

**Three Lenses on Making Change Happen:  
Theorizing Identity and Positionality, Social Inequality, and Change**

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**Section 1: My Identity and Positionality*****Identity Traits from My Family:***

When I look back at my life and who I have become there are several traits that have shaped me based on the life I was born into. I am a middle class, white, Christian, female attending a four year institution. When describing myself at the surface level there is no denying the amount of privilege I have been born into with my whiteness and socioeconomic status. I acknowledge these identity traits (by that I mean, the way I view myself) have given me widespread opportunities that may be severely more difficult for others to obtain because of the social structures within society. Everyday I grapple with my white privilege and by acknowledging my whiteness I constantly think about the ways that it has impacted my life. I try to consciously remind myself of the privileges I hold throughout my daily life in the ways I act and think and push to strive to be an ally for my students and peers. Addressing my privilege is important for me to be inclusive to my peers around me. The main parts of my life that have shaped my identity and understanding of the world around me is through my family, Christianity and education. My family and faith have taught me about confidence in myself as well as morals within life. Realizing the importance of education within John Ameer's class my freshman year caused me to find my future career and strive to constantly learn. These traits of my life have surrounded and molded me into who I am and what I believe about the world.

I acknowledge that I am fortunate to have grown up in a supportive family. I realized at a young age I was lucky to have my parents there to teach me how to treat others as well as staying true to myself. As the eldest of three children I learned how to always be there to care for others when they need support. Caring for others and showing empathy to all people has always been important to me because I don't know others' experiences and it is easy to show kindness to

everyone and show support. My parents taught me the importance of honesty, respect for all, and empathy. I try my hardest to show respect to all people whether I get along with them or not because all people deserve to be shown respect. I also believe that it is better to be honest in every situation even if it is difficult to do so. Being able to feel and understand others' feelings is extremely important for communication and having positive relationships with anyone. Another contributing factor that I learned from my parents is that I should strive for what I love doing and that I am capable of many things. I am grateful to have grown up with parents that built my confidence and taught me to believe strongly in truth, compassion, and empathy.

Another influence on what I believe about the world is through Christianity. I grew up in a Christian family attending church every Sunday. Through Sunday school and youth group services I learned many lessons about love and forgiveness especially that have really impacted my decisions in life. The bible teaches us to, "do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14). This broadened my perspective on the world because it pushes me to try and treat others even if I didn't get along with them, with love. No one is perfect and obviously it is hard to maintain love without feelings of judgment in some way. Regardless, I believe that love is a powerful emotion and can make great differences within the world.

***A Turning Point:***

In the spring semester of my freshman year, I began the course Complexities of Urban Schools with John Ameer. Beginning this course I wasn't sure what to expect. I was still unsure of a major and career for myself. This course opened my eyes towards education and teaching as well as broadened my understanding of the privileges I have had compared to others specifically in urban schools, like in Worcester. As the course progressed I learned a lot through our required readings and discussions during class by authors such as, Bob Herbert, Robert Rothstein and

Robert Putnum. Each student in the course also had to volunteer a certain number of hours at a school throughout the semester. The first day volunteering in a second grade class at Woodland was when I decided to be an elementary educator for my career. I fell in love with these students through the ways I was able to watch them learn and realized how important it is for young children to have an education. These students' elementary education and the teachers they have can impact the rest of academic life. I knew from that moment visiting that classroom that being a teacher was what I wanted to be--to be part of building the foundations of students' learning in their education.

In John Ameer's class we learned about the struggles that our students may face through racial and socioeconomic barriers within society. We read about poverty, homelessness and the resilience of students despite the struggles that they faced. We discussed what we believed our students in our classes could be struggling with and we also compared the classrooms we were in to our own educations. Although I acknowledged my privileges of whiteness and education before, these conversations were what truly caused me to realize first hand the privileges I have and why I should be grateful for the education I received. While talking about these topics I felt ashamed to have ever taken my education for granted and for never noticing the struggles that my peers in high school and that many other students still face today.

***Reflecting back on High School: Seeing Inequalities in a New Light***

This course challenged us to think about our high school experiences, as I looked back at my experiences, I attended middle and high school at Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy (HMTCA) in Hartford, CT. It is a magnet school created for students from all around the state to prepare for college and focused on math and the arts. Half of the student body was from Hartford and the other half was from towns all around CT. Most of the students in my magnet school were

bilingual and learned English as their second language. In school I challenged myself and tried to always take advanced or AP courses. While being in John Ameer's class I was able to look back at my academic experiences with a new lens and recognize the opportunities I had within my school as well as the differences I could see from my friends and peers within high school as well.

During class discussions and while volunteering in classrooms, I thought back to the memories I had in high school of the ways in which students of color, bilingual and students with disabilities were treated and they were not fond memories. It made me realize the privilege I have as a white middle class female attending a university, and that the opportunities that I was introduced to were not always the same for my fellow students of color. Realizing this I was ashamed to have been blind to this before. Learning the ways that students in urban schools are ignored or treated because of inadequate teachers, less funding and other factors infuriated me because these urban schools hold more students and should be getting the same opportunities that schools in wealthier areas do. When I witnessed students of color and students with disabilities (while volunteering) being brushed aside to fall behind other classmates I was shocked and angry that these students were not being taught or listened to in the ways that they should be.

In a class discussion with John Ameer, we spoke about how most urban school students speak more than one language and the barriers they experience while in the classroom. I could connect this with many of my peers and friends in high school. One of my friends in high school had to study for the SAT for months and practiced with her ELL teacher because standardized testing doesn't consider language barriers for bilingual students. There are also questions on these tests that are really difficult to respond to because of different cultures or backgrounds such as ethnicity, language and socioeconomic status. Within John Ameer's class we discussed how

these different cultures and backgrounds bring different experiences to each person and make it difficult for some to complete these tests. This is generally because they are created by middle to upper class white men. Standardized tests are created in a way that makes it difficult for students to do their best work because of the different experiences or backgrounds people have. This problem was also present within the class I volunteered in for the required standardized state tests. I noticed the students in the class I volunteered for struggled with these required tests because of language barriers and I was not allowed to help them which frustrated me.

***Importance of Education for Youth:***

Education has been an important factor of my life for as long as I can remember. My parents taught me how important it is to receive an education, but I never understood until freshman year how much of an impact it can make on children. Our education systems are extremely different around the world but especially in the US, our education system is heavily impacted based on social class, income and wealth. The differences among schools within lower income areas and higher income areas are prominent by the resources that are provided to the students. In higher income areas it is more often that the students will have more updated supplies and appliances within their schools, because oftentimes families donate support to schools their students go to. Higher income areas also have more income to support staff so that their students can attend after school programs. However in lower income areas, parents and families do not have the luxury of being able to support their children in that way, there are limited resources, after school programs and books for these children in these areas. In my freshman year of college I discovered an article that described school budget cuts depriving students of music and arts (Chira, 1993). This was the first time I realized the privilege I had to be able to receive a quality education where I was able to participate heavily in the arts and

music. I believe having outlets to express yourself as a student besides academics is extremely important. That being said, this is one of the contributing factors that pushed me to want to become an elementary school teacher. The early learning stages are so important for children and to think that I could help build the foundation of young students learning in the future is exciting for me. I believe that quality education is important for all and that alternative subjects such as music, arts and even sports are influential for students to find their outlet as a learner.

John Ameer's class pushed me to recognize the importance of education in young students and see how my peers and students I worked with struggled with restrictions because of differences in socioeconomic status, cultures, and race backgrounds. This moment drove me to acknowledge my privileges and made me ultimately want to become an educator to attempt to make a difference for these students as support in their education. My agency to teach youth is because of watching students take pride in learning something they never understood before. I am excited to teach so that the students that I teach can expand their knowledge and not only learn from me as a teacher, but from their peers as well. This realization of wanting to teach, made me want to push myself to use my identities to my advantage and demonstrate to others the impact educators have on their students. Education is important for all students so that they can grow in their knowledge as well as develop their skills and talents in the subjects they connect with. This changing moment in my life, made me notice the impactful things that create who I am through what I learned from my family, Christianity and my personal experiences with education. All of these traits and experiences made me want to become an educator.

***Concluding Thoughts:***

These three facets of my identity are what have influenced what I believe in the world in my life morals, how I treat others, and what is important to me in my future career. I

acknowledge that my life experiences and privileges that I have, brought me to who I am and what I believe in today. From the experience of being through John Ameer's class, I used what I had learned to realize what has most impacted my life and in what ways I can use what I had learned in that class to change the lives of other students in my career as a teacher. This experience as well as my identity traits will help me connect to the students in my praxis site as well as become a support system for them.

[Brief reflection: These identities still apply to me today and I believe it is important to always be aware of your identities and privileges. For me as a rising MAT, it's important to continue to do this to be aware of my experiences for my future students as well.]

## **Section 2: My Theory of Social Inequality**

### ***Locating Inequality in Education:***

*“My favorite thing to do is read,” a second grade boy said to me on my first day volunteering at Woodland Academy. This boy was named Elijah and he explained how his goal was to read everything in their small collected library within their classroom. That day in class the teacher and her students finished reading, “Miss Nelson is Back” and had to decide on a new book. The books that they had to choose from for a vote was between a book about a whale or a book about an African American girl and her goat living in Uganda. This was a class of around 22 students and all but one voted for the book with the whale. Elijah was the only student who voted for the book “Beatrice’s Goat,” and he was also the only student who was Black. The teacher and half of the class was white, the rest were Hispanic. The teacher started reading the book about the whale without another word to Elijah, who seemed pretty disappointed.*



*Why didn't any of the other students want to read "Beatrice's Goat?" What made them choose the book about the whale instead? Why didn't they pay attention to Elijah? Of course, I don't know the answer, but I felt upset for him that a book about an African American girl – that he wished to learn more about – wasn't even considered for him. Later for personal reading time Elijah said to me, "I am going to read the book anyway just so I can know what happens with her and her goat." Situations in which certain students in this class were excluded, more often students of color, English Learners, or students with disabilities, happened numerous times over the semester.*

*In the middle of the semester while I was volunteering in this second grade class, a new student named Marcus was admitted to the school because he had to move in with his grandmother. Marcus was the second student in the class who was Black. At first, he was shy and nervous around his new classmates, teacher, and me. As I talked with Marcus a lot, I got to know him well, and marveled at his imagination and creativity. He loved art and drawing, especially when he was able to make his own comics of superheroes. "I like to make comics for my cousin," he glanced up at me showing a drawing of a boy with a red cape, "if you didn't know, he is my hero." It was things like this that drew me to Marcus and helped me see the love he had for his family and his art.*

*What infuriated me about being in this class was the fact that the teacher, only days after having Marcus, assumed that he was "behind in all of his academics" especially reading and math. This teacher (as well as many others in the Worcester Public Schools) demonstrate all of the students' "levels" for math as well as reading so anyone can see who is excelling, passing, or falling behind. When I realized this, I was devastated for these students and realized how nervous or anxious they must feel to try and do well. Especially in terms of Marcus -- who was*

*adjusting to a new home, school, and friends -- he didn't show his knowledge or skills as much as he did the few weeks after adjusting. As it turns out, based on test scores he took a bit later, and as I suspected from the way he talked to me, Marcus was just where he needed to be in terms of academics, and it only took time for him to get used to his surroundings. This teacher judged him based (I'm presuming) on his race and experiences at home instead of truly seeing and getting to know or listening to Marcus himself who is so bright and creative. **Why is it so difficult for teachers to understand students on the students' own terms? Why is it hard to really listen to what students know or believe?***

***Commentary and Questions:***

In both of these scenarios, I had the privilege to hear and see Elijah and Marcus' perspective within the classroom. Their teacher missed the opportunity of having this connection with them because she didn't give it the time needed. **Did she have the time and not take it? Or did she not have the time?** If their teacher worked to understand students' thoughts and feelings during lessons she would also be able to see each and every students' understanding or thoughts. **Why didn't this teacher take the time to understand and hear her own students' voices and beliefs? What is causing school to be a shutting down place for kids? Why is school a place where they so often hate to learn? Why are these things so difficult within the classroom setting?** The questions in bold are ones that I am struggling to answer and understand.

***Discovering Talking for Understanding:***

I was introduced to T4U by Sarah Cramer, a Clark alumna who now teaches high school geometry at Claremont. She started this so that there would be a comfortable atmosphere for all her students to have more discussion in math class, and she hoped that it would be a way for

students to be more comfortable asking questions about things they don't know. She felt this was especially important in math because so many of her students struggle with it. She also thought it would be a way to attempt to hear from all students in her class and get to know their thought processes and what they understand, even students who were not proficient in English. This work resonated with me because of the experiences that I had within the second grade classroom I observed, and is what I am focusing my Praxis project on.

### ***What is Talking for Understanding?***

Talking for understanding is a powerful learning idea and a kind of dialogic pedagogy. It presumes a classroom culture and interactions in which students learn through communicating with their peers their thoughts and understandings on a given topic, guided by the teacher. But this is not the standard “direct instruction” approach where the teacher explains the “correct” answer, or draws it out of students through recitation. In a “talking for understanding” approach, students would be figuring out complex ideas together as a group even though some students might be confused or not fully understand. The main purpose of T4U (as I see it) is to have students comfortable within the classroom setting to talk about what they don't know as well as what they do understand and to learn from one another as well as themselves, by going public with their thinking and questions. I have come to think that learning from one's peers and thinking out loud before hearing the “correct” answer from a teacher is a big shift in the status quo and highly beneficial to students.

Within the classroom I previously volunteered in at Woodland, students' voices and thoughts were constantly ignored, especially students of color and students with learning disabilities.

### ***CLAIMS/ASSUMPTIONS:***

I come to this work with a set of personal opinions (assumptions), grounded in my own experience and in my reading about education. I want to explicate them (go public with them) so that I can examine them and also think about them with others – in the spirit of “talking for understanding.” It’s my view that students struggle with coming to school everyday because they are not comfortable within the classroom environment, and that can make them not want to learn there. In the time that I have been within the education system, I have seen students get ignored or excluded specifically based on race, perceived ability, and socioeconomic status within my own schooling and while volunteering in WPS classrooms. The educational curriculum is often isolating and biased which makes it difficult for students to want to be engaged, proactive, and persist in their academics and continue learning. Students are required to spend sometimes 6-8 hours at school taking classes and then continue to have possibly hours of work to complete at home. It is really difficult for students to want to learn for themselves and the students who do love learning and have resilience like Elijah and Marcus are often shut down and have the possibility of burning out later on because they are ignored in their classrooms. I understand for teachers it is difficult to attempt to change ways to present the curriculum because the system is strict (with pacing guides and teacher evaluations based on coverage and students’ test scores) and sometimes teacher-initiated changes in a mandated curriculum or in the way the curriculum is taught could lead to a poor evaluation or even their termination. Talking for Understanding is not a new curriculum, but it is a shift in how any curriculum is enacted. With Talking for Understanding there is an opportunity to have a welcoming community for all students as well as to create an environment where students like to learn because they realize they have the power to teach and help each other.

***How does Theory relate to my experience in a 2nd grade classroom and T4U?***

In the reading, “Black Bastards and White Millionaires” (1984), Charles Payne describes different ways that academics explain educational inequality. He identifies the most common (and conservative) theories as “denial” theories that deny any relationship between the “Haves and the Have Nots.” He unpacks this set of theories in terms of where they place the blame for inequality, and how certain people are blamed (it’s the kids, their parents, the teachers) or separated by social inequality and in what way (Payne, 1984). Rarely is there a direct relationship between the “Haves and the Have nots.” This means those who are considered to “have” power within society (this being whites, or people in the middle and upper classes) are rarely blamed for those who “have not” or aren’t considered to have power within society (people of color, people with disabilities, and in certain times those who are poor) (Payne, 1984). When I think about my experiences within Woodland’s second grade classroom there were several examples of the denial theories, the first is what Payne calls the attribute theory. This theory is where the blame is put upon the victim for the things that have happened to them, “the poor should be changed, not the relationship between the poor and unpoor,” (Payne, 1984). This describes the fact that those who are “unpoor” (the wealthy) don’t even consider the struggles or the experiences of the victim and believe the victim (the low-income student) should change socially to be like them instead of trying to understand their experiences they have had. The wealthy would not attempt to try to understand the experiences of the poor and think of themselves as “greater”. In the classroom where I volunteered, the teacher would mostly help the students that were excelling or passing and the students who were struggling would continue to struggle because the teacher didn’t always have the time to spend to help these students catch up. The teacher struggled between having to help catch these students up or giving up. Most of the time she gave up because she felt that she couldn’t help them. In this situation either the student

would be blamed because they didn't spend much time catching up on work or the teacher would be blamed for not taking the time to work with them, it would not be the education system that was to blame.

Another denial theory that applies is the opportunity theory. The opportunity theory is a focus on specific opportunities that hold back "have-nots" without noticing why those opportunities are like this in the first place (Payne, 1984). For example, the opportunity theory reminds me of the "picking yourself up by your bootstraps," saying which means anyone is able to succeed as long as hard work is put in. This is never the case and people are truly never able to find the "American Dream" because the expectations put on people who have no resources or no "bootstraps" in the first place makes it impossible for them to succeed. Both kinds of theories relate to the story about Marcus when the teacher automatically thought Marcus was behind in his academics. She made assumptions about him when he first arrived that he was poor and because of his lack of opportunities would be behind. This relates to the attribute theories as well because poor children are behind because of their families or because of poverty. It was because of this teacher's assumptions and the fact that she did not pay enough attention to Marcus to see if these assumptions were true. These thoughts and assumptions had caused her to never notice his creativity or see how smart he was until he got his test scores back. The point of T4U is for teachers to hear more and listen more deeply so that they can understand their students. I see T4U as a way of addressing social inequalities within the classroom.

[Brief reflection: Looking back on this theory of social inequality essay, I truly believe that Talking for Understanding is something that can make a positive impact in students lives. I think it is important to pay attention and listen to student needs to help them learn best within the classroom.]

### **Section 3: Theory of Social Change**

#### ***My Experience: Need for Educational Change***

Coming to Clark University, my past self never knew where I would be today. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do until I saw the ways students in urban schools were mistreated and ignored. While volunteering in several classrooms, I wanted to make a difference for the students, listen to their opinions and voices, and push them to enjoy coming to school. The school environments made it difficult for all students to appreciate learning and I hope that within my future classroom as a teacher, I will be able to change that.

The identities that form me come from the morals as I developed in section 1, I learned within my family and Christianity that I continue to use throughout my daily life in the way I think about others and the actions I take. My education from a magnet school in Hartford, CT as well as Clark University helped solidify what I now know and acknowledge as 'white privilege', which has given me many advantages over the course of my academic life. In John Ameer's Complexities of Urban Schooling class at Clark University, the readings, class discussions, and weekly observation hours in an elementary school -- taken together -- pushed me toward a teaching career and made me realize that big changes need to be made within the US education system. I learned through this class that I should be grateful for the education I was blessed to have and it caused me to compare what my school was like to the school I was volunteering at.

#### ***Importance of Education: As a Site for Change***

The social inequality that I now have come to recognize as such in public schools is that students, specifically students of color or English Learners, or students with disabilities are ignored or separated within the classroom, and aren't being granted the full capacity to learn. I

think education for all students especially in the elementary grades is important to form the foundation for the ways in which students learn throughout their lives. It is really important for students to feel comfortable in their academic environment and actually feel engaged in their learning. These things are very difficult to do and achieve but they are things I will strive for in my future classroom. While acknowledging my privileges (and reflecting on them with others) I want to push for a classroom environment where all students' voices are heard and where they feel comfortable to not only be themselves but speak on topics they are unsure about without worrying about the "correctness" of their response or what others might think. As I work on my praxis project with Sarah Cramer, the impact I have within that classroom community may be minimal. However, I may be able to help certain students feel more comfortable within their environment just by being a listener for them, a person to trust. Having a welcoming community is something I wish to have within my future classroom and I feel like this is possible with a commitment to the idea of building a classroom culture of "Talking for Understanding."

***Talking for Understanding: A Site for Change***

From learning Sarah Cramer's experience as a teacher and how hard she works to implement T4U into her curriculum it made me realize what I want to be like as a teacher. I admire how she gets to know her students personally and tries to create a trusting environment for her students so that they feel comfortable to speak their own opinions. She also is constantly researching and speaking to others about how to change her classroom to make it better. She speaks to her students and takes their opinions into account on the ways in which she should attempt to change her curriculum in the ways that she can. Talking for Understanding is a way that pushes students to learn from themselves and Sarah Cramer uses tools in which to push them in that direction.



Talking for Understanding is what I believe to be a site for change because of the way in which students could enjoy learning and going to school more, but there are still struggles that come with trying to instill it within the classroom. While working with Sarah Cramer I have learned that attempting this classroom culture of T4U can be very difficult. Since T4U is reliant on student participation and collaboration it becomes difficult if certain days students are not feeling up to participating. Students also would learn more from one another if they are open to participating and collaborating, with a lack of collaboration, it is difficult to try and get students to participate in T4U. The teacher attempting T4U has to use teaching tools to help facilitate conversation if students are not up to talking to help encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings.

The reason that classrooms of the students I have worked with (Elijah and Marcus) have trouble learning is because of the many challenges that can arise such as: lack of student collaboration, some students being ignored (like Elijah and Marcus), trying to teach students remotely, and more. It makes sense that students dislike coming to school or learning because the things that they are learning are not being taught in a way that is helpful to them. Although T4U may be difficult to implement, the progress that it has demonstrated within the classroom has really benefited students' confidence in speaking to classmates, as well as in their assigned work. These students demonstrated pride in the assignments they would complete and would feel proud of themselves for learning difficult topics they never thought they would before, based on the experiences of the students I saw in Cramer's classroom and hope to see as I continue this research. If T4U was able to be implemented within all schools, students should not be left out and the classroom should feel like an equal community, not something controlled by the "power" of the teacher. In order for T4U to be implemented in schools, the teachers need to be passionate

about their students' learning and want to teach them in ways that would be helpful to them.

These teachers would have to learn about dialogic teaching and how it can be implemented with certain talking tools and strategies that can facilitate classroom conversation.

### ***How Will I Make Change?***

The change that I hope to make within the world is to continue the work of Sarah Cramer with Talking for Understanding, so that I can make an impact on the students that I work with while volunteering. I want to learn as much as I can about T4U so that I can work closely with Sarah Cramer on how to implement it in a way that's beneficial to students and figure out which teaching tools are not as helpful. I want to see how T4U makes a difference in the high school classrooms that I volunteer in and be able to overcome the challenges so that students can benefit from T4U. My personal project, (not necessarily for praxis but could benefit from my project) is that I could one day adapt it for my elementary classrooms. I feel like talking for understanding is something that all students can benefit from. With a classroom community that is equal and welcome for all students from all experiences, abilities and backgrounds the students would have maximum capacity to learn and grow within their academics.

[Brief reflection: From this praxis project I have learned a lot about the process of Talking for Understanding within Sarah Cramer's class through the past year. I have learned the realistic process through the classroom and know that T4U is important for students and I know that it is something that I will do within my classroom. I want to be able to make a difference for my students and I know I will learn so much from the process of T4U as well as from my students.]

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