

My Theories of Positionality, Identity, Equality, and Social Change

My Positionality and Identity

One aspect of my identity that has always been important to me is the fact that I am a woman in the United States, while I am fortunate to have grown up in a white middle class family I know that the fact that I am a women means that there are some aspects of life that will always try to push me down. For instance, as I am writing this I am agonizing over the reality of my future, and even more so the future of those who are less fortunate than I to live in the part of the country I do and have the resources I have, because of the leaked supreme court verdict that would overturn Roe v. Wade.

I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia and was surrounded by people who looked and thought similarly to me. I was fortunate enough to go to a private Quaker school for preschool through eighth grade and then a different Quaker school for high school. My father taught at the first school and I was on financial aid for high school, and so I have always been somewhat aware of how lucky I am to have been able to attend private schools. I knew that had my dad not worked for the one I went to my parents likely would have never sent me there, or at least not for as long as they did. Additionally, my father had connections to the high school I went to, which I am sure helped in getting me the financial aid needed for me to be able to attend the high school. While I was not at the top of my school's financial bracket, I knew that my family had the resources to provide me with this education, enroll me in extra-curricular activities which I continue to realize cost more than I thought, and we could afford to go on family vacations.

I know that my private school experience is different from the experiences of many of the children who go through the public school system, especially in Urban areas, because of the curriculum, class sizes, federal regulations, and resources. However, the societal inequalities that exist such as sexism, racism, ableism, etc., exist in all spaces. While my thesis focuses on the worlds of children in a preschool classroom in the Worcester Public Schools, every child in every school has a world and their background and the isms they experience whether directly or indirectly influence that world whether its continuous or subconscious.

My Theory of Social Inequality

In seventh grade my middle school restructured the curriculum and we started learning math at our own pace with various online tools, like Khan Academy, rather than as a class like in a typical classroom setting. We would only meet with the teacher periodically to go over homework and concepts we were stuck on. The class was split in two based on our math ability, which is problematic to begin with, most of the class was in the regular group and a few kids were in the slower-pace group. While I do think some students are able to grasp concepts at a quicker rate than others, because everyone's brain processes things differently; it is problematic to categorize children into groups based on their perceived ability. This is especially true because often minority students are the ones in the slower-paced classes due to preconceived notions of their ability that are not actually based on them or their potential. Since the curriculum had changed, our teacher, who was male, decided to move the more advanced kids to the group that went at a slower pace to even out the class sizes and create a way for students to help one another learn. One day I went up to go over some homework and the teacher said to me "It was between you and Peter (pseudonym) for the advanced group, and I've decided to move up Peter." I think he gave me a lame explanation for why Peter was moving up over me, but it was clear to me that

it was because Peter was a boy and I was not. There was only one girl in the class moving up to the advanced group, the rest of us stayed in the grade-level class. I had loved math for most of my elementary school and middle school experience, but after that, and a few other remarks from the teacher explaining that he did not believe I was going at the right pace to complete algebra one and comparing me to my male peers, I stopped enjoying going to math class. Aside from his clear sexism in the classroom, he also was the only teacher to dress code girls on their shorts being too short, which always made me uncomfortable given that meant he had to be looking at where our shorts ended. This one teacher was able to take a class that I loved and enjoyed and make it a class that I was no longer excited to attend.

Sadly, I know that I am not the only girl to feel inferior to my male peers in the classroom, because of the way society, and therefore teachers, perceive us. The sexism in the United States is so deeply rooted that most teachers likely do not realize they are treating their female students as lesser than their male students. Given that we are taught from a young age, by the media and family structures, that boys are superior in academics it is likely that by the time teachers are at the front of the classroom they no longer realize that they are contributing to the problem. Girls have been left out of education since the American education system started, and while we have been able to walk through the doors there is still a belief that we are inferior intellectually. Boys are taught from a young age, through various social systems, to speak out and that they have all the answers, whereas girls are taught to sit back and not be too loud. The media and family push the idea that men are superior to women through language on television and through family gender norms such as who takes care of the children and the home. Since young children hear these things on television and see them in their homes it is no wonder that girls continue to believe that they are not as capable as their male peers.

Another aspect of the education system that pushes girls to the background is dress code. School policies, that were likely put in place decades before by those in administrations (likely mostly white males at the time), are continuously teaching girls that not distracting their male counterparts, by showing too much skin, wearing something too tight, or too short is more important than their own education. Girls are dress coded and told to leave class, which disrupts their education, in order to change into “more appropriate” outfits. Instead of punishing girls for expressing themselves through clothing, society, especially the media, should be teaching boys to respect women, their boundaries, and that what a woman wears does not give boys permission to violate their space or make comments. I hope to be a teacher who encourages all the voices within my classroom regardless of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. However, I am aware that being a cis-gender white woman from an upper-middle class background gives me privilege that not all my students will have.

As a white woman I am part of an elite group in terms of my racial background. I will never know the experience of my peers and students of color. As hooks writes in her piece, *Theory as a Liberatory Practice*, “...Gender is not the only factor that determines femaleness,” (hooks, 1994, p.4). This quote suggests that being a woman is not simply determined by sex, but also by race, gender expression, and other identities. Hooks discusses how theory, specifically feminist theory, has left out minority women by creating rules about what counts as theory and should be shared in academic settings. Often the rules made up by white theorists delegitimize the theories and experiences of countless women, mostly women of color, and can perpetuate patriarchal norms. Feminist theory should be about strengthening women, no matter her background, but instead it pushes some women out. It leaves women who are unable to attend higher ed. out of the conversation since they are less likely to be given the resources to access

these theories. Payne (1984), I believe, would classify this under his idea of limitations of progressive theories. Payne states, “What is troubling is that progressive analysis easily lends itself to picturing relative differences in power—and hence responsibility, if one chooses to look at it that way—as absolute,” (Payne, 1984, p. 21). In this case, white feminists are seeing their subordination to men as the absolute in terms of differences rather than considering that they too have privilege when it comes to their race.

As a white woman, especially one who wants to go into elementary education, I have to be aware that while my world has been influenced by the sexism I have experienced, witnessed, and heard about, there are many other aspects of my identity that put me in a position of power. I need to be aware of those within the walls of my classroom and ensure that my students feel heard in the curriculum. While I may not be able to relate to the struggles in their lives, at the very least, I can include voices that do in their curriculum so that they feel seen and validated. There is much more that needs to be done beyond curriculum to provide equity within the education system in terms of both gender and race. For instance, the difference in the quality and quantity of resources between suburban and urban schools, stereotyped expectations of ability, and that the policies surrounding dress code need to be addressed nationwide. However I, as one person, cannot create all the changes that need to happen, but I can at least work to make my classroom a safe space.

My Theory of Social Change

Positive social change happens when people work together to reach a common goal for the greater good of society--one person cannot do it alone. Some protest on the streets, some donate money, some go into politics to create change at the top; there is no one way to create social change. However, it takes time, effort, and unity to truly be effective. Given that problems

such as sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, etc., are embedded within social structures, it will continue to take consistent effort from the people, as well as people in positions of power creating policies to enact this change within social structures and institutions.

As we saw in the summer of 2020 with Black Lives Matter, people were appalled by the murder of George Floyd and took to the streets and social media to have their voices heard. However, what happened to Floyd has happened far too many times before and continues to happen two years later, because there is a deeper issue within the United States around racism and the power of police. Those protesting were seen as disrupting society and harming property when in reality their worlds had been broken so many times by societal norms and those who were supposed to protect them, that they responded in the only way that would get them any attention.

With every fight for social change, there are those who oppose it; otherwise, it would not be so hard to create. For example, when people took to the streets for George Floyd, we saw the way the police treated individuals who were peacefully protesting the unjust death of Black people by police. However, on January 6th 2021, when white supremacists stormed the capital because they disagreed with the 2020 election results, we saw the police do nothing while people with rifles screamed in their faces. The people who opposed BLM were silent and suddenly it seemed that those saying “blue lives matter” did not mean it; they just meant that to them, black lives did not. Social change takes far longer than it should because there are always going to be people who believe that a given issue is not an issue, should not be fixed, or goes against their beliefs. Just as the people fighting for social change have voices to be heard, so do those who oppose it. The opposition has political power too, sometimes more, which makes it even harder to create the change for which people are fighting. Additionally, people on the same side

occasionally disagree on the best way to create change, which then creates rifts and makes achieving the goal harder to accomplish.

As a citizen of the United States who has privilege in terms of class, race, and sexuality, I am able to contribute to social change by speaking up for those whose voices are often pushed down, but also by listening to those whose voices are pushed down in order to truly hear what they need. As a woman, I understand what it is like to be pushed into the background; however, I am still more privileged than many other women and therefore have the opportunity to fight with them and amplify their worlds.

Additionally, as an aspiring teacher, who hopes to be able to work in an elementary classroom one day, I have the opportunity to create a safe space for my future students where they can feel heard; and hopefully create a space where the pressure of social “norms” and prejudices are lessened. Since my students will likely come from various backgrounds, they will have different wants and needs to fulfill their worlds, which can be hard to balance. However, I think it is important for everyone to be able to share their opinion, in a way that does not harm the world of someone else, because that is the only way to truly learn.

I want to create a classroom environment where my students feel safe to be whomever they are and not feel like they need to be who society tells them they are supposed to be. I want all of my students to feel like they can share their feelings, to believe in their academic abilities, know that their body is theirs, and to feel comfortable being who they are regardless of their gender and the stereotypes that go along with that. I know that I cannot single-handedly create social change, nobody can, but I can make sure that my students feel safe when they are in my classroom. As a white teacher, I need to create space for teachers of color within the institution of education and make sure my students of color see themselves in the curriculum through

books, visitors, history, etc. I also know that I need to continue to educate myself and make sure that I am not trying to be a white savior and instead am creating space for all identities to be heard and seen.

Social change is a process that takes everyone, and everyone approaches it differently. However, I am going to try my best to create social change and awareness within my community and hopefully I can help to create a future of equity for my friends, family, and future students. I hope that through my World Framework, myself and others who work with youth can start to validate the worlds of students by acknowledging their wants and needs to be successful in the classroom and create spaces that do not blame them for being “disruptive,” but instead acknowledge their response as valid and help them find a way to reshape their world no matter how or what caused it to break.

