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### **Critical Social Theory**

There is no elementary-school memory I remember more vividly than the morning I spent tearfully imploring to my 5<sup>th</sup>-grade that I should receive a “G” for my self-control grade, rather than the “S+,” to which I was previously accustomed. Were you to ever take an education class with me, you have heard some version of this story. When it came to grading, Brooklyn elementary schools gave its students a grade on their self-control they were able to display, ranging from the worst letter one could receive, a “U,” for unsatisfactory, to the crème-de-la-crème of intangible, non-numerical grades an elementary-school student could be handed, an “E,” for excellent. The full range follows thusly: U: Unsatisfactory, N: Needs Improvement, S: Satisfactory, G: Good, and E: Excellent. Four times a year, upon report cards being doled out, I would get given a “satisfactory plus” rating, a grade the middle schools to which I was applying deemed unacceptable for entry. I received 24 report cards from one of Brooklyn's most notable elementary schools, P.S. 321, four a year for my six years of elementary school, and in that time I got a “satisfactory” grade on my self-control 23 times.

My parents, understanding how the middle-school application process worked, and how admissions counselors made their decisions, would always emphasize to me the importance of the self-control section on my report card; I never valued it as much as they did – I was only

focused on my academic grades, after all, that's what I knew school to be. And I always did well on my academic grades; my parents would never be disappointed in that section of the white cardstock report card, just the one letter at the bottom-left corner of the card. Middle schools cared about the self-control grade; as elementary students all coming from a similar class, racial, and education background in the district, it was hard to stand out – except, of course, for the self-control grade and test scores, two things I never did particularly well in. Towards the latter half of my 5<sup>th</sup> grade year, my parents became concerned if my previous self-control grades would hinder me from attending the best middle school I could – they did – and assigned me the task of campaigning to my teacher, Rhonda, for a “good” in self-control. The next day I went into class, and sobbing, explained my predicament and that I was *really* trying hard to improve my self-control. At the end of the marking period, I finally got a “G”; and I was ecstatic.

At that moment in time, my future success was predicated on a hyperactive ten year-old being able to sit still for hours on end, day after day – a task that seems difficult for even the most developed 5<sup>th</sup>-grader, but for me, bordered on Herculean. We didn't find out that I had somewhat-severe ADD until almost a decade later. School, in my area, was designed to maintain the most control it could. The students weren't given freedom to express themselves and develop their young minds; instead, the institution was designed to conformity, regimentation, and obedience. But, of course, every kid is different, and there is no such thing as conformity when it comes to schooling, and so standards should be analyzed on a spectrum. However, the response that students who don't conform or learn traditionally face, blames the *students* not the system.

Instead of being treated as a kid who struggled to control himself because of mental or developmental reasons, and should be worked with personally, I was labeled an “immature” student and a “distraction” – those are two phrases that repeatedly would come up in

parent-teacher conferences. When systems that are predicated on control encounter someone who goes against the system – not even in an antagonistic way – and has issues being controlled, the student gets blamed and villainized. These kids are in the minority, and so it is easier to blame the small chunk of the student body who really struggle, than for the system to be held accountable for what it is. Through my time in school, and now with my experience working with elementary-aged kids, I've never met a kid and thought "wow, that child really displays excellent signs of restraint and self-control!" Kids that age are curious, rambunctious, and playful. Penalizing them for that actively works to destroy the parts of students' character that makes them unique.

Childhood ADHD is a tough thing to diagnose and treat. My parents were always told by my teachers that I was just an energetic, distractible child; ADHD was shot down when my mother asked my teachers if they speculated it was something from which I suffered. Because most happy, developing kids have a wild and energetic side, it is harder to accurately observe and support acute ADHD characteristics in young children. The symptoms of ADHD, as are listed in the DSM-V, are all school-based symptoms, such as lack of focus, and trouble sitting still. This means that schools are the main vehicle through which diagnoses are made. However, because those things can be so common, often times, kids are not diagnosed – like I wasn't – and that creates a culture and a system of kids needing special help not receiving it, and struggling for years, without knowing why. I had a horrible time in high school because of it, and a lack of support and treatment stopped me from being able to attend the middle school I wanted – I didn't get into a single school I applied to, and had to be placed in a random District 15 middle school. To me, it is important that I know how to identify signs of ADHD in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students and give them the support that they need. ADHD is not, obviously, a flaw on the part of the

student, and schools shouldn't be designed to blame and villainize students who don't fit the mold of control and conformity.

My ADHD experience just exemplifies how social inequality gets reproduced: through systems of control. Institutions, in order to retain power, -- and this goes for every powerful institution, not just schools -- need to be able to control its constituents. Controlling a population necessitates retaining power and reproducing inequality. Any person that has issues with being controlled, by their own volition or not, becomes inherently villainized and is unable to succeed. Schools are a business, and ADHD kids run as the antithesis to the business model of schools. I want to have the opportunity to help kids struggling with ADHD and build methods of support for them, so they aren't lost in the system, and don't have to struggle through thirteen years of school.

## Positionality and Identity

The graduating class of the Brooklyn Kinderland Kindershule, every year, embarks upon a reflective journey across all they have learned about Jewish history and culture, named “The Sort.” The activity involves each student receiving a collection of 20-some-oddish slips of paper, all containing various phrases and potential answers to the guiding umbrella question of “What Makes Someone Jewish?” While technically all of these dozens of pieces of paper could correctly answer the question, we, the students graduating in the year 2015, were tasked to separate these slips into two piles: The five answers we thought were the least strong in correlating to the definition of Judaism and the five answers we thought were most strong. The five of us – we didn’t have the *biggest* afterschool population at Kindershule – all agreed on our number one answer for what made you Jewish; without any conference, we unanimously decided that the thing that makes you most Jewish was “believing you are Jewish.” Afterall, Judaism – whether it’s Orthodox Judaism, or my practice, secular, cultural Judaism – is an identity, and the thing that was most salient in defining that aspect of identity for each individual was absorbing that into who you are as a person; as long as you believe you are Jewish, and identify as such, it becomes part of your identity – we all agreed on that.

But the 2015 sort didn’t go off without some controversy, at which I found myself the head. While everyone else – the four other students, our graduate advisor, Judee, and the three TAs who participated in this edition of “The Sort” – had all placed the card “having a Bar/Bat Mitzvah” in their top-5 strongest pile, I had omitted that selection, and instead chose to include

the “eating Jewish foods” answer. I was met with a haze of confusion and disbelief, and a multi-year debate ensued, headed by Judee, the woman I consider to be my third grandmother, and have a decade of experience learning from and arguing against. Judee told me that it was preposterous to not include the Bar/Bat Mitzvah answer because nobody would have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah without being Jewish – which I have to believe is true. But to me, I didn’t think that that celebration of one’s Judaism was imperative to defining one’s Jewishness; I thought about how all secular and non-religious Jews would be ostracized from the community if this was the most salient definition of Judaism. I thought about all the people in the room around me whose Jewish identity that would strip; I thought of my father, the Yiddish scholar and man who made an early authorial name for himself through his writing on traditional Jewish bagels, who didn’t have a Bar Mitzvah. In my eyes, identity was a personal thing, and one’s connection with it was down to their own personal significance. I consider myself to be Jewish, and it is a top-3 important aspect of my identity, even though I didn’t have a Bar Mitzvah. However, I reflected on how connected I felt to my heritage and community whenever my father would make Latkes come Chanukah; I remembered all my learning on Jewish suffering and history every time I would eat Charoset on Passover; I thought about how each time I get a bagel, I honor the Jews’ immigrant history in this country. Yes, everybody, for the most part, eats bagels, and that doesn’t make everyone Jewish, but the meaning behind eating traditionally Jewish foods helps me to connect with that community and aspect of my identity. The Sort, and all my teachings at Kindershule, facilitated me coming to grips with the version of Judaism that I identify with, and what the importance and celebration of Judaism means to me.

To me, the most salient aspects of my identity are those that I share with my family, and, in-turn, are vessels through which to connect with them. The three most salient aspects of my

identity are facets that allow me to do that – the three being my Jewish identity, my New Yorker identity, and the part of me that is passionate about teaching children. My sister and I were both raised Jewish and hold it in our family values; both of my parents, and seventy-five percent of my grandparents are New Yorkers, so that has gotten passed down to me; lastly, the majority of my family have taught before or have some commitment and involvement in education. These are ways that I connect with my family, and that is why they are the most salient and crucial aspects of who I am.

But in reflection with my identity and the analysis of it, it is important that I understand that I am privileged, in terms of identity, and how that shapes how I interact with the world around me. As a white, straight, middle-class, cis male, nothing about how I look or where I come from puts me at risk, like it does for other groups. I don't have to walk around everywhere I go with the fear of death or violence in my mind. I am privileged to be safe. I think about this in terms of W.E.B Dubois's theory of double consciousness: the idea that people from an oppressed minority group experience the world through the eyes of the white oppressors in society. To exemplify this, I thought about the first time I was ever in a car that was pulled over by the police. I was seven years old when a car I was in was pulled over for the first time. My white father was driving, accompanied in the passenger seat by my white mother. The police officer asked for the standard license and registration, and everything checked out, and the cop went about his day. I saluted him because I had seen other people do it before – which now I obviously regret. I asked my father why the cop pulled us over, and I was told that their job was to keep people safe on the highways. I guess I was too young to be told about all the violence that cops commit. The next day I went into school and told my best friend, Jeremy, about the exciting drive I was on yesterday. Jeremy is the Black son of a Haitian woman. Much to my surprise,

Jeremy was taught very different things about police officers; he was taught to always obey everything a cop says, so he can walk away from that interaction safely and without harm. Because Jeremy has his double identity of being a Black American, rather than just an American like me, he had to be taught about his racialized body to *protect* him from any potential danger. In understanding my privilege, I have to also understand that this means that I won't be able to connect with and truly comprehend the unique struggles of living in America as a minority. I know that going into teaching, hopefully in a school district and classroom that would benefit from CYES practices, I will always be separated from the violence and oppression that many of my students will face. I can be as supportive of that struggle as I am trained to be, but I will never have that lived experience that fully prepares me to connect with those aspects of their identity. I interact with the world differently than non-white people do; I don't have to worry about myself or one of my family members being attacked or killed in a racist incident. I don't have to worry about how I'm perceived at job interviews or car dealerships; I have the freedom to walk anywhere in public without feeling like I'm being surveilled.

In tangent with that, however, part of learning about and connecting with my Jewish heritage was understanding the plight and suffering that Jews have gone through across history. The Jews have the deepest historical lineage of suffering across any peoples in the world. Some Jews think that this means that all of our suffering is equal, and Jews have a congruent understanding of current-day suffering as non-white people do. While anti-Semitism is still excruciatingly prevalent in today's world, I do not think that we have a parallel suffering to communities of color, and so I don't claim to understand that real-world story that is oppression; I have never been the target of any real anti-Semitism. Yet, my Jewish identity has armed me with empathy, a skill that is often lacking in the minds of the public. Whereas I can't understand



the personal suffering that comes from being a minority in this country, I am able to empathize with those struggles and recognize the harms and violence it brings. Because of what I know about the deep suffering of the Jews, I feel a stronger drive and desire to use my privilege to stand up against the injustice that we see today. An injustice to one is an injustice to all, and someone from a community of past suffering, cannot stand by and not advocate for making a change.

## **Theory of Change**

I have to go into teaching with the understanding that I cannot solve the big picture issues of education; it will be soul crushing and heartbreaking to think of myself as someone with those capabilities. But what I can do is stay true to my own teaching philosophy and truly believe that that philosophy will make a difference in my students' lives and the environment which I'm trying to cultivate. To me there is great power in teaching: Teachers have the ability to shape the future according to their own values, and for me, that future looks like open-minded people positively engaging with themselves, their peers, and their communities for the greater good of the planet. It is exceedingly important, especially in this day and age, to know what one stands for, and to act upon those beliefs. In my teaching, I strive to pass down that lesson to those younger than I. The most important thing that we have in our lives are our values and ideologies; as much as people may try, nobody can strip us of what we believe. Our beliefs carry us through the world, and make us who we are. Because I want to teach elementary, I have the unique and beautiful ability to teach young students how they feel about the world. I want to be the beacon, the lighthouse, towards which they can turn when there are crossroads in life. My goal is to foster a sense of community, equity, and belonging among all my students to allow for them to learn the individual and tentative facets about who they truly are.

I have worked with young children my whole life; I have seen a range of children's abilities, questions, and frustrations with the world over that time. I understand how hard it is to be a kid – people, once they pass a certain age, forget the distinct challenges that come with

being a child and trying to navigate the world for yourself. As teachers, we can't lose touch with these challenges, and need to have an understanding of the world through the eyes of a ten year old in order to be the support person it's our job to be. There's nothing – maybe frisbee – I'm more passionate about than youth work. I can't see myself doing anything else, nor do I want to. I have been told my whole life that this is what I'm made for, and I hope I can live up to that. My whole life is predicated on laughter. When I was three years old, my family would say I would either be a teacher or a comedian. Laughter fills my soul, and truly makes anything feel possible. There is no better joy than hearing the gleeful laughter of a young child, and it motivates and drives me to be the best teacher and youth worker that I can be. I love children, and I cherish and am grateful for the opportunity to help them grow as people in an educational setting.

However, part of the challenges – and the focus of my Theory of Understanding paper – that children face in school is that not every student is the same, and not every student learns the same way. Public schools are too vast a behemoth to tailor themselves to each student's individual needs, and so, even from a very young age, a large portion of students are left behind. No school that prides itself on or stands for equity should allow this to happen. There are many reasons why students fall behind in elementary school: for instance, a student may have undiagnosed ADHD, and is having trouble focusing on and staying on top of assignments, or maybe the student feels ostracized from the class due to racial, cultural, or class-based reasons. These are the two biggest factors that I am concerned with, in terms of educational settings, and types of challenges that I want to address. In my first Theory of Understanding paper, I wrote at length about my experiences going through elementary school without my ADD being supported, and how it diametrically changed the way I went through school. I think that teachers need to see kids with ADD and other learning disabilities not as problematic or distracting

children, but kids who need a more individualized and personal learning style. We are starting to see the emergence of IEP programs, but we are still far away from making public schools a supportive space for kids like this. For one, IEP teachers, in my experience, aren't fully trained that extensively on the complexities of the role. Oftentimes, other classroom teachers are made multi-purpose teachers and assigned to represent the IEP students. I think that my experience with navigating elementary school with ADD will allow me to be that supportive adult that my neurodivergent students need to fully maximize their learning potential. No student deserves to be punished for their atypical learning styles, and teachers need to be accustomed and adjusted to these differences.

In terms of my latter point, in regard to cultural reasons students are ostracized, I strive to make my classroom a space where everyone feels, not just included, but *represented*. Studies have shown that students who don't read books by authors who look like them or have some of the education material in their first non-English language feel less motivated and passionate about their time in class, and will become separated from the class. In a paper published by Liza G. Braden & Sanjuana C. Rodriguez, they state, "When young children are presented with literature that only reflects their background, cultural heritage, and experiences, they may believe that their experience dominates all others. For this reason, the literature presented in schools—the site where children come to read, and know themselves and others— should be inclusive. Children's literature must give children pathways to interrogate and contest the ways in which cultural groups are presented within stories" (2016). I need my classroom to be representative of all my students' identities so they each believe they are worthy of an education. In my Universal Design of Learning class, we looked at making a diverse classroom library and a multilingual classroom, and that has become my model for how I want to design my classroom.

However, I think that my own positionality will make it harder to be the full supportive figure that my students need. The first thing that people see, obviously, when they look at me is a straight, white man – which I am. And because of this, I don't have the real-world experience of oppression and persecution in my daily life that some of my students will. In understanding my privilege, I have to also understand that this means that I won't be able to connect with and truly comprehend the unique struggles of living in America as a minority. I know that going into teaching, hopefully in a school district and classroom that would benefit from CYES practices, I will always be separated from the violence and oppression that many of my students will face. I can be as supportive of that struggle as I am trained to be, but I will never have that lived experience that fully prepares me to connect with those aspects of their identity. I interact with the world, worlds differently than non-white people do; I don't have to worry about myself or one of my family members being attacked or killed in a racist incident. I don't have to worry about how I'm perceived at job interviews or car dealerships; I have the freedom to walk anywhere in public without feeling like I'm being surveilled. I have to understand that, as much as I try to empathize, my positionality can only make me an ally, not someone who truly understands the struggles students are going through. But that doesn't mean that I can't try to be as compassionate as I can be.

For my praxis, I want to engage an upper-elementary classroom in restorative justice circles. These activities “provide an opportunity for community members to come together to address harmful behavior in a process that explores harms and needs and a path toward accountability and repair” (*University of Michigan*). I think that students this age need to learn how to deal with conflicts through productive conversation, rather than violence or anger. Circles help to facilitate healthy self-expression, and a way to learn about other cultures as well. In 8<sup>th</sup>

grade, I had a circle leader who helped me to learn what it meant to be part of a community and engage with my peers in a healthy manner.