

Name: Sandra Leiterman
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Reflection Wheel Journal #: 1

Event:

I read the article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack" by Peggy McIntosh. It was an interesting article that began describing the "male privilege" that exists (mostly in the workplace). The author then compared that "male privilege" to what is known as "white privilege", or the ability to say and do things with ease, simply because one is white. There were several things listed that were easily attainable or doable, simply because one has white skin. The list included such things as:

- buying posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines that feature their own race
- being pulled over by a cop or audited by the IRS is not a means of being singled out because of race

And even one I had never even thought of before, which is being able to buy a Band-Aid or makeup that will "more or less match my skin".

Feelings:

Annoyed
Angry
Sympathetic
Empathetic

Thoughts:

When I read the opening paragraph, I very much agreed with the author's view, although I never heard of "male privilege", however, call it what you will, it exists. I worked for 10 years "in a man's world" and I'm pretty sure I would never go back! However, I will admit, when she began to compare male privilege to white privilege, I felt quite annoyed. Not because I didn't think it existed, but more like a "here we go again" type of deal. I assumed this would be another written testimony about how good white people have it, and how horrible every other race does.

I was taken aback, and my annoyance turned to empathy as I read the list of items she so carefully pointed out white people can do daily without even thinking about it. Some of the things listed, I really had not been aware of, such as the band-aid; but some I know about but only since teaching in a school that was under federal desegregation orders. For example, I am now aware of the nearly nonexistent diversity in textbooks. I am also fully aware of the fact that there are places that people of different cultures or races are not welcome. There are in fact so many things that we (white people) take for granted, because we have never had to face that difficulty. The one piece of the list that really stuck in my mind was the ability to buy make up or bandaid to match my skin tone; I thought of the foundation spread at Sephora (because I was just there) and you can buy foundation in about 10 different shades of "white" but perhaps only one or two shades of "black". I am sure every race has their own shades of skin tone- yet the white skin is the most catered too.

Learnings:

1. Assumption Checking

I did carry an initial bias about this being yet another paper telling me how bad my race is. I did also have potential bias, because I personally am not racist, prejudiced, or biased toward anyone based

on any fact other than the actual person. I forget that there are a lot more people in this world that are NOT like me, and carry attitudes and prejudices handed down to them from generation to generation.

2. Reflection:

The assumptions I made about this article being another paper talking about how bad the white race is, is valid based on the cultural norms presented to me here in Arkansas. I was raised to never judge someone by their race, religion, ethnicity, sex, or economic status. Moving to Little Rock, AR from Green Bay, WI was culture shock for me. I can sympathize with many of the things the author is saying. I have learned there is a mutual hate between black and white people. I have heard it spoken to others as well as to myself. My experiences here are why I thought what I did when I read the title of the article. I am not a bad person; however I am regularly judged with a more critical eye by both parents and students, because I am white. I have, however, encountered many good people here in Arkansas that see beyond the color of skin. I do know and understand that white privilege exists, as much as I understand and know that male privilege (having worked in the insurance world) exists.

3. Critical Reflection

When I moved to Arkansas, for the first time in my life, I was the minority. I was entering into a world where I did not feel welcome or invited. I was a “Yankee” and white. Being a Yankee carried stigma, because, yes, it is true, the war is not over here in the south; and being from the north was not a good thing for me for obvious reasons. I also had to learn mannerisms I never knew existed, and relearn how to converse with people so as not to come off rude. As a matter of fact, my “northern directness” as it was kindly put to me, has inadvertently offended many people. Though I am getting better, I am still learning. Just a month ago, I accidentally offended someone at my school because I asked a question before saying “Hi, how are you, do you have a minute to do something for me?” It’s all these crazy unwritten rules that I am still learning after 6 years.

As I began my teaching career, I found myself in the principal’s office on more than one occasion, even accosted in my classroom by a parent, where I had to defend my assignments and the grade that was given. I was being accused of giving a poor grade, or being too harsh on a student merely because they are black. My feelings at the time were of shock and awe; there was no way I would ever treat someone poorly, or grade inappropriately just because they are black, (or white or Hispanic or whatever). It was amazing to me that anyone could think that. Unfortunately, this is a prejudice that is carried on, and it won’t go away anytime soon. It hasn’t happened to me lately, but goes on regularly in my school. There are students I send to another teacher’s classroom for redirection/minor discipline, because as the other teacher so nicely put it, I can say things to him/her that you can’t because you are white.

Application:

Personal/Professional Growth

I have learned to be even more tolerant and empathic towards others. I always try to take a step back and put myself in their place. I sometimes find it hard to assimilate into the southern bell culture, though I try. I have been called rude, inconsiderate, stuck up and few other names. The sad truth is, I am none of the above. Some days I forget about the southern pleasantries, and get right to the point, and that offends many people here. I have also learned that no matter how hard I try, there are people that are going to hate me because I am a Yankee, and/or because I am white. I have learned not to take things personally, and I have learned how to succeed in the professional world here. It takes a lot of effort to remember “all my manners.”

As much as I need to learn, and continue to learn, the same holds true for my students, especially CLD students. Although some have lived in the USA or even Arkansas their entire lives, they have different cultural norms and expectations. Although I have just one class left to obtain my ESL endorsement, I will continue to learn and teach best practices to ensure that all my students feel welcome and safe in my classroom.

My move south of the Mason-Dixon line has proved to be one of the best adversarial situations to overcome. I can empathize with students of other race/culture better. Even though I am not seen as a minority through their eyes, I am one. Perhaps it is because I have experienced the hate, the confusion, the prejudging, and many other things that our CLD students face, that I am even more of an advocate for the students and their well being. I share stories regularly, about my growing up- that I too was poor (like many of them). I tell about moving here and trying to fit in. We have great conversations, and I become more human to them. I make sure they are comfortable and feel safe in my classroom. I work one on one with the ones that struggle. I give them many chances to succeed. I am somewhat limited in how comfortable I can make my classroom. I cannot look at placing students in groupings that are best for them, but rather what is best for the "snapshot" should someone walk into my classroom. I now have two Hispanic students in the same classroom, but district orders are that I cannot place them at the same table together, even though I know they would benefit from each other. I cannot do pure ability grouping, or knowledge grouping unless I first take race, then sex into consideration; if it works out, great, if not, I have to make the groupings as best I can to conform to federal and district guidelines. I hate that rules like this exist, because to me, it keeps the color divide alive. I try my best to not ever let the students know why I am moving them, or why they can't choose their own seats (I did that in the beginning, and was reprimanded because it looked like a segregated classroom, even though they chose their seats). It's difficult, and I feel the pain on both sides. I recognize the cultural diversity of my classroom, but I don't view it as a racial divide. Everyone has great qualities that they bring to my room. I encourage all my students to talk about their culture and heritage. Many of my students are not originally from Arkansas. We embrace the knowledge we learn from each other. I love learning from my students, and I learn more every day. I believe that my experience of "being in their shoes" helps me to be a better advocate and teacher for them.

Conclusion:

The author of the article is not wrong. White privilege does exist in so many ways. I wish that it didn't. I wish that people didn't hate and judge based on the color of people's skin, or how they talk, or what language they speak. Society has become more accepting over the past 50 years, but there is still a long way to go. Because I am aware of this, and I am aware of the feelings that others go through when they are a minority, I continue to educate myself on how to be a better teacher and advocate for them.