The “It” factor

by Victoria Treto

“BAHAHAHA,” the student howled. “This is stupid!” I paused one of my first solo lab lectures, looking at her deadpan before continuing, a tightness building in my chest. I was mortified. Was this not the same student I had mentioned my excitement around to a colleague the week before? As the only person of color (POC) of the fifty students I instructed in the introductory geology lab, I immediately anticipated connecting with her on a deeper level. I was eager to instill my passion for the physical sciences on her. I was often the only POC in the room… I was “**it**”, but perhaps the student never desired to be.

I first became aware of “**it**” in high school earth science class. I had quickly returned to my seat from the bathroom and detected something was off. The desks around me had shifted, a furrowed brow stuck on my face. “Can someone deal with **it**,” my teacher bellowed. The entire class peered at me, resounding laughs ringing out. I was humiliated, the moment burned into my brain for eternity. As one of maybe ten POC in the school, this was the first time I felt deliberately isolated for being so. The thirty-something geologist by training juddered me with the “it” designation that brisk fall morning. Little did he know “it” would continue to affect me throughout my career.

My high school guidance counselor never explicitly called me “**it**”, but she treated me as such (in the Addams family sense). I recall her sitting in the gray office, always drumming her oddly small pinky on her glasses disapprovingly. “You won’t succeed in college,” she spat. “You shouldn’t even apply to community college because it will be a waste.” What a guidance session this was. “Did everybody face the same disregard by supporting educators,” I thought. As a future educator myself, I recognized I never wanted to make a student feel so small and unable.

A position as a graduate student teaching assistant became my chance to counteract “**it**”. In my first year of a master’s program in geology, I hadn’t noted any POC in the classes I was a student in, as well as the classes I taught. This was jarring at first, but why would others who had too been “**it**” subject themselves to “**it**” further? Suddenly the student I was looking for strode into my lab. I instantly went to her and introduced myself. Oblivious to my glee, she gave a casual “Hi” and continued shuffling books from her bag.

Two weeks later, I began a mineralogy lecture I spent some hours arranging the night before. Mineralogy was my favorite subject during my undergraduate education, so I was overjoyed to present it to my students for the first time. I always paid particular attention to the reaction of the only POC student of course. I wanted to see her enraptured with my beloved science so I could give her the encouragement I didn’t have.

Then commenced the negative, incessant comments. “It better be right this time,” she uttered as I checked her work before lab. The student also outwardly used a mineral ID app on her phone for the “organoleptic” characterization of minerals lab. As far as I am concerned, phones are not organs… yet. The behavior became so distracting and cruel that I privately emailed her. Had I created unjust expectations for this student based on my own damaging experiences? I discussed the situation with coworkers who confirmed my fears. I was overly sensitive of this student’s conduct because I had projected my own degrading encounters onto her. By trying to prevent the dimming of her light, I unknowingly framed her as an “**it**”.

Ultimately, the student was not a science major. She did not deserve my expectations or hopes as a burden on her shoulders. Nearing the end of my graduate school endeavor, I recently began work as a geologist for a civil engineering company. I have not encountered a single POC in the office, which is an issue in itself, but when I do, I’ll be certain to become acquainted with them through meaningful conversation. They don’t need the preconceived “**it**” factor. No one does.