

The way in which I was raised has absolutely influenced the person I have grown up to be. Growing up as a white girl in a middle-class family with strong core values, I relied on friends and life experiences to gain an understanding of other microcultures. I have also gained a strong understanding and appreciation for other cultures, races, and exceptionalities from the 3rd graders I have taught throughout my career.

I grew up in a middle-class white household, with my parents and two siblings, in central Kansas. Growing up, the majority of my friends and classmates grew up in similar homes. At that time, single-parent homes were not as prevalent as they are now. While there was some diversity by way of different races and religion in the city I lived in, it was primarily a white Christian town. One of the first introductions to a person of another culture came in the form of my friend, Jasmine. Jasmine's parents were both from Egypt, and the Egyptian culture was very much present in their home. From Jasmine, I learned about religion, languages, and beliefs that were different than my own. I think that this friendship allowed me to realize that there were other types of families and lifestyles than the one I lived, but that didn't change the fact that Jasmine and I could be great friends.

While I did not have any exceptionalities growing up in school (such as learning disabilities or being labeled gifted), I do think that growing up with two college-educated parents had an influence on my childhood. The fact that my mom is an elementary teacher meant I was surrounded by the love of learning while I grew up. This has followed me through to adulthood as well. I still love to read, and I followed in my mother's footsteps (and my grandmother's!) to become a teacher. I have no question that the fact I ended up as a teacher came from seeing my mom's love of learning and teaching.

Another aspect of my identity that has hugely shaped my life is the fact that I am an identical twin. While the textbook lists the social categories as gender, sexual orientation, race, social class, and exceptionalities, I also think that being a twin could fit into this category, too. There are so many curiosities that surround being a twin, which happens when people come across something (or someone) that is different than they are. As a result of this, my sister and I were both painfully shy as little girls. People were always stopping us, and asking us any number of personal questions (Can you feel each other's pain? Do you do everything alike? Do you finish each other's sentences?). As a result of this, we were easily embarrassed, and it wasn't until we were teenagers that we fully embraced our twinship and all the special things that come with it. I do think this experience has shown me that people's differences should be respected, and people should not be completely defined by social categories. I am so proud to be a twin, but it is not all that I am.

One thing I have learned is that while there are some aspects of cultural identity that cannot be changed (being a white woman, for example), there are some that can be changed. Religion, for instance. Growing up, I attended Sunday school, church, and youth group on a weekly basis at my parent's Congregationalist church. This was one aspect of my cultural identity that I had the choice to change as I became an adult. Did I still want to attend a similar church on my own, or did I want to change how I practiced religion? Or, perhaps, were my religious beliefs different now that I was on my own? That is one of the freedoms of embracing your own cultural identity; the right to decide how you want to live your own life.

All of these experiences have shaped and influenced my role as an educator. Over the six years I have been teaching 3rd grade, I have dealt with a wide range of students: many different races (white, African American, Asian, Native American), many different cultures, and many different social classes. The experience with different social classes was probably the hardest bridge for me to cross. When I grew up, my parents attended every parent-teacher conference, provided every school supply requested, paid for field trips, and always helped me with my homework when I needed it. I truly did not realize that there are a lot of families out there that do not have the means to be able to do all those things for their children. I have been surprised that some parents never attend school functions, and never provide the help and support that their child needs to be a successful student. I have come to realize that none of this is the fault of the child (nor, necessarily, the parent—there are almost always extenuating circumstances). I have realized that each student needs my full support, no matter what they are getting from home.

I have also learned so much about differences from my students! They without fail bring their various microcultures into the classroom with them, and it is my duty to embrace the differences while teaching each student in the way that they best learn. Sometimes kids are the best teachers, and I have learned so much about different religions, cultural beliefs, and exceptionalities from my students. For example, a couple of years ago I taught Xavier, an African American student who had moved from Kansas City with his parents. The neighborhood that Xavier had lived in had a large black population, and he was very aware of the lack of a diverse population in his new classroom. Xavier helped me realize that being a minority was something that truly affected him, and it was my job to help him stay in touch with the culture and experiences he was familiar with.

I have no doubt that my understanding of cultural identities other than my own is an ever-lasting journey. While some aspects of my own cultural identity will never change, there are other aspects that change as I grow and learn more about myself. The strong and supportive childhood I experienced has given me a wonderful foundation to build my life on, and I have learned so much from friends, family, and life experiences. I have always tried to bring an open mind to my profession as an educator, with the desire to accept all students into my classroom just as they are, and with the realization that I am always changing and learning from my students.