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Theories of Understanding: Inequality, Positionality, and Change

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### Inequality

When I immigrated to the United States when I was six years old, my family and I settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Little did I know that Cambridge was rich in community, education, diversity, accessibility, and resources. Although my single mother who was barely making ends meet at the time qualified for affordable housing, she lacked the information on how to access this resource. Even when she did learn about the opportunity, my mother said “It’s okay, at least now I’m working, I don’t want to take it away from people who might need it more than us”. Every week she only made just enough money to put food on the table for my sister and I and keep the roof over our heads. To this day, Cambridge is one of the most expensive cities to live in not only in Massachusetts but in all of New England. My mother could have easily moved us to a city where we could have lived in a bigger, better apartment and she would still have been able to save money. However, she refused to move because Cambridge possesses incredible public schooling and provides free, wonderful educational resources for all its residents. So my mother sacrificed a lot in order for my sister and I to grow up in Cambridge and take advantage of the opportunities Cambridge was able to give. I grew to love Cambridge and my schooling experience because I saw how much my mother valued and praised the public schooling my mother had to offer.

However, growing up in Cambridge put me in a large bubble. I was not aware or exposed to the reality of oppression that infested neighbouring cities, the United States and even

Cambridge. I had learned about racism but since I went to school surrounded by deep diversity, I was not conscious that it existed. In school, we only learned about how racism looked like in history and it was something the civil rights movement “fixed”. It was not until I reached high school where the reality of how alive racism was hit me. At first, I took pride in saying that I went to one of the most diverse high schools in the nation. Although that is an amazing aspect of my high school, it did not fix or attend to the oppressive systems embedded within the schools in regards to racism and inequality. There was only one public high school in Cambridge so all the students from the several different elementary and middle schools joined together in the humongous building. Therefore, it was difficult to miss the implicit and explicit forms of inequality that raided the walls of my high school. It reminded me of the book “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” by Beverly Tatum. Tatum (1997) wrote, “Walk into any racially mixed high school and you will see Black youth seated together in the cafeteria. Of course, it's not just the Black kids sitting together--the white, Latino, Asian Pacific, and, in some regions, American Indian youth are clustered in their own groups, too” (p.110). In my high school, this de facto segregation was not only present in the cafeteria, but unfortunately in the classrooms. The AP and Honors classes were filled with white students and a few Asian Pacific students versus the CP class which was the lowest track were filled with Black and Latinx students. As much as Cambridge takes pride in the diverse schooling, they did not put as much emphasis on the inequality, segregation and racism that occurred everyday within the walls of the school. It was the school administrators, guidance counselors and teachers who did not believe in their students of color and convinced Black and Latinx students that they only belong in lower track classes. Guidance counselors downplayed the potential of the bright futures that Black and Latinx students could have. Instead, they had low expectations for their students of

color getting into good, accredited colleges and pushed them towards career paths that were unfulfilling for them. The school administration put more emphasis on disciplinary action rather than on cultivating an environment where Black and Latinx students are supported, listened to, trusted and instilled high expectations.

It was alarming to see the blatant, large wealth gap in Cambridge when sitting next to my white peers. It never occurred to me the lifestyles they were accustomed to living in versus what was true of my home reality. I come from living in a tiny, cramped apartment where sharing my room with my sister was the norm. On the other hand, my white peers would complain about how their mother made them load the dishwasher while I thought it was luxury in itself to have a dishwasher. Even in cities that had a sense of community and seemed perfect on the outside, the bubble burst when I finally learned the truth about the city I grew up in.

"As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest." ~ Nelson Mandela

As embarrassed as I was to have had the privilege to believe racism did not exist anymore, I was grateful for my ability to learn otherwise and have my eyes opened. To think about how to solve inequality seems like a great, daunting feat because it is large on many, different scales. However, if we stop, learn, dismantle, relearn and work together, it can seem much less daunting and more attainable.

Positionality

When I learned of this word, positionality, a little more than a year ago as a Junior, I immediately resonated with it because I recognized the importance of it. However, what I did not realize was that the application of my positionality was going to be harder than I thought. Although I learned about positionality in relation to as a teacher in a classroom, positionality is present in other spaces as well. For my praxis project, I was accepted and joined a virtual book club with four high school women facilitated by an ESL teacher and Clark professor. Even before I officially joined the book club, I knew I wanted to build relationships with the facilitators and the young women. It was important to me that the young women know I was not just there for my praxis project and I genuinely did want to cultivate a sense of trust between us. About five months into the book club, I noticed one of the girls, Glendy, had missed a few, consecutive book club sessions so I reached out to her via text to check in. She responded saying that she was mentally struggling and felt depressed. She asked me not to share this information with the other girls in the book club or the teachers. The way that I responded to this situation was critical because it can make or break the trust in a relationship. Trust is incredibly fragile and if I had not handled her vulnerability correctly, it could have shattered the trust she put in me by sharing. In those same messages with Glendy, I thanked her for trusting me with this information and her emotions. I asked her if it would be helpful to set up a meeting with me so we can talk through some of the issues and maybe come up with a solution. She agreed and the next day we met via zoom. The meeting consisted of her pouring out her stress and depression to me while I listened. She expressed that much of her stress and depression was coming from school and zoom fatigue. The rest of the meeting was spent helping Glendy catch up on her AP Literature assignments and we agreed to set up another meeting so that I could support her more. Glendy

and I would continue to meet a few more times through zoom where I would help her with catching her up on homework assignments.

I was happy that Glendy felt as though she could trust me with her vulnerable emotions and accepted my help. Glendy was grateful for my support, expressed how helpful I was and was appreciative of my time. However, this was one of the situations where I was not aware of my positionality or lack thereof to truly get the help Glendy needed. I, myself, was not in a good head space mentally and although I desired to help Glendy and be her rock, it was not my position to. In June Jordan's (1982) "Report from the Bahamas", I learned the importance of knowing when to step back no matter how much I want to help the issue myself. Jordan recollected an experience with a young, Black woman named Sokutu who had come to Jordan to express her situation of domestic violence due to her husband's alcoholism. Jordan, deeply disturbed by her story, listened intently and started calling people and resources she knew of to support Sokutu. When almost at a loss, Jordan got in contact with an Irish woman who was able to help Sokutu. Although Jordan had past trauma in regards to the Irish and their views differed, Jordan escorted the young woman to Sokutu. The Irish woman knew exactly what to say and what to do because she herself had been through a similar situation. At the end of the night, Jordan watched them interact as though they were sisters and Sokutu left feeling better, safer, and supported (pp. 14-16). I described this story in depth to provide a clear example of the importance of positionality in respect to aiding others. In a fragile, vulnerable situation such as the one with Sokutu, it is crucial to handle it with the utmost care and thought. Jordan quickly recognized that although Sokutu trusted Jordan, Jordan did not have the capacity to truly help Sokutu. Although Jordan was a Black woman herself, Jordan realized she could not help Sokutu because there was a lack of experience in the area, but she could use her resources to find

someone that could. This is something I struggle with to this day. I deeply desire to help people when they personally come to me for support because I want to be that rock for them. However, especially in delicate situations as the one Sokutu was in, it would be unjust to try and solve the problem on my own. Instead, the appropriate thing to do would be to provide the right resources and step back from the situation. Knowing how to help and when to remove yourself is significant to positionality. To be able to do practice this is what makes trust stronger in relationships. Although Glendy had asked me not to disclose her vulnerable information to the facilitators of the book club, I should have carefully had a conversation with her about why. I should have taken the time to explain that although I was grateful she was able to trust me, I was not the right person to help but I could point her to another resource,, one of the facilitators, who could help better than I could have. There was no way of knowing how Glendy would have responded to this conversation, but it was highly likely that our trust would have actually gotten stronger.

It is imperative that I take this experience with me when I soon become a teacher. I need to remind myself constantly of my positionality or lack thereof in regards to my students. Everyday, I have to be conscious about how my actions can be a service to my students instead of a disservice. No matter how much I want, I inevitably will not be able to help all of my students in every way that they need. I can, instead, provide resources that can help, lend an ear to listen, and support them through every step.

### Change

Change. It is such a beautiful word filled with much hope and bright futures. It is also a word that sometimes seems impossible and daunting to think about and attempt. “How can I change the world?” I have been asking myself this question since I was about twelve years old

and started to witness the different oppressive systems put in place for centuries in this nation and our world. When adults used to ask my younger self, “what do you want to do when you grow up?” I responded, “I don’t know, all I know is I want to help people and make the world become a better place”. When I recognized that education is the foundation of change, it was an easy decision to enter this realm. I remember when I was five years old, back in India, there was a costume contest at my school and I decided to dress up as a teacher. Now, in just a short, few months, that costume is becoming my reality. It will be my job to only teach my students, but learn from them and enact change together. One of the most innovative classes, if not the most innovative class at Clark taught me the model of youth participatory action research (YPAR). At first, I did not know what to expect. The class was separated into different groups mixed with other college students but also high school students from neighbouring Worcester public schools. We had the agency in our group to choose what we wanted to try and change in our Worcester community. We ended up tackling the issues of the lack of all gender bathrooms in our Worcester public schools. Initially, it seemed like such a large task. How are we a bunch of college and high school students going to create this type of change? Long story short, we did. Our group worked together and were able to implement all gender bathrooms at the new, South High School in Worcester.

Change does not have to be as daunting as it may look or sound because instead of asking myself, “How can I change the world?” I need to start asking myself, “How can I work together with others to change the world? How can we change the world as a team?” This makes tackling the world easier because we do not have to be alone to enact change. Change is about support, love, ambition, community and togetherness. Change does not necessarily have to always be on a large scale. There is so much power to enacting small changes as well because even to help one

person or make one situation better is an amazing achievement. Although, I will be the only one teaching my classroom, it will be a team effort. It is crucial that I rely on my peers, advisors, and students to collaborate and learn so we can help create change together.

As I grow, my theories of understanding will grow and shift as well. This will be a forever changing document of my values and understanding of the world. It will be at the forefront of my pedagogy and openness to learn in my classroom. As a young teacher, I am aware that I am bound to mistakes. I used to think of mistakes as devastating failures. I always tried hard to not make mistakes, be as perfect as I could be, but that ended up being more detrimental to my learning and growth. Instead, now I look forward to the mistakes that I will make as a teacher because through CYES and my education career at Clark, I have learned to not look at my failures with negative connotations, but rather as opportunities to learn and grow in order to be a better teacher and a better citizen of the world.