Minority Experience Reflection

While being involved with the different experiences that are compiled into the Minority Experience assignment, I frequently found myself as being a minority, though this was not surprising. Through these experiences where I was not always able to understand what was going on, or felt distinctly uncomfortable and confused, I believe that I was able to learn valuable things for when I become a teacher. What was surprising to me was that I was also able to learn what I believe to be necessary for me, as a teacher, to know and enforce in my classroom. I believe that the best way to learn is through doing, so by being a minority, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of what the minority students are feeling in the classroom, in terms of both welcoming and unwelcoming actions. Through these experiences, I think that I learned valuable information that will help me become a more understanding teacher.

I was able to learn from and understand more about the groups that I visited, especially when those groups were open and welcoming. During my experience at the Presbyterian prayer service, I was initially terrified, considering I was the lone outsider in a group of about 20 people. However, those around me quickly put my mind at ease by being extremely friendly, and welcoming me to the service. I think that friendliness is one of the most important traits to display when interacting with a group different from your own, since it starts everything off on the right foot. When I become a classroom teacher, and even in my observations, I want to try to bring that same feeling of welcoming and openness to my classroom. I know that it is a difficult thing to accomplish sometimes, since there are so many viewpoints to represent and acknowledge. One of the ways that I hope to create this welcoming environment is by all of my students to share, through a report, an aspect of their culture. By having all students do this, it could lead them all to a deeper understanding and appreciation of other classmates backgrounds, and help them all to feel a bit more comfortable sharing aspects of their lives.

Also, during my experience at the MAFE meeting, the Native American house, and La Casa Latina, there were no feelings of superiority displayed by those who had a grasp on what was going on. I was the only secondary education minor at the MAFE meeting, surrounded by 10 Early Childhood Education majors. It was very intimidating, though they did not act as if their major was the only one that mattered, and made sure to include me in the discussion. A similar event happened at La Casa, as I was very new to the idea of Hispanic testimonios and history. The woman presenting factored that into her presentation, and made sure to give us enough background information that we would be able to properly understand the story that she was telling. When I walked into the Native American house, I was surprised by how welcoming they were, and how even though I was the only person without beading experience, I never felt like they were looking down on me because of that. Instead, I felt like they wanted to help me succeed through teaching me. It was a reassuring feeling to be welcomed into the experience, and to have the people who were familiar with what was going on display an interest in my experience. All of these experiences helped to make me feel like less of an outsider, and taught me what it took for the majority population to ease the fears of the minority. I will take this information and use it in my future as a teacher by remembering how I reacted when I was a minority, and how I felt more comfortable opening up to the new experiences. Through remembering this information, I think that I will be able to create an environment for my students that will encourage them to feel like one comprehensive classroom unit, instead of 25 or so separate students.

As I continue my teaching education, and become a teacher with my own classroom, I want to keep these experiences where I felt welcome in mind. By approaching each class with the idea that all students have something to bring to the table, and should have the opportunity to share those ideas, I think that the classroom dynamic will be affected positively. Through these experiences, I learned that the outreach to people of a minority does not have to be extreme, but can be as simple as taking the time to explain an idea, share a smile, or speak welcoming words. All of these encourage those who are new to be comfortable, in what could potentially have been uncomfortable situations.

There were also a few things that made me feel uncomfortable in my experiences, and that I realized I would need to work on actively to alleviate in my future classroom. These stemmed from simply being the minority in the situations, and being unsure of how to interact with those I talked to in the experiences. I primarily felt uncomfortable when I didn’t know what was going on in the meeting or presentation, such as when I went to the MAFE meeting and couldn’t relate as easily to the experiences that the rest of the members presented. I experienced the same feeling when I went to La Casa Latina, due to my lack of knowledge of the history and topic. When I felt out of the loop, it was hard for me to want to participate and interact with those around me. It was only after I was able to make a connection with the dominant members of the group and knew that they accepted me that I was able to let myself feel more comfortable and like part of the group. As a teacher, I want to allow all students of all different backgrounds and viewpoints to represent those views in a safe and welcoming environment. Allowing the students to share their experiences and feel safe doing so can help to encourage positive discussions of differences, and allow for communication between the different groups represented. I realize that it will not always be possible to have each group represent their beliefs in a way that is accessible to all, but providing an environment where students can feel comfortable is essential.

In my future classroom, I want to try to incorporate some of the things that made me feel most welcome, and comfortable as I experienced in the different events and meetings I went to. Though I was not ever fully comfortable, the ways in which the people surrounding me encouraged me to learn about their lives and experiences was incredibly valuable. I also believe that connecting the activities that we do in class to the backgrounds of the students is very beneficial. Through not placing focus on a singular group of students, it will be easier for each to feel slightly more comfortable and included in what we are learning. I learned this from my experience at the Wesley Food Pantry, where we didn’t single out those who were in need of help, but simply treated everyone who came through as if they were exactly like us. The pantry-goers responded well to this treatment, and I think that it helped place them more at ease.

I will also try to incorporate some of the more difficult topics that I was witness to into my classroom in the future. At the MAFE meeting, I realized how hard some students have to work in order to simply realize that college can be a possibility for them. I hope to be able to draw on information resources, such as different technical schools or the requirements of different colleges, and the scholarships available, in order to give my students the realization that they are able to achieve higher education. Partnered with that is also the need to support these students in their school work, whether it is through a little extra one-on-one time before or after school, or holding them accountable for their work that is due. I think that by showing the students that someone cares enough about them to encourage such a goal, that they will be capable of achieving it.

This project was one of my favorite things that I have had to do in my time at U of I. By being encouraged to take chances and place myself in situations where I was not guaranteed to know what was going on or guaranteed comfort, I was able to take away a lot from my experiences. Some of the events and meetings that I went to became some of my favorite experiences, taught me a lot about being a minority, and how best to teach those who are minorities in the schools. I now know more about how best to present activities and lessons in the classroom in order to get the best results from all those who are learning. These experiences provided me with the chance to gain an understanding into the minds of the students who are minorities, and develop a way to effectively teach them in my future classroom. I am going to carry the knowledge that I have gained through these experiences with me into my future as an educator, and use them to best interact with, and include all of my students.