EDU-261

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The Underrepresented in Schools

I am an upper middle-class white female. I have lived my entire life being just that. I know my own experiences, I know how other people see me, and I know how I have been treated because of how I look. My class has talked about diversity from day one, but what exactly do I know about diversity? I have been taught that this is something that most of America fights for; it is important to my school, something to be celebrated, and something to strive for in every school system. As I progress further into the education program, I am discovering that I need to know more about how to be an effective teacher with a strong understanding of the role diversity plays in a classroom. One day, my classroom will have students of all walks of life and I want to treat them equitably. I would like to prevent any types of discrimination from taking place in my classroom, which includes dismantling ignorance and preventing any sense of ‘otherness’ amongst my students. I interviewed a female, queer, Semitic student from Virginia Commonwealth University who had a lot to say on the topic of diversity in schools, to try and find out if there was anything I could do to prevent any child from feeling like they did not belong in my classroom.

My interviewee has requested to be called Ester in this paper. The first two questions tackle school locations and the student population statistics, “Where were your schools located? Suburban? Inner-city? Rural? What were the demographics of the student body in your schools?” She responded by saying that she went to multiple schools and there were different demographics in each location. Ester’s family has moved around a lot, so she has experienced a wide variety of school systems. In elementary school she went to both a suburban middle-class school and a lower income magnet school. In middle school she went to a suburban high-income school. Finally, for high school, she went to a suburban high-income school, a rural variant income school, and a suburban high-income school. In elementary school, everything was fairly equal: equal percentages of boys and girls, and equal amount of race representations, ethnicities, and religions. When she reached middle, and some high schools, the population was mostly white, and the amount of boys was higher than the amount of girls. In the high school that was affiliated with the Episcopal diocese, she was one of six females in her grade.

Growing up with this ever-changing atmosphere was difficult, but it wasn’t hard for Ester to notice that while everything changed, some things stayed the same. The schools she went to were all a new experience with new people, new teachers, and one thing in common. There was very little, if any, recognition of her religion or identity. I asked Ester the next question, “In what ways was your religion/culture/ethnicity reflected in the curriculum?” She did not even have to take a moment to think as she responded immediately, “It was not reflected at all. It was not acknowledged. At various schools, if there was a noticeable population of Jewish students like me, it was talked about less in order to normalize differences between social identities. They wanted to create a melting pot where everyone was the same, instead of a variety of people who were celebrated because of their differences. There was no acknowledgement of the different religious holidays by that school. It was just the seasonal holidays. I felt like a singularity, there was no integration of the cultures and religions I practiced. At other schools that didn’t try to normalize my identity, it was as if I didn’t exist at all unless we were talking about the Holocaust. This was true at all the schools I attended.” In our Education 261 class, one thing that stood out for me was the idea that we, as future teachers, need to recognize that we are being detrimental to our students when we are treating all of our students in the same way. Ester told me in the beginning of our interview that, “American privilege is defining race along color lines. “You’re different from me and must be treated as different from me because you look different from me.” Americans will see a white-passing skin-tone and believe, “Oh, you look kinda like me, therefore you must have had the same privileges and experiences as me.” Americans who are unconscious of the ramifications and importance of racial identity will befriend non-white people and unconsciously act as: “I see you, a non-white person, and perceive you to be who you are, a person. Because I have experienced life as a white person, without discrimination, and I see you as a person, I impose my own privileges and experiences onto you.” Privileged people commit these harms all the time, because they think their experiences are the only right experiences for everyone to have.” I believe that any attempt to make students feel included by treating them similarly to the other students is the same as saying their differences don’t make them unique and worthy of recognition. Teachers are doing them a disservice by not acknowledging and respecting their ethnicities and cultures. We have learned in class that children respond better when the teacher respects where they come from and who they are.  A teaching strategy we were taught in class is called Equity Pedagogy, which is a style of teaching that uses materials and instructional strategies that include major aspects of students’ family and community culture. I plan to incorporate every student’s community culture and family values into my lessons, so I can connect better with my students and expand on topics I might not have been able to touch otherwise. Ignoring these differences can cause some students to feel unsafe and underappreciated.

Being in situations where you feel unsafe is something all people, no matter your background, have felt before. I have been nervous walking back to my car at night, or when I’ve been approached on the street by someone I don’t know, because I am female. I am nervous when left alone with a male I don’t know. I have had my ideas and opinions discarded in school because I was the only female in a research group. Ester has had experience in these situations more frequently than most. She has to contend with the fear and setbacks of being female as well as being afraid of how people will react to her for being queer and Jewish. I asked her, “If you have experienced stereotypes what were they?” She took a moment to think about how to word her next answer, which she broke into two parts. First, she told me a story about one of her elementary school classrooms. In third grade, she was told by all of her classmates she was going to Hell unless she converted to Christianity. Her class actively tried to convert her to Christianity when their teacher left the room. People believed she was lesser because she wasn’t a part of the Christian population at her school, and they tried to, in her words, “fix her.” She continued, “The stereotype that Judaism is somehow not as valid as Christianity is damaging for all Jewish children. Yeah, people are racist. My nose is a beacon of my identity. Because of the jokes and stereotypes related to my nose and Judaism, I have been treated differently.” When asked to expand on that, Ester told me stories of how some of her classmates, at the high school affiliated with the Episcopal diocese, made rude “jokes” about burning her at the stake when she was researching non-monotheistic religions, and about starting camps and labeling all nine Jewish students on campus. “The idea that it is ok to make jokes about death to Jewish people--they are threats, real live threats, not jokes, are horribly wrong. It was terrifying to hear these things be said about and to me. It makes me worry about my safety, the safety of my sister, and the safety of my family.” Violence concerning religious stereotypes and racial ‘jokes’, make students scared for their safety at school, on the street, or in their homes.  My own classroom will have a zero-tolerance policy for any type of discrimination. These are not jokes, they are threats. In our Education 261 class we have talked about how to create a welcoming environment for our students and allowing bullying to take place in our classrooms is at the top of the list on what to avoid. We, as teachers and future teachers, cannot condone or participate in bullying at all in our classrooms.

Ester, in answering this question, “Can you give an example where different expectations were applied to different races/ethnicities?” brought up a story in which she witnessed a teacher treat another Jewish student differently for an entire year. Ester told me this, “The only other Jew in my class outed herself to the teacher and classroom when the teacher was talking about how many Jewish people there are in the world. The teacher started referring to her as a ‘special snowflake,’ both sincerely and sarcastically, and the rest of the class followed along. I never identified myself to the teacher or the rest of the class, because for the rest of the year, my classmate was only referred to as ‘a special snowflake,’ and any and all questions that either the teacher or a student had about Judaism were directed towards her.” Ester expressed that the class made her feel nauseous. She was worried someone would find out that she was Jewish, and the class would start to marginalize and antagonize her as well. As a future teacher, and as a human being, I am appalled at the lack of care this teacher showed her student. How can we foster learning in such an uncomfortable environment? I asked her, “What would you like your peers to have known about your race/ethnicity? If you could go back in time and talk to your peers and teachers what would you have liked them to know?” Ester, who is vocal and proud of her identity, said to me, “You mean like I didn’t sit up and say something?” She has spent her school years arguing against Jewish racial stereotypes and explaining her heritage and beliefs to others, when she felt she was safe enough to do so. She shouldn’t have had to do this. Our schools should teach religious diversity alongside racial; my classroom will absolutely touch on all types of diversity.

Ester’s experiences have opened my eyes to the different layers of discrimination in our school systems. I look around and notice when something is excluding a group of people, pretending they don’t exist, or being ignorant about their culture. There are multiple layers of discrimination in American schools that are not addressed by the mainstream media. In general Americans usually don’t discriminate as harshly or as publicly against white-passing individuals. Most students are able to grasp the first layer of discrimination, which is color, due to the fact that America has a long history with discrimination against African Americans. This interview allowed me to look into the secondary layers of discrimination against underrepresented students. Students like Ester, who are white-passing, but face different types of issues in their classrooms. I hope that this paper will make the educational community take a long look at how they’ve been treating their students. I hope they ask themselves, “Am I fostering ignorance by not acknowledging my students’ different religions and other identities? Am I not respecting my students’ differences? Is my classroom a safe place for people of all kinds?” As a future educator, I will strive to acknowledge my students’ differences by treating them as an individual, by respecting them for their religious beliefs, and I will educate my class about different types of religion. Celebrating our differences is the only way to have a cohesive diverse classroom, and I refuse to fall into the trap of treating my students like they are all the same.