A preservice teacher considers how her experiences as a woman of color have shaped her understandings of identity and diversity in the classroom.

We let people say stuff, and they say it so much that it becomes okay to them and normal for us. What’s the point of having a voice if you’re gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn’t be?

—ANGIE THOMAS, THE HATE U GIVE

Angie Thomas’s character Starr in the novel The Hate U Give finds her voice in the midst of tragedy and upheaval. As readers, we cheer for Starr as she speaks up and acts out; as educators, we encourage our students to see Starr as both a window and a mirror (Bishop). But are we listening to the Starrs in our own classrooms? Do we create spaces to understand different experiences and honor different lives? When we stop and listen to the diverse voices of our students and teachers, we might be surprised at what we learn as Bria LeeAnn Coleman confirms in her column contribution.

An Other Story of Diversity and Identity

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When I was young, my parents worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. Because of their work schedules and the expense of daycare, I had to learn how to be home alone. By the second grade, I fed myself breakfast and put myself on the bus in the mornings. In the afternoons, I came home and did my homework. I looked forward to going to school, because it gave me something to do besides waiting for my parents to get home.

My first day of middle school, we were asked to share what our families were like, what we had done that summer, and what we were looking forward to that school year: standard first-day questions. As we went around the room, I listened to my peers talk about their exotic vacations, their interesting summer camps, and their excitement for after-school activities. When my turn came, I was embarrassed to share my different life, but I mustered up the courage to speak. I remember the looks my peers exchanged with one another and my teacher’s apologetic expression as she watched the excitement in my eyes disappear with every word I said.

My ninth-grade year of high school, I learned that I was labeled an “at-risk” student while applying to college. A subsequent Google search taught me what the term meant, and it infuriated me. Despite being at the top of my graduating class, enrolled in advanced courses, involved in a plethora of school activities, holding numerous leadership positions, and working part-time, I was labeled “at risk.” Was it because my parents were only high school graduates? Because we were considered economically disadvantaged? Because I was one of the few African Americans in a predominately White school? At seventeen, I learned that the color of my skin, how much money my parents made, and whether my parents attended college affected how people viewed me, treated me, and what they thought I was capable of, even if I was doing “You act White.” I had heard this before, but I’d never paid attention to it. Now, I noticed that I was continually referred to as an “Oreo” or told that I talked and acted “White.” I laughed at the jokes to feel included, but I never understood them. All of my peers liked the same things that I did. Why was I expected to like other things?

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extremely well. I should have been proud of my accomplishments, but now I struggled to feel like I mattered, ashamed of who I was because I was considered an other.

**BEING NORMAL VERSUS BEING DIVERSE**

The issue with the term *diversity* in an educational setting is that it stands as a term for anything other than “normal,” which, considering the history of American education, is anything other than affluent, White, and male. Thomas Jefferson established a two-track education system (“Historical Timeline”) dividing students into “the laboring and the learned.” In doing this, Jefferson divided students by those who were privileged and those who were not. Centuries later, students still face the same divide, only now, those who are not privileged are classified as diverse. No two students are alike. They do not learn the same; they do not have the same background; even those considered “privileged” are still incredibly different from one another. When the label of diversity is placed on students, they are othered by their experiences and by being compared to the “norm,” which is problematic for all students, not just the ones labeled as diverse.

Often, students are considered diverse because of their ethnicity, cultural heritage, gender identity, or socioeconomic background. Certainly, these are important parts of students’ identities, but these labels are not the sole determinants that make students diverse. Diversity includes many essential identifications that make students who they are: the first person to graduate high school in their family, their extracurricular involvement, their family structure. These experiences are significant; they matter, too.

**EXPLORING IDENTITY IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

English class is where I always felt the safest throughout my public school education. I was not able to relate to the experiences of my peers or to the experiences of many of the characters in the books we read in classes; as Jason Reynolds stated in an interview, “Nothing that’s happening in these books [was] happening in my neighborhood” (Krug). Still, I enjoyed reading powerful literature full of fantastic voices. When I read the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, however—one of my first works of African American literature—it became my favorite book. Even if I did not realize it at the time, the story mattered because it was being told through the lens of someone with whom I could identify.

Many canonical texts used in the English classroom include diverse characters: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart*, among others. These stories are important, but they are also dated and offer tragic representations of people of color. As I think about these texts, I think of Chimamanda Adichie’s words from “The Danger of a Single Story”:

> Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Texts such as *The Hate U Give*, *The Sun Is Also a Star*, and *All American Boys* humanize the current experiences of students of color and recognize that their experiences are worthy of discussion in an academic setting. Current young adult literature allows students to find characters with whom they identify; by teaching these identities in the classroom, students understand that their identities are worth talking about and are relevant to our study of literature.

Every student should leave the ELA classroom with content knowledge and appreciation for their experiences as well as the experiences of the people who surround them. Identity is the common human experience. By fostering diversity of identity and experience in the ELA classroom, we humanize, dignify, and empower students. Students should never feel as if their experience and identity are other; nor should they feel as if any experience or identity is more important.
than any other. All students should understand that their identity matters, that their experiences matter, and that the people surrounding them matter, too.

As I stand at the threshold of my own ELA classroom, I realize I was not provided the space to understand that my identity—as a student of color, an economically disadvantaged student, and a first-generation college student—mattered. I realize that my peers telling me I “acted and talked White” separated my identity as a person from my identity as a student. I realize that my experiences as an other will help me challenge the discussions we have about diversity in the classroom.

WORKS CITED


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CANDIDATES ANNOUNCED FOR SECTION ELECTIONS; WATCH FOR YOUR BALLOT

The Secondary Section Nominating Committee has named the following candidates for Section offices in the NCTE spring elections:

For Members of the Secondary Section Steering Committee (one to be elected; terms to expire in 2023): Susan Barber, Grady High School, Atlanta, Georgia; Valerie Mattessich, Pascack Valley Regional High School District, Montvale, New Jersey.

For Members of the Secondary Section Nominating Committee (three to be elected; terms to expire in 2020): Rob Ford, North Branford High School, Connecticut; Joel Garza, Greenhill School, Addison, Texas; Sandra J. Mayes, Gallipolis City Schools, Ohio; Byung-In Seo, Chicago State University, Illinois; Liz Shults, Oak Mountain High School, Birmingham, Alabama; Melissa Tucker, Rock Hill High School, South Carolina.

Members of the 2018–19 Secondary Section Nominating Committee are Elena Garcia, Scottsbluff High School, Nebraska, chair; Adrian Nester, Tunstall High School, Virginia; and Andrea Zellner, Oakland Schools Intermediate School District, Michigan.

Lists of candidates for all of the ballots can be found on the NCTE website at http://www2.ncte.org/get-involved/volunteer/elections/.