

Positionality and Identity in a Social Context

It's difficult for me to think of singular words that describe my identity. I feel like I need to explain my intersectionality with more than a couple of different, yet coinciding words.

I never know how to identify my race, and I think that's important when talking about intersectionality. I would not call myself white and I would not call myself a person of color. I do not like spending time explaining to someone why I choose the label I choose when it comes to my race. It's a waste of my time, and I either leave feeling racist, or a fresh wave of imposter syndrome hits me like a truck. I have trouble believing that my experience is valid.

I'm Armenian. It is a race. It is an ethnicity. It is whatever *we* want to call it. My race and ethnicity has changed the way that I experience the world. I hadn't met another person my age that is Armenian until I got to college and somehow I never understood what made me different from my peers.

In elementary school I had coarse, black body hair that covered my arms, legs, and face. Ate food that *stunk* to my classmates who categorized me as Indian, Mexican, and *I dunno something*. My great grandmother risked her life coming over to the U.S from Armenia, saw her mother and infant sister die of dehydration in a Turkish dessert, and I still had kids asking me how many goats I thought I was worth.

On the complete opposite side of the spectrum, if I say I'm not white—then I'm racist.

Let me explain.

If I had a penny, for every time a white girl called me racist for identifying as not-white, I would have too many pennies. I never *start* conversations about my race because it's *no one's business*. If my primary job was to explain my race to strangers who ask for an explanation, I would drop out of college. My race has made me see how insecure the world is. White people

feel like they have to be the number one ally, and in effect, they don't think of people like me. I have imposter syndrome about my culture, my race, and ethnicity because I understand that the world sees race as either black or white.

Moving away from race, if I were to choose three aspects of myself other than being Armenian that I identify with the most, I choose being low income, and disability ally. My life is greatly affected by these identities on a daily basis except for being a lesbian, however it is one that I identify with the most.

I worry about money more than I worry about anything else. I grew up with a financially stable family, and a healthy childhood and all however, we lived paycheck to paycheck, with my single mother, and help from my grandparents. There was no question that I would need to get a job as soon as my age allowed me, and keep one until the day I die. I wish that I could spend money and not worry about it, move out of the dorms and pay for my own apartment, but I can't afford to. Not having money sucks, but I try to make the best of it.

As a low income kid I did learn how to have a good work ethic. When I do a job, I do it well or not at all. I learned how to cooperate with the real world at an early age, so moving away to college was not difficult. Being a kid that does not come from money, it has greatly affected the way that I view the world and treat people. I believe that I would not be as empathetic and generous if I did not have money struggles growing up. I go out with my friends and pay for dinner when I get a big paycheck, because they're kind enough to spot me when I'm low on money. I give my students parts of my lunch if they skipped breakfast to have another twenty minutes of sleep. I learned to be generous. Not greedy with money. People who worry the most about money are often the most giving.

A big part of my life includes people with special needs. I have a close family member on the spectrum, and they have completely changed my outlook and what I want to do with my life. Growing up with them taught me to accept all types of people ever since I could bat an eye. My mom instilled in my brain that we do not make fun of people who are *different*. She taught me to be a compassionate kid. (My mother hated the thought that people with autism were the ones that were *different*. She has a theory that the people with autism are really the *normal* ones, and we should all take after them.) I have been surrounded by people with special needs my entire life. Even when autism was not really acknowledged, these people were friends of my mom's, family members, or strangers that would shop in my family's store. It has made me a non-judgemental person, kind to people in public who may seem socially awkward. My upbringing also helps with my job, working at a middle school with primarily special education students.

Working with middle school students has changed my outlook on learning. I have worked with every type of student there is. Students with autism, IEPs and 504s, students with no disabilities, students with behavioral issues, immigrant students, students who use drugs, and students with felonies. I have learned that every kid learns differently. And by taking the time to understand them and be kind to them, they are more likely to listen to you. However, I'm not perfect. There have been times where I kick a student out of the class. I learned that matching the energy the student gives me, I can earn their respect quickly.

I don't think of my identity as something that I am continuously working to reconstruct. Some of my identities I was born with— they're not changing. Others have become so permanent in my life, I might as well have been born with them. To think about this abstractly, I have worked to change the way that my identities function in a public school environment. My love for people with special needs affects me everywhere I go and especially since I started working

in a middle school. The students know that if I see them making fun of another student or disrespecting another student, that I will become their worst nightmare until they learn respect. I have embarrassed students in front of their classmates one too many times for them not to get the message. Someone in my family I love deeply did not get this support when they were in school, and it shatters me to the pit of my stomach when I see someone like them getting picked on. The one downfall of all of my identities combined, is that I care too much to the point that it will one day kill me.

As for how I see myself interacting with social change in my everyday life, I function on the ideology of “See something, say something”. It’s a basic saying I was taught in elementary school, but the phrase is fitting for the way that I interact with social change. When I see something that is unjust, I say something. When I see a student getting bullied, I say something. When a student is struggling with their work, I help them. If a student is crying, I comfort them. I know that these are basic interactions that teachers should be doing daily. The sad thing is at least where I used to work, there is lack of empathy and understanding most teachers.

As for my praxis site, I will interact with the environment similarly. However, since my students are adults, my focus shifts less on maintaining a productive environment and more on being a support for the students when needed. My LARC students are respectful of time, each other, and their school work, so I can step back until they need some support. In any learning environment when I am the facilitator (or one of them), I also feel the vibe of the room. Some classroom settings require more support than others. However, I like to let the students try and figure out things on their own, before I offer help.