

Theory of Understanding Social Inequality

In the spring of my freshman year at Clark University I became involved as a mentor for a college readiness program called Collegiate Success Institute (CSI). This program strives to guide students through the college application process. During the second meeting, we facilitated an activity to have the juniors become familiar with common "college terms". Before the students walked in my peers and I set up the whiteboard with posters that had college vocabulary printed. These were terms such as FAFSA, CSS, Common Application, Supplementals, doubles (common freshman year room assignments), major, minor, resume, and others. When the students walked in and we explained the game less than 5 out of 20 knew more than two of the vocabulary on the posters. As the game went on it became clear that financial aid, parts of the college application, and a majority of the vocabulary were unfamiliar. After the activity students were at first insecure that they had not known, however, came to realize that the FAFSA and CSS were meant to help fund higher education. Some were excited that they could choose to study more than one topic by either double majoring and or minoring in different areas. One student, in particular, was visibly excited and stated that "now I can think about college" and "I didn't know college was an option for me." This moment is one of many where I realized how fortunate I was to know basic knowledge about college and the application process. My views had begun to shift and I realized the true privilege this knowledge is and the lack of accessibility students have for the process in high school.

As a first-generation college student, I am grateful for the opportunity to attend an institution to obtain an undergraduate degree as it is becoming increasingly challenging due to accessibility and finances. Growing up I was privileged in that my mother instilled in me that college was an option for me. My mother's constant push towards higher education I believe is rooted in her insecurities about not going to a four-year university as well as the lack of support from early educators as a result of my learning challenge. The combination of my mother's insecurities and developing advocacy for me with my educational struggles broke the "chain" of college not being seen as a viable option for my family to obtain. Once my mother emphasized this, I wanted to prove to myself that I could be the first in my family to apply and attend a university resulting in my countless research. This research was something I had to search for as my family wanted to but did not have the resources to help and my counselors waited for me to

approach them. With the sense of self-advocacy instilled in me at an early age, I felt comfortable reaching out to teachers and counselors and that skill is one I am grateful was reinforced heavily by my mother. This skill is what I believe drove me to explore college, research, and learn about the process at an early age. Once arriving at Clark and working as a mentor with CSI, I realized the immense disparity in obtaining higher education and truly how privileged I am. Through my own experiences, courses I have taken, and youth work the lack of accessibility can be seen at my praxis site.

When thinking about the different theories that have impacted the way I view social inequality and the impacts that have on my praxis site the most applicable to the work I want to do is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT was first developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate in the mid-1990s and has become the dominant framework to promote a social transformation of conditions that have been created by racism and oppression. Other CRT theorists such as Dixson and Rousseau have called for this type of research to create "radical educational change that addresses racial injustice in our schools" (557). To create this change in schools there needs to be an implementation of an alternative curriculum to actively work against the racist and oppressive nature of our education system. CRT calls on "engaged action towards transformation" (557). The foundation of CRT is that we must acknowledge that racism is not isolated to one act but a result of a pervasive system. White people have benefited from this system. The narrative of those who have been oppressed is critical in claiming their voices and should be used, and must acknowledge intersectionality.

The inequality I plan to focus on through my praxis site is the result of systematic racism and oppression in our education system. This can be seen in the lack of knowledge around college as many at Claremont are students of color and also first-generation college students. This is important as higher education has been very restricted to both urban school students and students of color creating a cycle of distance from higher education. First-generation college students are unable to gain knowledge firsthand from family and because our education system lacks in providing resources in counseling for college, many students don't have access. The combination of unfamiliarity from family and the flaws in our education system today are deeply rooted in racism. CRT offers a helpful lens and methodology design possibilities for my praxis site by creating a new curriculum and using students' narratives as a part of my research.

CRT aims to speak to white youth workers in a way that is meaningful for me when thinking about the responsibility and importance of youth voices in my work. It's important in the work I plan to conduct that youth voices are heard and engaged with so that I listen and learn from their stories to further be critical of my biases. This will have the youth be a part of my research instead of them being researched. By addressing the lack of access to knowledge regarding college and the confidence that it brings we can disrupt the normal flow approach to the college process. Using CRT as a basis for my work will allow me to be critical of the well-meaning white youth worker narrative prominent in urban schools. Doing this will change the narrative to meet students' needs with them and not for them. Knowledge is power and in college, access growing this knowledge will allow students to become advocates for themselves in their education and beyond.

Higher education is seen as the gateway to a better life and while I do not believe this to be the only path to success, every student deserves the option to choose if college is for them or not. Currently, many youths feel that college is not meant for them or a realistic path. There are numerous reasons why students feel this way including finances, however, an aspect many forget about is that the access to knowledge around college, in general, is lacking and one that needs to be addressed. The education system in this country makes college and the process one where the rich get richer not just literally but also when it comes to knowing the "tricks" and "lingo" of college. If college is the new requirement for success as society views it then students' access to learning about college and tools for success need to be more readily available. While the current CSI program teaches students vocabulary that is important to creating more accessibility, there is still more that can be done.

I envision CSI as a program that goes deeper than just vocabulary and guidance. Access to the basics of the college application process is important, however, there needs to be a greater emphasis on college knowledge and its many parts. This knowledge would include learning to have agency in your education and confidence in worth as an academic as a student and or first-generation college student. Agency and knowing the control you have in your education gives students back the power to see themselves as worthy of higher education if that is one they see for themselves. When learning how to talk about yourself, unpack your experiences and identities, and gaining a sense of control is one I believe is extremely powerful. The current program is run to help facilitate guidance during this stressful process, but I want to build on

CSI and enhance it to address what I see as important for growth and agency. I see CSI as being a program that doesn't just set up students to be accepted to college but gives them tools to succeed once there or where they end up. By building a well-rounded college knowledge curriculum into the program, I hope that students begin to see themselves as being heard and valued as high school students but also after graduation. This will foster a sense of agency to give them voices to advocate for themselves and build confidence in knowing they are just as worthy of knowing and attending college as other students. Reflecting on my time applying to college I felt empowered through my knowledge to ask questions, see myself as an equal, and felt worthy enough as a first-generation college student to be on campus with my peers.

Reflection

This theory of understanding piece focuses on experiences, theories, and inequality I see within my praxis site. Since I last wrote this, my site and work has changed with the new program being College Knowledge. As I discuss in depth in my thesis, my site went from Collegiate Success Institute to Clark Claremont College Connection to finally, College Knowledge. While the site has developed since last writing this, the inequality I wrote about in terms of higher education influenced College Knowledge and being able to specifically focus on providing a program dealing with access to college readiness. In this work I state that I “envisioned CSI as a program that goes deeper than just vocabulary and guidance” and to “give students the tools to succeed once in college or where they end up.” This statement, while being written a year ago, directly relates to my goals for the College Knowledge Program. Being able to see that my goals and lens have remained the same throughout my praxis experience makes me proud that I was able to create a new program with Olivia that can hopefully be built upon in the future.