

Theory of Understanding my Identity and Positionality

During the fall semester of 2020 I felt stuck. I didn't know if this feeling was because of the Pandemic and all of the changes that were happening because of this or if I felt stuck because of something bigger. Once I flew back home to Los Angeles and got settled I took time to unpack how I was truly feeling and why I was feeling this way. Since senior year of high school I knew being a youth worker was a passion of mine. I jumped straight to the idea of being a teacher as I had numerous youth work experience and knew first hand the importance of great educators. When arriving at Clark and quickly deciding to be a Community, Youth, and Education Studies major I found myself in many classrooms in Worcester Public Schools. When thinking about all of my time spent in classrooms over winter break I became more and more frustrated. Being in the classroom brought up many challenges, like for instance in the fall of my sophomore year the teacher I was helping was stuck between helping students falling behind or helping the others ready to move on. She decided to move on. Instantly frustration took over me but after reflecting more I had to ask myself what would I do in her shoes? The answer was I had no idea. I brought this question to all of my education courses during that same semester and the answer was the same, you can try your best but sometimes you have to make that decision if you've exhausted other options. Looking back over this past winter break I realized this is where my current feeling of being stuck was rooted in.

As an educator you have one if not the most important job which is teaching the future generation. This profession is not only not as highly valued as it should be in the United States but also has countless restrictions in terms of curriculum and testing. While I know that being in the education field and specifically public schools is where I see myself, I began to grapple with the question of whether or not the classroom was for me. When reflecting on my life and the three identities I hold close to me are what I wanted for myself and my goals became clear. I grew up in a dysfunctional and inconsistent home and had a learning challenge up until middle school. For most of my childhood college and advanced courses in high school were not on the table for me and being a first generation college student further added to this. Today as a junior in college the identities I hold to be the most salient to me are my learning disability, dysfunctional home life, and my new identity as a first generation college student. These three identities have come together and have heavily impacted my interest in life and in college.

As a Community, Youth, and Education Studies major I hold the view that education is key for every child and society as a whole to be successful not only in academics but in life. Education impacts students for the rest of our lives as it is a fundamental time in these children's and adolescents' lives. In elementary school during kindergarten and first grade my teachers noticed that when it came to reading I was significantly behind most of my peers. When speaking I was told I was advanced and this perplexed my teachers as well. During a meeting with my teacher, principal, school counselor, and my mother my principal claimed that I must have ADHD and should start medication as I couldn't focusing on reading and that was the answer. My first grade teacher and mother disagreed and I was quickly referred to a psychologist to be tested. I was then diagnosed with a phonetic awareness disorder and given an IEP to address the setback I was facing in reading. This decision made by my first grade teacher and mother directly impacted my life and allowed me to be here today. If I was given medication instead of an IEP to give me the help I needed, I wouldn't be here at Clark. My IEP was exponentially valuable to my education and in seventh grade I no longer needed it. I went on to take honors and AP courses in high school and now attend a university. With my IEP and educational struggles, the way I view education for myself and youth has been heavily influenced by this experience. This challenge I faced as a child gave me a chance to progress in my education and also be an advocate for other students facing these struggles in their education.

At the age of two, my parents divorced, and the way I would view family throughout my childhood changed. My mother remarried when I was eight years old and by the age of ten, my father was no longer a part of my life. As a child of divorce, as well as the daughter of a drug addict, family was something important to me but was very different then some of my peers in Southern California. Along with my dysfunctional home life during my early childhood years, I also moved with my mother and step-father eight times by the age of fourteen. With both my family challenges and our constant moving I have now learned how to reflect on these experiences more since arriving at Clark and Main South. I never felt that the experiences I had been through were something to be proud of for overcoming, however, after taking Complexities of Urban Schooling with Professor Ameer during my freshman year, I suddenly felt very vulnerable. In class, we discussed resilient children, and what experiences these youth went through and were able to get out made them resilient. The article Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community by Bonnie Benard defines these

resilient children as responsive, flexible, empathetic, caring, and having good communication skills. These children, including myself, and their personalities are what enabled them to succeed despite the challenges they faced at home (Benard, 11). Once reading and discussing this article I began to connect more with these youth and saw similarities between myself and many of the students in Worcester Public Schools I had been and continue to work with. While we all hold different experiences in our lives, after reading this article I put myself back in the narrative and have grown in my views on family and how I see myself especially as a future youth worker.

Before coming to Clark University I had never identified as a first generation college student. It was a detail I knew about myself but not one I understood or took pride in. When filling out information regarding my parents education I felt ashamed checking that my father had a sixth grade education and my mother a high school diploma. However, once I started my freshman year at Clark I finally realized not only how proud I was of myself but also of my mother for all she did to help me be where I am today. Once I finally gained appreciation for my background, being a first generation college student I now say proudly and have used this identity to drive my goals and passions. In the spring of my freshman year I began working with a college mentor program in Worcester for high school students, mainly first generation college, applying to college. When these students learn this about me they engage and ask questions, the questions I was scared to ask out of fear and embarrassment. Working with youth and connecting with them as being a first generation college student has shaped me into who I am today and the type of youth worker I want to be.

Who I am today and who I want to be in my Praxis site is because of my experiences and challenges. The reflection period I had over winter break was one I had needed for a while. Prior, the connections between all of my identities never truly came together to make sense for me. With this, I believe I am not only a stronger student but also better equipped for Praxis. Praxis has been this overwhelming thought in the back of mind for years as I wanted to find a site I was truly passionate about. Now I can say after going back working with Olivia at the college mentor program I have worked with for years is one I completely connect to. This site allows me to share my own experiences with youth while also allowing me to grow from these students who have similar or different backgrounds to me. My praxis site will help develop what I believe would have been beneficial for me in high school not just in regards to college but personal development, advocacy, and self reflection.

Reflection

Since writing this piece a year ago, I have changed so much and being able to reflect on that is a perfect way to end my praxis experience. This time last year I was stuck; who did I want to be, what work was I passionate about, and overall the youth worker I wanted to see myself as. Through the praxis process, being able to unpack these questions I had for myself impacted the work I planned on doing and eventually did in the College Knowledge Program. When I declared as a Community, Youth, and Education Studies praxis and found out that praxis would be a year and a half long in duration I felt instantly overwhelmed. However, since I have completed this process I now see the value in giving us the time to develop as students, people, and change makers. This piece in particular is the one I resonate the most with as I was able to share my lived experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today. After graduation as a graduate student at the University of Maryland studying School Counseling, I see this piece and my praxis work as one to be proud of and see the growth I have made.

Work Cited

Benard, Bonnie. "Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School and Community." *National Resilience Resource Center*. University of Minnesota, 1991.