

Anders



Max Anders is a middle-aged, white man who teaches at my school, Lincoln High School. He came from San Francisco, California where he taught at Mission High School, a school like Lincoln. I interviewed Mr. Anders because I wanted to get perspective from a white teacher in a non PWI school, one that really seemed to care about the students and how their mindset changed overtime of particularly students of color.

Me: It's December 9th, 7:41AM, in Room 224 and I am here with Mr. Anders today and I'm going to ask him a few questions. I'd like to start off with; what was your childhood like?

Mr. Anders: I had a happy childhood. I was born in California but when I was really young my family moved to the east coast of Providence Rhode Island, and I lived there until I was nine years old. Both my parents are doctors, we had a comfortable life, my brothers went to private school, they went to this pretty fancy quaker private school. I went to the little quaker elementary school kind of thing. I don't have too many memories of that, but then I remember moving back to California and being upset

because I had to leave all my friends and stuff like that. We moved to a place called Davis, California which is this little college town of 60,000 people, UC Davis is there which is a pretty big university in California, and they call it Cow Town, there's rural fields everywhere but it's this cute little town, it's very hippy and progressive. I went to public school, elementary, middle school, and high school there. It's like diverse in certain ways, there's a lot of university families there, so when I think back to elementary school, I remember we had kids from Egypt, Morocco, kids from different parts of Asia. If you were to look at the school picture, it's diverse but everyone was children of academics for the most part so, it was pretty much consistently people of upper middle class. No one was like super rich, but most people own their homes so, there was a level of comfort there that was great in a way, but I also don't think it exposed me to different groups of people, different socio-economic groups of people. There was not a big African American population there, and very few Pacific-Islanders, so I think that affected me.

This is sort of the answer I was expecting from him, not to be making too many assumptions but I did assume of him to have lived a comfortable life, like the one he described. I wanted to ask him this question just to start off with ease and just to get more background information for the upcoming questions.

Me: How would explain how you'd view them, African Americans, and Pacific Islanders?

Mr. Anders: I don't think I was ever an active racist, being like people are better than other people. My mom was sort of a hippy in her day, she went to Woodstock and stuff. My dad marched with MLK, they were really, theoretically, about the cause, and so I grew up knowing about inequity and caring about it. It's funny, recently I read my work from 6th or 7th grade, I read the autobiography of Malcom X and did a piece of classwork about it. I was really passionate about Malcom X and so I think from a theoretical perspective, I sort of thought I got inequality and social justice, but on a very

superficial level. Then I went on to college at UC Santa Barbra which is a very white school and then I moved to San Francisco. Moving to San Francisco was really the first time I was living next to people of color, was living next to diverse. There are really wealthy people in San Francisco and there's really poor people in San Francisco and I was working with kids in Foster Care. I was working very closely with people who were sort of the most disadvantaged in society in some ways and I feel like that was jarring for me, in a way, it made me realize how uncomfortable I was with that segment of the population, how I took a lot of things for granted. It was a culture clash; I didn't know how to communicate in certain ways and so I think I never thought down on people like that, but I just had such a limited experience building relationships with them that there was a discomfort in that.

The information about his parents did come a little surprising to me because I didn't expect him to already know about inequity at a young age simply because most white kids I was around during my years of fourth grade to seventh grade did not have half that much depth of knowledge and were really ignorant, but nonetheless was happy to hear that he was at least aware because I do think that is something that should be understood earlier on in life, especially in regard to white children. When Mr. Anders was talking about the "culture clash" he experienced I was not surprised though. Many times that is the reaction when you're introduced to something you're unfamiliar with and I have had many encounters with white people to know they're minds will be blown when we do not meet the description in their minds.

Me: What was your first learning experience, where you realized, you're not how you thought you were and don't understand?

Mr. Anders: I have a moment that comes to mind that I am embarrassed to say, but I'll say it. After working with kids in Foster Care for a year and a half, I decided I wanted to get into schools. I didn't want to teach but I wanted to get into schools because I was like, if you want to work with kids that's where kids are. I was like a counselor in schools, and I worked at this public school, but it was this very high performing public school, you had to apply to get in. They had kids from all over, it was diverse, not super diverse, but it was diverse, but economically it was very diverse, there were working class kids, there was middle class kids, but everyone was the top percent of their middle schools. From there, I worked there a couple of years, then I decided I wanted to be a teacher, so I went and got my teaching credentials and my masters. I started to work at this school, Mission High School, which is very similar to Lincoln High School, super diverse, not a lot of white kids but there's pretty much everyone else and economically most kids are on free and reduced lunch. I worked with this incredible African American teacher who became my mentor and best friend, she really schooled me through a lot of things. I remember a moment, early on, when we were looking at some student work and the kids writing were representative of kids who have not had the best public education, sentences were all over the place, punctuation was wrong, that kind of stuff. I don't know whether it was a look on my face or if I said something like, "these kids can't write." Then this woman stopped what she was doing and said, "OK, if you want to work with me right now, you have to understand something very clearly..." and then proceeded to educate me how there's a difference between skill and intelligence. I actually don't think I said, "these kids don't know how to write," I think I said something worse, like, "these kids aren't smart" or something like that and she said, "If you don't understand the difference between skill and intelligence, you can leave today." It helped me realize that knowing where to put a comma and a period, you're not born knowing that you learn that from teachers who invest in you, education systems that meet your needs, and a whole society that values you in a way. But even if you never learn those things, every human being is tremendously intellectual. I think she helped me see that if you don't distinguish the two and recognize someone's intelligence, you can't do anything as a teacher. I don't know if that totally answered your question but that stood out to me as a moment where I realized "I didn't know that" I think I looked at intelligence in a certain way, and I looked at working class people of color as less intelligence, and now I totally see it.

I found his answer so ironic because the way he was describing how he taught earlier on is exactly what I wanted to avoid. Before school started, I saw that I was in AP Language and immediately went to my counselor to switch out of the class. I had several reasons: I didn't want to be in ANY AP classes, that was something I was set on after my freshman year because I thought of them as pointless, reason being that even if I get an A in the college course class, if I don't pass the end of the year AP test then I won't get the credit. Although it's not given whether I do or don't pass it, I heard from many students they do not pass it and I simply don't see the point of taking the college course and not getting any college credit and I didn't want to take the risk, I thought it was a waste. Another reason being, a lot of times, I do not like the way English teachers have taught me in the past, I always wonder how I still got A's in my previous classes so going from a regular English class to a college course English class just made me gag. I also didn't want to do any work, I am a big procrastinator and like to do the minimum for an A, and I knew having an AP class meant that the minimum would be a lot more than what I was giving before. But nonetheless my counselor did not want me to switch out and said I was even downplaying myself, he told me to give the class a week or two before I made my final decision. Off the bat when I walked into the class, I didn't want to be there, I was with, yet another white, male teacher and I was not in the mood to deal with what I thought would be a boring and mean teacher. I thought I was going to hate the class and hate Mr. Anders, but I was unexpectedly wrong. In that short amount of time, I ended up loving the class, still not the work though, but also even liking Mr. Anders who has already made such an impact.

Me: Well, I think you have come a long way. Were there any times with a student, or even a teacher, of color, where you felt like you were being prejudice or racist when you were becoming a teacher?

Mr. Anders: Racism is a really complex topic, I remember in college, I took a lot of classes around racism and one class particularly that stood out, said that racism is a system of advantages based on your race; so no matter what I do, how I think, and who I am, if you and I walk into a street where we don't know anybody, I'm going to be treated a different way. That is racism, the privileges I get. Even to this day, even all the work I do, I still think I benefit a ton from racism and there's nothing I can do about that. I think when we live in our sort of segregated, isolated bubbles there's a lot of ignorance across cultures and races and if we don't build those relationships, we can live and die in that ignorance. I think I did, having not growing up around working-class people, people of color, specifically African Americans, I think I did have a lot of ignorance, I think I was susceptible to stereotypes in the media, music, and all those things. I think teachers are often times really cruel to African American kids and they immediately assume the worst. My daughter is in first grade, and I watch the black students in that class, what my daughter says about them, what the teacher does to them, and I'm like "Oh it starts here." Then understandably, after a few years of it, some African Americans do disengage from school and do feel like it's not a place that they're not welcomed and so then it becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy. But all that to say, I remember having students early on in my career, I'd put them to work. Although there were probably 4 or 5 kids not getting to work, I'd focus on the African American student and did not come to them from a place of curiosity or compassion. Today, I'll say, "Why aren't you doing the work?" six of ten times there's a good reason. I think before I came at them like, "Oh you better do the work..." and then where there was a little friction there it was like "well you got to go," I think there was some of that directed at students of color. With my mentor breaking that stuff down, we looked at data of which students are being sent out, why they were being sent out, and there was a lot of support for young teachers on working on that, so that reframed me a bunch.

Although I was expecting a more detailed experience moment, I am glad he shared that with me especially the insight of his mentor and the data collection. That is something I feel like that method of his mentor is one that should be taught to not just young teachers but even old ones who are still oblivious and ignorant to the statistics. But I did think that the story was somehow so unbelievable of Mr. Anders because the way he treats and teaches his students today is unrecognizable to the one he described. I also full-heartedly believe in what he said before his eye-opening experience, people grow to be ignorant when they're not exposed, and many children of color particularly black children face constant discrimination within schools, and it doesn't come from just their schoolmates but the teachers as well. This is a topic I'm passionate about when writing because I truly would love to see faces of color out in the world rather than the constant pale streaks that run our world. Even the kids in my classes, although I don't like a lot of them as a person who doesn't like to interact and socialize deeply with others, I want them to succeed and make it big in whatever they want to do.

Me: Have you ever worked at a PWI school?

Mr. Anders: No, I went to one as a student, but I never taught at one.

I asked him that question because I wanted some insight on his perspective between the two and what the differences would be, but he never taught at a PWI so it led me to my next question...

Me: Do you think there are any big differences between the two?

Mr. Anders: ...I remember being sort of shocked when I got to Mission High School in San Francisco because the school I went to was a little bit more suburban. Kids did crazy stuff, kids were doing drugs all the time, partied, they went and drank in fields and had these keggers, it was this very toxic popularity contest and it felt like those American Pie movies. Then when I got to Mission, that was my first non PWI school and so, I was like, "oh is this where fighting is going to happen?" The school had a real reputation, when I'd tell people on the bus I worked at Mission High School, it was just like Lincoln, they'd say, "You work where? The gang school?" So, I had that somewhere in me and then I went there and was like, "These are some sweet ass kids." Most kids did not have time to party because they were working two jobs or they couldn't throw parties because so many family members lived with them, there was such a maturity to it. For sure there was immaturity, there was fighting, there was stuff of being a normal teenager, but I also thought in some ways kids had to grow up so fast that there weren't as many big issues in a way. It's so ironic that people of color are typecast this way, but when you look at drug-use, teen pregnancies, it's all in PWI schools.

I attended a PWI from 4th grade to 7th and those were some rough years. Before that I went to well diverse school, I didn't mind moving though because I thought the school I would next be attending, would be similar. I was wrong, there was always a heavy air wherever I walked, I also began to feel

insecure about many things and had to deal with a lot of microaggressions. At the end of 7th grade, I moved to Tacoma and finished my year in Puyallup but when I told my friends I was moved there, they were all scared for, they said it was ghetto, I could die young there, and that everyone here was a "thug". I found it funny of them and tried not to take it to heart, but of course because they were my friends it did dawn on me for some time until my 8th grade school year started. It was nothing as described and I felt much more at peace. I really related to Mr. Anders when he was describing his PWI because that was a lot like my experience there and it was not a fun one. When I was finally around more kids of color I realized how much I missed being around all sorts of different people and not just white people.

Me: Why did you choose Lincoln High School?

Mr. Anders: My family had to leave San Francisco because it was too expensive, so we were looking for other places to live and I had no interest in moving to this part of the country, I didn't know anything about it. I assumed the Pacific Northwest was very white and I wasn't really interested. My wife was trying for several ways, she said environmentally it's so good and I said that's important then she literally went on a website and looked at the demographics of Lincoln High School. She heard about it from YouTube, Tacoma has a good YouTube page for its schools, where it has all these videos. She had come across Lincoln High School that way and all she did was send me the demographics of it and asked if I heard of that school. That was what got me interested in it because I wanted to work at a school that was similar to the one I was at. Which that's a whole other question, should white teachers be working in schools like these, but it was where I wanted to be. Then I did a little more digging and I found out, not only are there students of color here, but high school graduation rates are also high and college acceptance rates are high. That made me think, not only are they working with the population I want to work with, but they're doing a good job with it. I started to dig more into it, watched a bunch of those videos and I reached out to the principal, I will say I reached out to a bunch of schools and most principals don't respond, but Erwin wrote me right back and said if I was interested to come for a visit. I came to visit and walked around, I remember just walking around out here and seeing the kids and knew this was where I wanted to come, there was an energy. I don't know though, I think you should always be wary of white people who always want to work with kids of color because I think there is this savior complex and I'm not going to say that's nowhere in me, I'm sure it is somewhere. But I think doing the work I've done, I have realized, I desperately want to change the world, I think there's so many problems and I think I've realized I have a part to play but since I'm not from the communities that need the change, my role is secondary. I really believe that if there's going to be change in this world, you're going to do it, not me; so, I think devoting my life to helping you get where you need to go is going to be the quickest way to change this world. I don't know, PWI schools, I'm sure I'd love the kids in a way, like my nieces and nephews are these high-powered private school kids and they're not going to change the world, you will before they will any day. I really believe this and that's why I want to work here.

After being in Puyallup for a few years, I too thought Washington was just a bunch of white people because that's all I was surrounded with during those years, but besides that I am grateful for Mrs. Anders because she brought a good teacher to this school, one which I think many students will learn a lot from, more than just English. He also mentioned a real take about the superior/God complex which is also funny because that was something that I was scared about at the beginning of the school year from him, but I felt him coming from a genuine intention, so I let it slide. I do think lots of change will come from people of color and that there should be more representation because it is a proven fact that a diverse group is smarter. Even just thinking about it historically there are so many races out there that have come to survive and adapt in so many ways, imagine what would have happened if they were all working together, the same theory stands today (as true) but in a more modern way. When Mr. Anders mentioned getting students of color to be teachers, it made me think about it again. I've always been told from a lot of teachers that I should be one and after every time, I always went to my friends to laugh about it because I never thought of even becoming one and it truly seemed like a joke to me. I've been thinking about it a lot more of what I want to do in the future, I don't know whether being a teacher may be my path but I've been considering it.

Me: Beautifully said. I do agree on the take about the god complex with a lot of white people because I see that a lot.

Mr. Anders: Well, I do think that is very important and I think a lot of white people need to check what they're doing and why they're doing it. I was born with this privilege, I can't get it away so to say when a white person says they want to do something with my privilege, I think that's a good thing but if they do it in a way that puts them in the lead rather than a supporting role, if you just look at history all the movements have gone wrong when that happens. Due to that people have said they don't want any white people involved in this movement, I don't think that's the answer, I think we have to be able to work together but the people who are most affected by the issue should be leading.

Although my friends and I joke quite a lot about white people not being included into stuff like this I do agree with Mr. Anders that everyone should be included but white people do need to stay in check.

Me: Which leads me to my next question, do you feel that being a white teacher at a non PWI school affects your relationship with students?

Mr. Anders: For sure. I heard many students in the letters to the teachers, students write about how they want teachers of color and I 100 percent get it, I think there should be. One of my goals is to work to have students of color become teachers, that's why I'm always telling you and other students be teachers. I think it's super important for teachers to understand where their students are coming from. I've done this for ten years now, I have a better understanding of where students of color are coming from, not to say I have a full understanding or as good of an understanding, but I also think there's a lot of messed up teachers of color. I don't think being just a teacher of color makes you're a great teacher, but I think when you combine good teaching with teachers who look and represent the students they're teaching then that's powerful.

He was right when he said being a teacher of color doesn't make them a good teacher, it's jus like anybody of any race can be a bad person, anybody of any race can have their faults, it is not exclusive to any.

Mr. Anders: Have you ever had a teacher of color?

Me: Let me think, I want to say no. Dang, that' crazy.

At the time I couldn't think of any teachers of color I had, but I did have one my freshman year but that's still not much to say because out of my 12 years of public schooling that is still only one. I wish I could've seen and got to experience the day we have a more diverse working field among teachers, but I am too short on time, I do hope future generations will get to experience it though because that's what they deserve. The future is why I was talking earlier about how I've been considering to be a teacher; I want the cycle to break. I want kids of color and other disadvantages to be able to reach higher with better opportunities presented to them instead of having to work so hard to stay locked into school when it hasn't been such a safe space.

Mr. Anders: Like that's crazy. I understand, if students of color are experiencing so much discrimination and trauma in school, that's why so many say to get me out of here, so why would they want to go back? But that's the work we got to do.

After concluding my interview with Mr. Anders, I did get to see a lot of perspective from him and got a better understanding of what he is working to achieve. I learned a lot about his past and growing moments with society that I think a lot of people could benefit from, especially other teachers. His teaching methods have clearly improved drastically from what he described his earlier days to be which has helped him become a better teacher and person overall.