

My Personal Identity Web and its Impact on Me as a Teacher

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Understanding Culture in the Classroom

I remember when I received notification that I was offered a position as a Teach for America corp member. One of the first things I ambitiously said to my family and friends was that “I cannot wait to create a classroom of little revolutionaries.” Although I was energetic about creating world changers, I had not given much thought to what it meant to be revolutionary. What is a revolutionist? What do they do? How do they think? What are the characteristics of a revolutionary person? After much internal debate, I concluded that the fundamental aspect of a revolutionist is one’s commitment to change and being a change agent. A revolutionist changes things. They observe injustice and then they go on to change minds, institutions, academia, and systems to align with resolving injustice. Revolutionists are not complacent with mediocrity or discrimination. I had no idea what I wanted my classroom to look like, but I knew what I did not want, and I did not want a classroom full of complacent students. I wanted each child to feel a sense of personal responsibility for their learning, their peers’ learning, and making the world a better place. With that individual responsibility, I wanted each student to develop accountability for themselves, each other, and me as their teacher if they ever felt that they were not receiving the education he or she deserved. I had no idea what I was up against.

It wasn’t until this assignment that I realized that these ideals of what I wanted my classroom to look like are direct reflections of my identity. However, developing the introspective skills to properly analyze how my actions have influenced this dream-land have revealed some interesting findings. What type of people lead revolutionary classrooms? Was I revolutionary? If so, was I revolutionary enough to do what needs to be done to create revolutionary students? If not, how could I fake it, because not having revolutionary students was not an option?

I was raised as the oldest of two in Atlanta, Georgia by both of my parents. My little brother, Pierre Jr., or Petey as the family affectionately calls him, has been like my first child. Although I am only three years his senior, I always considered myself “Mom” whenever he and I were alone together. I took my role as the big sister of the house very seriously and I know that that has contributed significantly to my ideology of leadership.

My mother is from New Orleans so when I lived there as a child, I attended Catholic school for kindergarten and half of first grade and then moved to Atlanta and attended public school in Clayton County from 1<sup>st</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> grade. For matriculation, I applied to four universities, and only one of which was a non-HBCU, or historically black college or university. Emory University, my eventual choice, was the only predominantly white institution to which I applied. I attribute this to a genuine lack of confidence in my competitive nature. Ultimately, I made the best decision of my life by attending Emory University. There, I learned that not only was I a smart black woman, I was a smart black woman even in a room full of white women, white men, Asian women, Asian men, Hispanic women, Hispanic men, and any culture, race, or ethnicity in between. Ultimately, that meant I was a smart woman, period. Attending, and succeeding, at Emory was the confidence boost I needed to feel like I could be somebody in the world. Maybe I could even change things... become revolutionary.

As offspring of a New Orleans native, I was raised Roman Catholic. As I got older, especially during my undergraduate career, I began to categorize myself as non-denominational because of my discontent and lack of fulfillment within the Catholic Church. Catholicism became mundane. I loved it because it was my family’s tradition. It was beautiful, processional, and added routine to my life, but I never really learned anything. I never learned about the God I was told to love, or His Son who I was told was my Messiah. As a result, I began to question

Christianity. Not so that I could dismiss it and become agnostic or convert to another religion, but I questioned it so that when others questioned me, I'd have the answers to defend my faith. I was tired of saying "because my mother and father said so" when people asked why I was a Christian. I began to delve deeper. I took classes on Christianity and searched for answers from "the beginning." This appreciation for learning and knowledge within my faith, instead of superficial practices and rituals, led me away from Catholicism and into the doors of any Christian church where I learned. Sometimes the sign outside said "Non-Denomination," which I learned is a denomination all its own, and other times the sign boasted "Baptist, Evangelical, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness," and sometimes, "Catholic." I began to notice that just as there are variations within race and diversity across institutions, religion was no exception. Not only were there religious variations, but even within Christianity there were variations. And even within those variations, called denominations, the generalities and stereotypes were just that, generalities. I found that no two Baptist churches were the same, nor two Catholic churches, Episcopalian churches, or any denomination. It was empowering to know that I had much more agency in my relationship with God than I originally gave myself credit for. Learning that I really could have a living, breathing, personal relationship with God was emancipating and I have never looked back. With that, I have become reinvigorated with the love of learning. Finding new, yet satiating, answers to old questions made me want to change more about myself and preconceived notions. As a believer of unity and oneness, for me, that changing myself meant changing injustice.

I have always been a leader, sometimes to my demise. Growing up, I would take over class discussions and get into trouble for telling kids what to do. It took me many years to learn that effective leadership had a delicate balance. I did not realize until high school that effective

leaders know when to lead and when to follow. Reflecting on this new perspective stimulated an epiphany. I suddenly realized that the reason that I led so much was because I had trust issues. I always wanted to lead because I did not trust anyone else to care as much, or do as good of a job, as I would. When I applied this newfound epiphany to each aspect of my life, it resonated. When I was little no one would protect my brother like I would, in middle school no one would lead the Beta Club as President like I would, in high school no one would protect the students in our Government Association like I would, and in college no one would edit and present the final group project with as much attention to detail as I would. Suddenly, I began to realize that my outlook on leadership, while positive in many ways, could have ramifications outside of my educational world. Perhaps it would affect my relationships, and indeed, it has.

Despite my aggressive outlook on leadership, I am fond of traditional roles within a heterosexual relationship. I identify as a traditional woman because I find merit in the man being the “head of household” and the woman following his lead. I attribute this aspect of my identity to my southern upbringing. Where I was raised, men are encouraged to be chivalrous by opening doors, pulling out chairs, and standing on metros and buses if a woman needs a seat. Childrearing and the quintessential American family appeals to me but finding a gentleman who shares my vision has been difficult. I attribute that largely to my outlook and perspective on leadership. As a strong leader, I can only follow someone I trust to do a better job than myself and from childhood to relationships, this has permeated my classroom in enormous ways. My leadership reflects my sense of responsibility. I feel responsible to fix, help, or contribute to any and everything I care about. The American education system has not been exempt.

Another component of my identity is my interdependent worldview. I appreciate and acknowledge the purpose, benefit, and potential in all people. I believe that one action, or lack

thereof, effects us all. This ideology, almost more than any other, is prevalent in my classroom each day. Despite having heavily studied diversity during my undergraduate career, I struggled, and still struggle, with integrating diversity discussions into an almost homogenous classroom of students. With 95% of my students of Haitian or African American descent, I struggled to find ways to prove to them that people who are different than themselves have awesome things to offer. I found that many of my students were already plagued with negative preconceived notions of race and resources. They already had ideas about what it meant to speak white, act white, and sound white. This was troubling.

Being the leader of my classroom allows for infinite possibilities. Having children's minds in the palm of my hand is a blessing, and an enormous responsibility. Although I do enjoy teaching math and science, along with the occasionally off-topic, yet equally meaningful, lesson, I love teaching leadership. After each lesson I try to explain to my students that with this newfound knowledge comes responsibility. In my classroom "waiting for the world to change" is a forbidden perspective. "We are who we've been waiting for" is more our style. To change the world, or any situation, you must be a leader. However, once you have reached the point where you are willing and able to change a situation, you have become revolutionary, and that must be our ultimate goal.

To demonstrate that we have more agency and power than we give ourselves credit for, we incessantly study world news using foreign sources, such as the British Broadcasting Channel's website. I find that American news is jaded and does not lend itself to my unbiased revolutionary lessons. Through studying the BBC and international news, my students value international people, their perspectives, and what is going on in their communities. Additionally, I am always sure to include one final component when we discuss international news, and it is

the most important one: What can I do as a fourth grader to alleviate or prevent this community or country's suffrage or situation? In terms of real life application of diversity within the classroom, I think that one of the most important things I can do is continue to emphasize exposure. My students are so underexposed that the study of a situation or person from halfway around the world absolutely fascinates them.

Asking what we can do as 9-12 year olds is important to me because it is a hands-on approach to social justice and activism. Whether we are talking about Haiti, Libya, Japan, Sudan, or the Czech Republic, my students surprise me every day with their answers. The best part about these discussions is that their answers include the actions of learned individuals. They say things like "as a doctor I would..." or "I would make laws that..." or "I would invent a product that..." As they accidentally, yet beautifully, find the meaning in education, I smile. These days more than others, I feel revolutionary.