

I am a white, as-Polish-as-you-can-get-without-being-born-there, female. Both of my parents came from Polish families, and both sets of their parents were born in Poland. They came to America with their families when they were very young and ended up in Michigan because of the auto industry. My parents were raised in Hamtramck during the time where you were “supposed to learn English” and “not speak your native language” so neither of them learned to speak nor understand Polish. I was raised in Troy, Michigan and while I had friends of different races, the majority of my classmates were also white. Honestly, I never had to think about my “whiteness”, and it never really crossed my mind. During one of the first years of my undergrad at MSU, I had to read an article about race that forced me to critically think about my racial identity for the first time.

I will never forget this article, although I have not been able to find it amongst my things to quote it here. It was about white privilege, and it made the argument that white people who say things like “I don’t see color” and “I accept everyone” do not realize that this is part of white privilege. This blew my mind. Prior to reading that article, I had often thought of myself as someone who does not see color, but it never occurred to me that I do not see color because I do not have to. I always thought that “not seeing color” was a positive thing; I accepted everyone! The community I was raised in had an overwhelming amount of people who were also white, and I never had to think about being the other, or what it meant to be a part of the racial minority. The article also pointed out what it would be like not to be able to find band aids or foundation that matches your skin tone, and for some reason, this has stuck in my mind all these years. I had never considered how accommodating life is for Caucasians, and how many things racial minorities have to overcome, even on a daily basis.

I remember having a conversation with my mom about this article, because it really made me think about a lot of things. She shared some insights with me that have resonated in my head for many years. My family moved when I was three into the house where my parents still reside today. My first friend in the neighborhood was African American; her family has lived diagonally behind my parents’ house from the time we moved in until now. My mom shared with me that she, too, thought of me as someone who did not see color. It never bothered my mom that I was friends with the African American girl who lived behind us, but she informed me that it did catch her off guard. What struck her the most, though, was the fact that I never seemed to notice. She said that I never asked about her “blackness” vs. my “whiteness”, and while she noticed it, it appeared that I never did. Again, this brought me back to thinking about how the fact that our differences never occurred to me was a sign of my white privilege. This was the first time that I even considered that “not seeing color” was not necessarily a positive thing, and that I needed to be more aware of my own racial identity.

I realized that I had been taking my own race for granted, and spent some of my life not realizing that I was benefiting from white privilege, whether I wanted to acknowledge it or not. This became something that I tried to be actively aware of after reading that article (and I’m sure, countless others that made me think during my undergrad).

It has only been in recent years that I began to think about my gender identity and what it means to be female in today’s world. I grew up in Troy, and felt safe and secure in my bubble for a long time. Of course I had heard stories of women being treated a certain way and the many instances violence against women, but I never thought that it would directly affect my life. Under the safety of my bubble, I thought those things would never happen to me, and that I was safe. I am fortunate enough to know that I am lucky that my experiences with this are limited (or maybe I am not so lucky because I have been unable to acknowledge some of my experiences for what

they are). It is only as I have gotten older that I have begun to notice the experiences where I was treated a certain way because I am a woman.

My job at Toast is my first experience working in a restaurant, and also the first place where I was able to notice and experience what it was like to be a part of a minority group. As a teacher, the majority of my colleagues are also female, and I have not had similar experiences in my teaching career. There was one time that I was extremely frustrated at the restaurant. The person I was working with was having an off day, and leaving me to do things that I had never done before with little to no direction. I like direction, and I like to do things right, yet I did not have the proper skills nor tools to complete the tasks. I became frustrated, and when I am frustrated, I cry. Of course, the men in my kitchen made it a big deal. The guy I was working with brought it up to me later, and I could clearly see that he interpreted my crying very differently from why I was actually upset. He said something to me like “Well, you women just cry about everything, so I figured you were having a bad day”. When I tried to explain to him that I was frustrated about not knowing and not being capable of working without knowing, he continued his original mantra. He would not (or could not) listen to the reasons why I was actually upset, which largely had to do with him and the way that he left me alone, clearly overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of the tasks I was supposed to do. He only saw that something happened and I cried. Essentially, his take away from the situation was that I cried because I’m an emotional woman.

My experiences as a white female continue to progress. When I think about my racial identity, I have begun to think about myself in relation to my students, especially this year. I have realized that I need to be more aware of my race and my gender, and how that impacts my interactions with my students. Of course, this will lead to being more aware in general, as I can see that an active awareness will not only affect my life as a teacher, but my overall life as well.

This class has made me realize that I cannot become a better educator unless I make some changes to my thinking and the way I do things. The various readings and videos we were assigned to read and watch made me think about things that I had never thought about before, or things that I pushed to the side because I've been a new teacher just trying to find my place in the classroom (on top of dealing with being moved every year). I was moved to the alternative high school for my district this year, and while it was not something I wanted—in fact I threw such a temper tantrum that I told myself I would use all my days off this year (I didn't)—I really grew to love it. I decided not to fight to leave at the end of the year, which is something that I never would have thought I would do at the beginning of the school year.

For me, this class could not have come at a better time. The students who now populate my classroom are an interesting group; they come to us with a variety of backgrounds and their diversity is reflected in the different topics we covered in this course.

I was able to make a connection with a teacher at my school because of this course. I found out that this teacher grew up in Dearborn, and although she is white, she was the minority in that particular part of town. She is extremely active in trying to bring culturally responsive teaching to our district, and while she meets a lot of resistance from some of the teachers at our school, she continues to be persistent in her efforts. I spoke with her at the end of the year about this class, and found that we share similar view points, and the effort she puts forth to making sure she is culturally aware in the classroom is inspirational.

When I think about what I want my practice to look like as I move forward, I think a lot about how this particular teacher and I could work together next year. I like to think of her as the personification of this class; she believes whole heartedly that it is the teachers who should change in order to meet the needs of their students, and this is the idea that lies at the core of this course. I cannot even begin to explain how excited I am to have an ally at my school, and someone that I can continue to learn from throughout this journey into diversity that I have started.

There is so much more that I still need to learn about our students, in particular the Middle Eastern students. I'm almost ashamed to admit that I don't know where the majority of them are from, or even what language they speak. This is something I need to work on. I need to be able to understand parts of their culture and their ways of life if I want to reach them in the classroom. My own personal goal for next year is to learn as much as I can about that part of the world, and about the students who populate my classes.

The other major take away I have from this course is the idea of parent involvement. For much of my teaching career, I have been stuck in a deficit thinking pattern when it comes to parents. I have assumed that parents who never return phone calls don't care, and I have avoided some of those phone calls. Next year, I am going to make a conscious effort to involve the parents more. While I am not exactly sure what this will look like, there are quite a few things that I would like to try.

As we discussed in the last class for the semester, a lot of the ideas presented in the course seem like they would be common sense, yet our system is still failing to educate the various minorities around the country. I want to make my classroom a more culturally responsive place, and while it's going to take time, patience, and effort, I cannot wait to see what it will look like in the future.