

Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. Matthew Blanton

*Interview conducted by Sophia Wilson Pelton
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Q) My question is how your experience has been in general – you can talk about Milton specifically or not – as mixed race.

A) So I can certainly talk about Milton or growing up. I can talk about Milton and then work backwards. I think that since I started teaching, which was actually at the Taft School as a math teacher, and then into Grad school, and then at Milton, certainly knowing that unless people know my identity, people will assume that I'm white, and I want my students – especially students and students of color – to know that I'm a person of color, so they know that in the classroom that they are in the presence of a teacher of color. So, basically, I have this icebreaker, Two Truths and a Lie. The whole reason I do it is to out myself as a person of color. So, as everyone goes around, and I participate as well, one of my two truths will be that I'm biracial. And on that very first day, the students know, "Ok this dude's black and white." So, even though he's certainly looking like he's white, he's revealed a little bit more about himself. But, I think at Milton I have no idea how much students talk amongst themselves – and this is a bigger school than I expected – so each and every day there are students I see who I've never actually seen before. The number of students I'm in contact with either through my class or through soccer is small. Even if I'm telling my soccer players or my students that I'm biracial, I'm still sort of passing as white throughout the campus. For any number of reasons, my contact with others is limited because I don't live in the dorms. I think it's just a matter of honoring my identity in ways that aren't like forcing things upon everyone. It's not like we go up to strangers and say "Hey! You know I'm Christian! And I'm Heterosexual!" and all other pieces of my identity that I don't know instead of "Hey, the weather is very nice today." But at the same time certainly trying not to shirk away from the things that I think are important. So there was a certain incident last year for which myself and a few other teachers of color spoke with some students about which was trying to contend with racial issues at Milton. And as a history teacher, I think I probably – I can't say for certain – but probably emphasize issues of more than my colleagues. One, because I think it is generally a part of US history or global history more than any people give it credit; also because in 2017, I think question of race and power are ubiquitous, so to give students exposure to the history of the way race has played in different events and the influence it has had on our contemporary times is important. But, for the most part, if students don't know me – whether they are white or non-white – I'm lumped into the vast majority of teachers at Milton who are white.

Q) Another thing I'm curious about is – it is difficult for me that people who aren't mixed race don't have the privileges that I have. I feel that sometimes people take my voice to be more legitimate about issues of race than someone who is darker than me, just because people can recognize me more, and I seem more familiar to them. I'm curious of that piece: how you deal with that?

A) As a teacher with students, I have authority just in that role. So, I think that to some extent, taking out the piece of the lived experience grants me a certain level of “oomph” – of gravitas – in the classroom. A vast majority of African-Americans in the early 20th century migrated from the South to the northern cities to escape violence and lynching. It’s not because there were more jobs and urban centers that were promising higher wages. They were getting out of dodge because violence was taking over their lives. That probably carries a certain weight just because I’m the teacher. If I then say that Black Lives Matter is a legit movement because historically, black folks and African-Americans have been discriminated against since they first landed on these shores, and I can tell you personal examples of that – if not for myself and my wife then for dad or my grandparents – that probably carries a bit of weight. Or among folks that look black they can be like, “Dude what are talking about? You don’t know jack because when you walk down the street you’re treated like a white guy.” And you know what? They’re right. So sometimes I do have a bit of authority when talking about race and sometimes I don’t. That’s kind of the duality of being mixed. It’s relative and it kinda depends on the surrounding. If I were, rather than being a teacher, a Milton student, the degree to which I am a person of color is the same degree to anyone who presents as a person of color. But the degree that I may be able to claim “blackness” relative to someone who may present as very phenotypically black, that’s where it gets a little touchy from the perspective of each person’s opinions. I think that these questions are all about relativity. And, if you’re talking with a bunch of white friends, they can’t convince you of a black of experience that they’ve only heard of but you’ve lived. But if you were hanging out with a bunch of black folks who might be darker or might have experiences in which they are confronted by racial oppression more, they speak from an experience that might have more drastic or dark histories.