Original Three Theories of Understanding – Submitted April 28th, 2021

Ellie Sienkiewicz

Theory of My Positionality and Identity in the World

       As a first-year at Clark, I attended a town hall about the Worcester Public Schools budget. Two Claremont students stood up to speak to the group about what they needed and wanted for their school experience. They told the group calmly and respectfully that they didn't want any more white teachers, they needed teachers who looked like them and could understand their experience. I was a little uncomfortable but the idea was not new to me since my coursework had already begun to address the lack of teacher diversity. Their words have stayed with me throughout my coursework and student teaching experiences. I reflect on that experience often as I struggle to align my identity as a white woman with my goal of becoming a teacher in an urban school.

       When I came to Clark I bought into what I now realize was a toxic narrative of white saviorism in education. When I was exposed to the idea in coursework during my first year I was shaken to realize that I had been wholeheartedly embracing a concept that was so obviously wrong. Since then I have often returned to the questions of how to be a "good" educator, what that means, where I should teach, who I should teach, how I can teach students of color in a way that helps rather than harms, and most of all what *I* can do to dismantle damaging structures of racial and economic inequality which I benefit from.

       Numerous experiences have shown me that all humans are multidimensional and also that most people forget that about each other. In my intersecting identities, I hold several that grant me unearned privilege. The most weighty of my privileged identities is my whiteness. Additionally, the fact that I am able-bodied, cis-gender, have had access to private education, am earning a college degree, and have two college-educated parents all grant me further privilege. In addition to my numerous privileged identities, I hold some marginalized identities. I identify as a queer woman; I have anxiety and depression; I am a survivor of sexual assault, and I have experienced economic instability. These marginalized aspects of my identity, though they in no way erase my privilege, offer an avenue through which I can empathize with and understand people who share these experiences. When considering my various identities, it is important to remember that my whiteness "is the heaviest thing about me...It is so heavy that it outweighs any and all other marginalizing identities" (Carter, 2021). This is true for all white people.

My identities impact how I experience the world. Since I was young, I have been constructed by those around me as "smart," "good," "academic," and "responsible." These constructions are likely informed by the fact that I am white, a woman, and the eldest of four children. In contrast, how might the two Latino boys who told me they didn't need any more white teachers, have been constructed by those around them? If you can imagine them being described in a way other than I myself was described, then you are aware of the ways in which race, gender, class, and related identities inform inequality in society.

My goal of becoming an educator is heavily influenced by the fact that I experienced school as a welcoming space where I did well, was encouraged, and was celebrated. The unfortunate reality is that this is not the case for many children. I approach education with the aim of learning from and following the teaching of Bettina Love who advocates abolitionist teaching "built on the creativity, imagination, boldness, ingenuity, and rebellious spirit and methods of abolitionists to demand and fight for an education system where all students are thriving, not simply surviving" (2019, p. 11). I also draw on Christopher Emdin's teachings. He writes in his book "For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood … and the Rest of Y'all Too," that "The work for white folks who teach in urban schools, then, is to unpack their privileges and excavate the institutional, societal, and personal histories they bring with them when they come to the hood" (2016, 15). Finally, I aim to follow this quotation, attributed to Dr. Maya Angelou; "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better" ("Maya Angelou," 2021). These quotations embody the goals I hold and the self-interrogation work I strive to do and plan to continue as I prepare to be a teacher in an urban school. I acknowledge that the contradiction of being a white teacher to primarily students of color who want and need someone who looks like them cannot be entirely resolved. However, I am more certain than ever that I have chosen the right path in becoming an educator. My experiences in Worcester youth spaces have shown me that the work I do is valuable. As a white teacher, I will never be able to fill the critical role of a teacher who represents most of their students' racial identity. However, I can create a joyful, affirming, antiracist classroom, provide strong allyship for colleagues of color, and above all, advocate for my students.

Theory of Social Inequality

"He looks young and able; he should be working." This unsympathetic comment comes from my mother as we drive past an unhoused man panhandling in the median next to Walmart. At 8, 12, and even 16 years old I was unsure what to think when I heard this comment or a similar one. At the time, I had never heard a counter-narrative about unhoused people. This was not an isolated event. Walking past unhoused people on the street my parents often, and my grandparents always, would give them a wide berth and pointedly look away. Sometimes my parents were inclined to give money and even say a few words. However, the attitude toward unhoused people was far from positive in my family and we never had any kind of conversation or education about the issue. My maternal grandmother in Germany would go as far as to complain and say racist things about the unhoused immigrants in her town. Throughout my childhood, explicit and subtle messaging told me that unhoused people are greedy, lazy, addicts, and in their position as a result of their own actions.

Today, I don't believe that any of the descriptors I just listed are accurate. Throughout my childhood, I was indoctrinated with the belief that unhoused people could not be trusted. I was trained to imagine and judge what they might use money for if they were given it. Recently, when my mom made a similar comment to the one I opened with about an unhoused person, I countered her comment with a few questions. She didn't make the comment because she is malicious, in fact, she is quite a kind and generous person who is the product of an unequal and oppressive system that taught her to think that way. The questions I asked my mom were inspired by ones I had been asked which had helped change my views. I asked, what if they don't have transportation to get to interviews? What if they don't have a device to search for jobs or write applications? What if they don't have a bank account? What if they don't have an address? She paused to rethink her comment and acknowledged that she hadn't thought of many of those factors. It took me until high school to begin to learn a counter-narrative and a more realistic picture of the nuances and causes of being unhoused in America. The questions I laid out for my mom all describe real impediments that unhoused people face if they are looking for employment. To make a derogatory comment about an unhoused person, assuming laziness or addiction, is an incredible manifestation of privilege and ignorance which enforces a toxic and unreasonable "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" narrative.

My own early experiences with unhoused people and attitudes toward them leads me to an exploration of factors that might cause someone to become, and stay, unhoused. Before I continue I will clarify that I use the term "unhoused" because,

> The label of "homeless" has derogatory connotations. It implies that one is "less than," and it undermines self-esteem and progressive change. The use of the term "Unhoused," instead, has a profound personal impact upon those in insecure housing situations. It implies that there is a moral and social assumption that everyone should be housed in the first place ("Why Unhoused?," 2021).

The moral and social assumption that everyone should be housed raises the question, why are so many people in America--an estimated 567,000--unhoused? ("State of Homelessness," 2020). Another question to consider is why are a disproportionate number of unhoused people Black? 39.8% of unhoused people are Black whereas Black people only make up 13% of the overall population ("State of Homelessness," 2020). Why also are Pacific Islanders and Native Americans "most likely to be homeless in America when compared to all other racial/ethnic groups" ("State of Homelessness," 2020)? The roots of this dramatic inequality can be traced all the way back to the founding of America. America was built on violence, inequality, and the subjugation of Native Americans and Black people. American history begins with the massacre of Native Americans and the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery laid the groundwork for persistent inequality between Black and White people which continues today. Post-slavery, Jim Crow laws, and racist policies, such as redlining, established residential segregation which in turn has created adverse health and educational outcomes among Black Americans. Active racism has kept Black people out of educational and work opportunities as well as certain neighborhoods and stores until today. Native Americans were forced into conversion schools and have been persecuted throughout U.S. history. Today, Native American culture and imagery are heavily appropriated, most notably as athletic mascots. These factors, along with the background of slavery, which has prevented Black generational wealth, provide an explanation, in broad strokes, for the racial disparity in unhoused people. White supremacist ideology and our capitalist system are at the root of this inequality.

The structures of inequality which I have described as influential in shaping the unhoused population in America, are at work in every sphere of our society including our schools. In my first year of college I spent 6 hours each week as a classroom assistant in a 4th grade. I kept a journal of my experiences. I will share an entry from it here.

Friday, February 8th 2019
Yesterday there was a delay to the start of school which has serious negative implications for many of the low-income students at Woodland Academy. Students who rely on the free government breakfast go hungry until lunch. One student, Alanna[1], came in and took an extra cereal from the box at the back of the room but as she was about to open it, the teacher stopped her reminding her that "there's no breakfast on half days" because "we don't have time for that and lunch is in an hour." In the moment I didn't think much of it and Alanna responded calmly saying she hadn't realized that was the case. Half an hour later however I was working with her and two other students on math when one of her peers complained that his stomach hurt and inquired how long it was until lunch. Alanna chimed in that she was hungry too "because someone keeps stealing mine and my mom's food at the shelter." She presented this completely matter-of-factly though she was a bit downcast and then we turned back to the math problems at hand. Lacking basic necessities such as stable shelter, food, or medical care (I had another student complain of tooth pain distracting him today) makes the task of learning an uphill battle for these children. (Journal Entry, 2019)

In this example Alanna is experiencing the adverse effects of living unhoused which are impacting her school experience. She also appears to the world as a black girl, something not evident in my journal entry yet important to my analysis.

I am teaching young girls STEM for my praxis project. Although housing insecurity may not seem closely related to STEM education for young girls, my experience with Alanna and the intersectionality of identity can show us that the two are in fact related. Systemic inequality is already seriously impacting Alanna's educational experience. This adverse impact can either be amplified or stymied by the teachers, curriculum, and school around her. It depends whether they actively combat racism and systemic inequality, that is they are *antiracist,* or if they are complicit in perpetuating racist structures of inequality. In my praxis project, I will strive to teach a feminist, antiracist curriculum. Renowned scholar and activist Carter G. Woodson provides an important framing to help us understand the importance of representation in teachers and curricula,

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (cited in Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 50)

---

[1] Student's name has been changed for confidentiality.

We can extend Woodson's analysis here to apply not only to Black children but to Native American, Latine, and Asian children as well. In the specific context of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), female-identifying students should be included in this group which is discouraged through lack of representation. Women are consistently under-represented in STEM degrees and careers. A 2020 report from *Catalyst*, compiles many of the factors and adverse outcomes of gender inequality in STEM,

> Despite similar achievement scores among children of all genders in math and science, men are the overwhelming majority of students studying STEM fields in higher education. The few women who begin careers in STEM face male-dominated workplaces with high rates of discrimination. Their contributions are often ignored; they experience isolation caused by lack of access to women peers, role models, and mentors; and they are paid less than their male co-workers. Women leave STEM careers at disproportionately higher rates than men, particularly among those who are working parents. Systems of bias that push women and people of color out of STEM careers can also influence the products and services created by STEM organizations, such as artificial intelligence (AI). ("Quick Take," 2020)

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain that teachers in K-12 contribute to the dearth of women in STEM majors at the university level "Females receive less attention from teachers, are counseled away from or out of advanced mathematics and science courses" (p. 51).

Returning to Carter G. Woodson's assertion that "The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in [the oppressed]" I argue that representation through a curriculum centering women, especially women of color, is critical to build academic self-confidence, self-concept as STEM students, and bravery among girls. This is particularly true for girls of color who face the double challenge of not seeing their gender *or* their race represented in media about STEM.

American society is built on white supremacy, capitalism, and individualism with a near-total disregard for social infrastructure and support, especially on the governmental level. Inequality is embedded in the fabric of our society and social attitudes and policy amplify each other in a negative cycle. Social change needs to happen at the personal, community, and large structural levels. My praxis project will aim to address inequality, particularly as it manifests in the context of race and gender in STEM, on the personal and community levels. On the personal level, I will be working on self-interrogation and education to maintain antiracist practices as a

program organizer and facilitator. On a community level, I will endeavor to connect with the community where I am creating an after-school program, to listen to them, and to respond to their hopes and needs as they themselves express them. Most importantly my project will center around the girls participating in my after-school program and what we can learn and build together. Eventually, my project may be able to contribute to change on the large structural level since I hope to publish my initial research and conduct ongoing research on the impact of the program.

Theory of Social Change

This morning I was literally jumping up and down in excitement. Although I should say that some of my bounciness was caused by the coffee I had just finished and the beautiful weather, my mood was mostly boosted by the prospect of a meeting and a webinar later in the day. Looking forward to a meeting and a webinar on a day off from school definitely does not make me a cool college student in the eyes of many. The meeting was to plan my work throughout the summer and next academic year with Recreation Worcester to facilitate a coding and STEM club for girls. The webinar was called "Leveling the Playing Field in STEM." It featured a panel of high-profile STEM educators of color. The events that made me so enthusiastic to start the day provide a helpful context for what brings me joy.

Gender and race-based inequity, which also intersect with socioeconomic inequity, are the primary forms of social inequity that I am angered, saddened, frustrated by, and determined to change. My current project to address these inequities is building a STEM after-school program with a female- and BIPOC-centered curriculum. My identity and positionality in the world complicate this work. I am a white woman. White women are one of the most dangerous demographics to children of color; or, we can be. I say this because numerous scholars have analyzed the detrimental effect supposedly well-meaning white women can have on their students of color (Miller & Harris, 2018; Love, 2019, Ladson-Billings, 2011). As I embark on a social change project, it is critical that I remain reflective about my identity and positionality and the ways in which I can cause harm. Cann and DeMeulenaere explain that it is impossible or nearly impossible for researchers to disentangle the colonial relationship between themselves and the participants of their study. They write "In the process of researching, the voices of the subaltern become secondary to the voice of the researcher who frames, narrates, discusses,

analyzes and otherwise interprets the words of the researched" (2013, p. 557). That is to say, aspects of my identity will, as McIntyre (2007) says, inform "my ability to listen, question, synthesize, analyze, and interpret knowledge throughout the PAR process" (p. 8). The aspects that I anticipate will most influence my work are my race, educational status, social class, sexual orientation, and age.

My intersectional identities will not only be limitations, they will also be assets as I work toward social change. My social capital and positionality, while it may alienate me in some areas, may be useful in gaining access to spaces and material resources. My educational background, past teaching experience, and passion for the work I have chosen will all be assets.

My vision of social change is change that originates in the community it impacts. I believe that "those closest to the problem will also be those closest to the solution." This is because the people affected by inequality best understand their experience and best know what they need. This ideal is at odds with my position as a Participatory Action Researcher. I found a space and inserted myself into it for the purpose of this project. I was not already a part of this space, nor was I drawn in by a leader in the space. However, I *am* being supported by the community organization I am working with and by multiple leaders within that organization. Once I joined their space, they welcomed me and have been encouraging and supporting my work. I am also creating the space to an extent since I will be facilitating a new program of my own design. I will draw on McIntyre's (2007) four underlying tenets of PAR projects to form my guiding questions and goals. These are

> (a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process." (p. 1)

I will strive to move beyond PAR to become an Activist Researcher conducting Activist Research. Cann and DeMeulenaere state that activist research "must be focused on social justice work: it is about the pursuit of justice--racial, gender, and economic justice, for example--in schools" (2013, p. 556) However, I will not fit this definition when I begin because "it is and should be a humbling experience to call one's work activist because it implies a close relationship with community organizing work" (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2013, p. 560 citing

Nygreen, 2006). I do not yet have a close relationship with the community I am conducting my research in. I am also not a member of that community.

Along with Cann and DeMeulenaere's guidance for activist research, I will draw from many other guides for approaching social change work. From Mariame Kaba and Bettina Love, I will adopt an abolitionist mindset, both broadly for our society and in an educational context because no one is free until everyone is free. From Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, I will draw the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT). From Paulo Freire, I will learn about critical pedagogy and liberatory education. From Kimberlé Crenshaw I will learn the importance of intersectionality in all liberation work. This is not an exhaustive list. To list all people who inspire me and whom I can learn from would take many pages. The people I have listed here are key influences on my theory of social change.

My freedom dream, to use Bettina Love's phrasing, of social change is that we will move into an entirely different structure for our society, one not based on capitalism, white supremacy, and oppression. In a better, more beautiful world, everyone would have food, shelter, and clean water as a bare minimum (unfortunately this is not even the case in our highly developed, "first world" United States). Next, society would center, care, love, and trust of fellow human beings. Police would be irrelevant and therefore non-existent. Prisons would be abolished. Everyone would have access to education and a life in which they can find joy and peace. My work for social change in the world that we currently live in will strive to move toward the "freedom dream" values that I have just described.

Reflection on Three Theories of Understanding – 1 year later, April 2022

My Positionality & Identity

My positionality and identity haven't changed much over the past year. Still, I am always learning about how my identity and experiences impact the way I live in the world. I know that continued reflection, especially as I go into the MAT program and become a teacher, is critical.

Theory of Social Inequality

Social inequality is huge, systemic, and multifold. I focused on the example of unhoused people in my original theory paper. This is still an important issue to me. However, there are innumerable manifestations of social inequality. If you are paying attention, it quickly becomes

overwhelming. To avoid becoming discouraged by the magnitude of social inequality, I find it important to ground myself by focusing on what I can do to contribute to social change work.

Theory of Social Change

My vision for social change is that it should be collaborative and allow for everyone to contribute what they have to offer. Social change must focus on dismantling existing systems that maintain inequality. In my original theory paper I wrote:

> "Social change needs to happen at the personal, community, and large structural levels. My praxis project will aim to address inequality, particularly as it manifests in the context of race and gender in STEM, on the personal and community levels. On the personal level, I will be working on self-interrogation and education to maintain antiracist practices as a program organizer and facilitator. On a community level, I will endeavor to connect with the community where I am creating an after-school program, to listen to them, and to respond to their hopes and needs as they themselves express them. Most importantly my project will center around the girls participating in my after-school program and what we can learn and build together."

In retrospect, I think I did engage in social change on the personal level. However, I don't think I enacted social change on a community level or on a large structural level. I initially wrote: "Eventually, my project may be able to contribute to change on the large structural level since I hope to publish my initial research and conduct ongoing research on the impact of the program." I no longer hope to publish my research beyond the CYES website. I also don't plan to conduct ongoing research in connection with this project. I do hope that my thesis findings might impact how future CYES students approach their praxis projects and even encourage CYES faculty to change how they frame the project.

In my original theory, I wrote: "My vision of social change is change that originates in the community it impacts. I believe that 'those closest to the problem will also be those closest to the solution.'" I find it strange that I wrote this even as I knowingly embarked on a project in direct contradiction to these values. I did recognize the contradiction to some extent because I wrote: "This ideal is at odds with my position as a Participatory Action Researcher. I found a space and inserted myself into it for the purpose of this project." I also wrote before the implementation of my project: "I will strive to move beyond PAR to become an Activist Researcher conducting Activist Research. Cann and DeMeulenaere state that activist research "must be focused on social justice work: it is about the pursuit of justice--racial, gender, and

economic justice, for example--in schools" (2013, p. 556). I don't think it is possible for me to be an activist researcher in the context of this study where I am a white, socially privileged, college student, and my research subjects are primarily of marginalized identities and almost all living in poverty. While I could purport that my Praxis Project had a positive impact on the girls involved, such a claim is difficult to quantify and support. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the attendance and participation of the children involved in my STEM program and research made the completion of this thesis possible. For that, I am grateful to everyone at the Y but I also regret that this project was set up in a way where I was essentially guaranteed to come away having benefited and the children—and YMCA program as a whole—were given no such guarantee.

There is danger and privileged ignorance in sending inept undergraduates such as myself to complete a "social change project" in a strict time frame, including human subjects research within the bounds of the IRB's rules. It might be more productive to encourage CYES juniors and seniors to engage thoroughly with a site for a year and a half; to reflect on practice and learn and build skills; to work with mentors to overcome obstacles and grow as effective social change makers. Only after months of engagement in a site should a student observe and pose problems to approach with action. I understand that the intention of the Praxis Project is that students theorize a problem and enact a change project within a site they are already familiar with or a part of, however, this is not the reality for the majority of my cohort. As I conclude my praxis project I feel uneasy with the way the project played out. I, an outsider, stepped into a site with high hopes and expectations for a program with children I had never met. I became frustrated when things didn't go the way I had hoped and planned. Ultimately, the arc of my praxis project represents a common theme of white Clark students taking up space for their own learning in Main South without producing significant benefits to those around them. This outcome is against my own expressed values therefore it feels important for me to explicitly acknowledge and reflect on this reality. While my role as a white teacher of mostly children of color is complicated and therefore requires continuous self-reflection, I feel confident that teaching is the best avenue for me to engage in social change.

References

Cann, C. & DeMeulenaere, E. (2013). "Activist Education Research." Qualitative Inquiry, 19(8), pp. 552-565.

Carter, K. (2021). "Your Whiteness is the Heaviest Thing About You." TikTok, @Kendalexis.

Couloute, L. (2018). "Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people." Prison Policy Initiative.

"Journal Entry." (2019). Unpublished Personal Document.

Ladson-Billings, G. and Taft, W. F. (1995). "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education." *Teachers College Record, Vol 97(1),* 47-68.

Love, B. (2019). "We Want to do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom." Beacon Press.

"Maya Angelou > Quotes > Quotable Quote." (2021). Goodreads.

McIntyre, A, (2007). Participatory Action Research. Sage Qualitative Research Methods Series, Vol 52.

"Quick Take: Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)." (2020). *Catalyst.*

"State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition." (2020). Endhomelessness.org.

"Why Unhoused?" (2021). Unhoused.org.