

Immersive Scenario

My name is Blanca and I am an educational technology consultant. It is a women and minority owned technology business. I identify as she/her and today I share my own personal story as an immersive scenario. Take a few moments to walk alongside me as I take you along my school journey.

I was in high school before I ever felt different than students in my class. Growing up I had been called names but it had been few and far between. You see, I grew up in a neighborhood just outside New York City in Queens. It was, during my time, considered the melting pot of the world – one of, if not the most – diverse places in the world. Many immigrants settled in Brooklyn and Queens when they came to NY and my corner of the world was Woodside. In my town it was normal to have parents that spoke English with an accent and weren't born in the U.S. Most families got along just fine. Our parents were friends, they looked out for each other's kids. We congregated at church, the community center, or the local bars. This was a working class community. Most families were either German or Irish or Hispanic or Italian – there were also the occasional outliers but people didn't make a big deal of it. I never really feel discriminated against...and I didn't know how different life was outside of our community. Until high school..

High school was a different story. I traveled an hour and a half to get to school each day. From the bus, I watched other students walk from their beautiful big homes. Their neighborhoods were prettier and cleaner, away from the hustle and bustle of people, noisy trains, and dirty streets. In high school, people dressed differently. They wore designer outfits and had fancy pocketbooks. During lunchtime students gathered mostly by ethnicity. It wasn't something I was used to growing up. Here, the Hispanic kids hung out in one corner, the black children in another, and the white children – well they made up the majority of the school. I am Hispanic but light-skinned. I have dark hair and dark eyes. This meant I could blend in. When people asked me where I was from, I mostly avoided the question. I cringed when I told them my name. Blanca, I would respond. Sometimes people called me Bianca. I let them. Not

really knowing where I fit in but thankful I didn't stand out. I didn't embrace who I was because I felt embarrassed.

The Hispanic and black children in groups made me nervous. They were loud which I mistook for anger. But I didn't act or speak like them. I didn't listen to the music they did. And as they created their own communities, I found them difficult to relate to. In my ignorance I did not take the time to get to know them better. In class, we knew each other just fine. But in their groups they largely intimidated me. And so, I ignored them. What I didn't realize then, that I do realize now, is that the way people act and speak is all a part of culture. And when you don't take the time to get to know people, you can make some really dumb assumptions.

Learning in class was no different. In class, there were no books from Hispanic authors. No talk of Hispanic culture. In fact, the only references I can remember were The Alamo and the word Hispaniola. In science (my favorite subject) there was no mention of any famous Hispanic scientists or women except for Marie Curie. If asked about the absence, I'm not sure I would have said I minded as a child. But as an adult, I have no doubt that the lack of mention helped to shape my future. I probably would have become a scientist if I had some role models to inspire me. Maybe. But the problem with being a child is that children only know what they are exposed to. And lack of exposure can mean the difference in someone's world.

In classrooms, I was very quiet having always been timid as a child. Because I thought of myself as shy, I kept to myself. I never raised my hand in school (well, only once). When it was time to answer a question I darted my eyes avoiding all contact, always with a knot in my stomach because I was afraid to speak. How I wish they had the technology they have today! I wish I had discussion boards to speak up for myself or games to play to show what I knew! School would have been a much different experience for me because not participating in class made me feel hidden, unwelcome and disengaged. Although I did well, there are several classes that I can remember not caring about even though the subject came easy for me. Calculus and Chemistry

were by far my favorite subjects but the notion of going into those fields did not exist in even a glimmer of hope – mathematicians and scientists were dreams for others – not me.

For most of the first few years I kept to myself but began to open up as after school clubs started that I was interested in. One of the first I joined was the Spanish club. The Spanish teacher was a moderator with blond hair and blue eyes. She helped to change my perspective about ethnicity and what people were supposed to look and act like. And the culture! Being a part of the club opened my eyes to Spanish culture. We visited and ate at a Mexican restaurant. We had Peruvian food. We read about Spanish artists. We spoke in Spanish! I had never spoken Spanish to anyone but my family. Everyone in the club wasn't even Spanish! Why weren't all of our classes like this? Why wasn't this immersive method adopted as a way to learn other things? Being in the club helped to embrace myself more. I slowly began to come out of my shell.

Inclusive curriculum was something I never thought about before I became an educator. At a conference many years ago, listening to Jacqueline Woodson's presentation on her book, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, it finally dawned on me how important it was to have inclusive education and curriculum. I know today it's talked about more but it isn't necessarily prevalent in schools. With more and more students coming from mixed backgrounds, it's also important to make sure they feel that both sides of who they are, matter. So whether it's embracing technology so that kids of all abilities can engage in a class, or including texts from authors of different backgrounds, or making classes more immersive, and incorporating choice so that students can explore and express themselves in ways that they are interested in, inclusive education can and should be embraced – for many reasons.

What's your immersive scenario experience? And how can your experience inspire others to reach more students in the classroom?

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