

My Identity and Its Effect on My Teaching

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In thinking about my identity, I find that I have three aspects that form my identity: socioeconomic level, exposure to diversity, and religion. So although people may see me as a middle-aged white woman, when one looks closer, my identity is more nuanced by my experiences.

My ethnic makeup is as follows-my mother is Italian and German, she and both of her parents were born here. My father is Polish, is one of 6 children, and he and his parents were born here as well. 3 of my four grandparents only finished 8th grade, and the last finished high school. My mother did not go to college. 3 of the children on my father's side completed college and 2 have master's degrees. This is a great accomplishment for lower middle class kids. It created a work ethic and value on education that was passed down to me early in my life. I can remember to this day being 10 and saying that I was not going to college. My father looked at me, and clarified that and it never occurred to me afterward that I would not go to college.

I was brought up in an upper middle class, mostly white (99%) neighborhood. This changed in high school. My town was bussed from Branchburg to Somerville to achieve a more balanced demographic, i.e. integrate the black school with the white kids. This was a great blessing in that it completely expanded my worldview.

Lastly, the last part of my identity that is relevant is that I was raised Catholic. We were the kind of Catholics that never missed a Sunday mass, a Holy day, and we went to mass (and a Holy day if it fell that way) on vacation. My parents were not overtly Catholic, in that they would not

proselytize or pray publicly, but more progressive, help the poor, folk mass kind of people. All of my friends were Catholic, the majority of my teachers were Catholic, it made me assume that everyone was Catholic.

These three aspects of my identity, lower socioeconomic parents who valued education, diversity in high school, and religious education have cemented my identity as an individual. I am empathize with students who may not have the newest pair of Jordans, but at the same time am able to push that student to achieve great success because I know the power of education.

Coming from a high school that was evenly split between white and African American students, I am now able to see the discrepancies that occurred between their educational opportunity. Specifically students were tracked in basic, college prep, honors, and AP classes. When I look back at the number of minority students in the honors or AP classes, it would be a very low percent. This is something that I reflect on when we track students in my current school. We take great care to push minority students to take upper level classes as well as giving them a support system to allow them to be successful in them.

Lastly, I am know a lapsed Catholic (I disagree with treatment of LGBTQ people, and do not want my children raised around it.) However, the social teachings of Catholicism , “feed the hungry, cloth the naked, etc.” (<https://churchofstjoseph.org/works-of-mercy>) are the cornerstone of my teaching philosophy. Like many teachers, I always have a snack/lunch for the hungry child, no winter coat, I make sure to get one.

My earliest memories of school were that I was a poor reader but I was good at math. I tracked into the low reading class and high math class throughout elementary school. I don't know that I was actually good at math, but I didn't have to read a lot to do it (very few word problems in those days) and people told me I was good at it so I was. This continued until about 6th grade when I had a male teacher for math. I can not pinpoint a specific thing the teacher did, or an attitude that he had, but I felt that I was no longer able to do math. It was feeling, or maybe it was harder. Either way, I ended up in the same high math class for 7th grade, but this year it was a female teacher, Mrs. Scotton, again. Not the kind that tell you they hate math and pass that onto the students, but an actual competent woman, who was unapologetic in her ability to understand, teach, and encourage me to do math well.

In 8th grade I had a male teacher again for pre-algebra. Again no specific gender bias, but I felt incapable again. I went to speak to the 7th grade math teacher again about if she could tutor me. She asked me why I would need her to tutor me, and I replied that I felt like I did not understand the teacher. I could tell that she was confused. She told me in that moment that I was more than capable of doing well in the class because she knew I was a bright student and was confident that I would not need her help. That flipped the switch for me, I never questioned whether I was

good at math or any subject again. Her belief that I could , changed how I felt about my ability in school. I never looked back!

Creating an atmosphere where all children feel that they are smart and able to learn new things is one of my main focuses in the classroom. I believe in the students (and give them the tools to be successful) until they are able to believe it for themselves. Also because I have a belief that I can “do math”, I do not pass a fear of math on to my students. It may take us a little longer, but we will figure it out one way or another.

I have been teaching for seventeen years. Over the years I have had the opportunity to choose resources (textbook, online books, etc.) for districts. One year in particular, an online book asked me to look at the section on scientists. All twenty of the people displayed were white men. I brought it to her attention, and she had even realized. This was eye-opening to me. How much had I been leaving out because the resources I was using was leaving other people out? I determined from there that anytime I would display a scientist, it would be a woman or minority. If I were to give an article about a scientist, it would be a woman or minority. I was going to be unapologetic with discussion and displays of women and minorities in my classroom. I fully embraced the idea that representation matters. In the Article “Why Onscreen Representation Actually Matters”, the authors Sara Boboltz, and Kimberely Yam quote a Gerbner and Gross paper that states, “There’s this body of research and a term known as ‘symbolic annihilation,’ which is the idea that if you don’t see people like you in the media you consume, you must somehow be unimportant.” (Boboltz & Yam, 2017)

Not only that I was going to give students that were not typically thought to be good at math and science a place to shine by creating groups where they could expand their roles and try new things without fear of failure or ridicule.

My identity is a mixture of socioeconomic level, exposure to diversity, and religion. These three aspects impact the way I interact with my students on a daily basis. They bring out the best in me and allow me to fight some wrongs that exist in schools and society today.

References

Boboltz, S., & Yam, K. (2017, February 24). Why On-Screen Representation Actually Matters.

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