experiences we had in school have led us to the place we are today. If our circumstances were different we would unlikely be in this classroom at YSU preparing for a career in teaching. Let us use our education, support from family and friends, and our cultural diversity to write the lyrics of a song as we travel down our individual road to becoming a teacher.
Reference Page


Neil Diamond Tribute Page;

http://www.legendsoftmusic.com/NeilDiamond/


Dr. Richard McEwing Web Site:

http://www.cc.ysu/~ramcewin/SONGlinks.html