

# Theory of Social Inequality

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It was a sunny afternoon. The kids were walking in their blue uniforms towards Woodland Academy, an elementary and middle school that is a ten-minute walk from Clark University. It was my sophomore year, and I was at the school to conduct an observation for my education class. I was led to the class of Miss Williams, a white teacher in her mid-thirties. She was pregnant. Her whole class was made up of seven-year-old students of color. As I arrived, the kids were sitting on the carpet listening to a story as Miss Williams held a picture book and pointed to pictures of birds. The kids, sitting on a colorful rug, seemed absorbed in the story. In the back, however, one kid started chattering with a girl next to him. His voice was very loud, and every other kid was quiet and attentive. The teacher stopped reading, looked at this boy, and said in a reprimanding tone “Jose, go sit over there at the table. You are disrupting the story.” The kids in the classroom turned to look at him as he moved away. Jose went to sit at a table that was quite a distance from the rug. As he sat there he found some pencils. A few minutes later, he started tapping them. The teacher was losing her patience: “Jose, stop tapping the pencils.”

I was there as an observer, but I was bothered by this incident. Asking Jose to leave the circle was a way of telling him, and the other kids, that he was different and he did

not belong. I wondered what was the effect on the other kids when she used that reprimanding tone of voice? Did they view Jose as someone to not include in their circle? She made a negative example out of Jose, who I knew was a good kid since I had been observing this class for a week.

Was the teacher to blame? She was overwhelmed, and she had to keep a large group of 7-year-olds in order. Although the teacher was doing her best to handle the situation, she knew that the school principal would be watching the class. She may have been feeling the pressure, which created her frustration with Jose. It is also possible that as a white teacher, she expected these Black and brown kids to be out of line at some point. Also, she did not have the resources to handle a kid who has ADHD and has difficulty in this learning environment. Her reaction could have been shaped by what Payne describes as denial based on attribute theories, in which “the explanations take as their independent variables (that is, their causes) some internalized characteristics of Have-nots' ' (Payne, 1984, p. 9). Discipline can sometimes be enforced unnecessarily because of how it is ingrained in the system, but blaming the school structures or the curriculum is a denial of the teacher’s own agency.

As the observer of the event, I may also be exhibiting some of the methodologies of denial. I was not able to include the teacher’s voice, and I would not want her to become part of what Payne describes as the “Good Person – Bad Person conception of social issues. If only we had more dedicated teachers, more humane prison guards, a more intelligent social class... The Bad Person conception of social problems should be considered a distancing mechanism, a way of saying that the people who are

problematic are not like us, not like the civil, literate, and concerned people who produce and read social theory” (Payne, 1984, p. 13).