

### **Portfolio Piece 2: Theory of Identity and Positionality**

At Core Stage's summer half day program students cycled between drama and dance before having art together as a group. It was the end of the day, so the students were doing an art project with the art teacher. The art project was to do a self-portrait of themselves as a superhero. They had to create a superpower and find a superhero outline to trace. I decided to take part in the project myself and began to draw myself and color it in. I was nearly finished when I saw one of my students, a younger Latina girl with her head in her hands, obviously upset. I was concerned so I walked up and asked her what was wrong, expecting her to say something about her friend being mean as they had been arguing shortly before. Instead she said, "I don't want to draw myself. I can't do it". Confused, I asked her what she meant, insisting she could do it since she only had to color in a cape, boots and the skin. I continued to insist she could and was confused about why she said she couldn't. "I don't want to finish my drawing because it's not pretty like yours, I don't like my skin and it being orange." I didn't know what to say. I looked at other students' drawings and realized that the only colors within the 36 pack of Crayola colored pencils that could be used as a skin color were dark brown, orange, and a peach that matched my skin tone and that of my co-workers. Over 85% of the students in the room were students of color about 75% being Latino/a/x students. My co-workers and I easily finished our self-portraits with the peach color that matched our white skin without a second thought.

I didn't know what to say, so I told her she didn't have to color it in if she didn't want to and changed the topic. I didn't know what to say as I heard another student comment on my co-

workers drawing, saying how pretty it looked and how she wished she had blonde hair too because it's so much prettier than hers. I didn't know what to say as she thanked the student and continued to color. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. And in that moment I let my silence and topic change normalize the lack of representation within the organization's half day program and Crayola colored pencil box and, in turn, perpetuated the student's idea that white is prettier. My silence spoke volumes.

Identity and positionality are topics I had never thought deeply about before coming to Clark, but that is because I never had to think about them before. This is because I am a white woman who grew up in suburbia in Maine, the whitest state in the country. Growing up I was always surrounded by people who come from the same demographics as me; the only thing that made my family different than the rest of the families in the neighborhood was our religion, language and heritage, but that is something we never talked about. I grew up in the middle class, where my dad had a good paying job he didn't love, and my mom worked in schools. I never had to worry about money or having to help support my family until the end of high school. I was able to participate in extracurriculars and take vacations to warm islands through my dad's job benefits. I pay for aspects of college living myself, but still my parents help with tuition costs. Though I spent quite a long time blind to it, I come from a very privileged background and remain privileged and in power as a heterosexual, white woman from the middle class. While my identity, like everyone else, has intersections and complexities, my white skin and the fact that I am getting a college education makes it so I am viewed as "higher" and "more valuable" in the invisible, yet real, societal hierarchy that gives me privilege and power.

So, who am I to be doing this work? My goal is to use my power and privilege to support and foster and sustain cultural and linguistic competence and identity exploration for my students

while not overstepping or assuming, but how do I know where that line is? Something I've noticed is that at Core Stage, identity is something that is never really talked about. The programs goal is to "empower youth through quality accessible arts", but this "empowerment" never fully addresses individual student's needs, aims to support their developing identities or validates multiculturalism or multilingualism in practice. By not addressing or acknowledging identity and positionality we fail to sustain and validate identities that aren't the dominant ones (wealthy, male, hetero and white) and perpetuate societal ideas of white skin being "better" and "more valuable".

I am an insider in an organization that is almost completely led by white people, with a volunteer base that is predominantly white college students. The questions above I don't have concrete answers to but will continue to explore and challenge, ask questions, own up to when I am overstepping and actively work to interrogate my own assumptions and beliefs. I am dedicated to arts education and helping support *all* students in creative exploration, however, I am an insider in an organization that doesn't fully addresses students' different needs and identities, and this needs to change.

Regardless of whether I step back and attempt to take an outsider role during research, many students know who I am and will always see me in the position of power making it impossible. This is something I'll have to keep in mind, especially working so closely with the Executive Director. Being an insider working with other insiders is going to be extremely challenging and has many potential consequences. I hope to follow Herr and Anderson's advice on how to work with other insiders and involve the community and the youth the organization works within the creation and implementation of my project in order to make sure it benefits students, not just the organization. To do this I will take a student-centered approach to my

teaching, which I hope will help the teens feel like they have some power and autonomy over parts of the project. I need to stay aware of my own biases, beliefs and assumptions, that of those around me and if that has any effects within the programs. I need to remember throughout the process that it will be harder being an insider working with an insider to get students to open up and be critical of the organization and its curriculum.

Throughout the duration of my praxis project and my career in youth work it is imperative to constantly be self-reflecting and critically aware of my identity, positionality and power and how it can impact others. While my identity as a white, college educated woman can be used to call out racism, teach other white people and support for students (whether that be through listening, amplifying or speaking up), it also creates complexities and tensions. Regardless of how critical I remain of myself; I will never be perfect when it comes to using my privilege to support people of color, people in the lower class and people without all the privileges I am afforded. I need to be able to acknowledge that my whiteness and other parts of my identity is sometimes more harmful than helpful for certain students. By this I mean that my identity, coming from a privileged background with no economic, cultural, linguistic or racial oppression, means that I need to be aware and ok with not being able to connect with all students, or that I won't always be the best resource for them. The complexities of identity and coming from a privileged background brings up questions that are important to consider. How do I make curriculum that is culturally sustaining? How do I best talk about identity, culture, language, race and privilege within art and with teenagers? How do I hold myself and others around me accountable if we shy away from conversations and activities that work to dismantle oppressive systems and inspire a sense of pride within students? As I continue with my future work, these questions will not be ones that can be easily answered, rather, it will be a process of

learning and growth, listening facilitating and overall just supporting a strong young generation of leaders who I believe have the power to begin dismantling these oppressive systems.

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*Even though I wrote the vignette I begin this paper with a year ago and it's been nearly two years since it happened, rereading this immediately took me back to that moment. I think that moment reshaped a lot of my thinking and understanding around privilege, race and identity because it was so real. Unlike theoretical readings, this was real life and deeply affecting this girl who was only seven years old and I didn't know what to do. When I first began my praxis sequence I thought about positionality and identity as complex and intertwined with privilege and societal social hierarchy. My theory of positionality and identity a year ago was extremely personal and self-reflective. I remember when I was originally writing this paper, I struggled to decipher my own identities and choose which to include, such as invisible illness and religion. The focus was very much on my own impact on those around me and the privilege that comes with the color of my skin, my education, language and class. "Regardless of how critical I remain of myself; I will never be perfect when it comes to using my privilege to support people of color, people in the lower class and people without all the privileges I am afforded. I need to be able to acknowledge that my whiteness and other parts of my identity is sometimes more harmful than helpful for certain students." This quote sums up my overall thinking on identity and positionality when I first began the praxis sequence. For a project like mine, critically examining your own impact and positionality is crucial so it is nice to reread this and see that that thinking process drove my project from the start. The questions I pose at the end about how I create a culturally sustaining space and hold myself and others accountable carried through the project and as I transcribed I often found myself asking what I could have done differently in*

*a moment or whether I was holding myself and the other volunteers accountable. The focus on the dangers of silence not only carries through all three theories but carries through my work in the form of Whiteness theory and language used by volunteers.*

*Having completed my project, I see that within my theory I may have overlooked some complexity of identity. By this I mean that I assumed all the leadership of Core Stage was white, rather than inquiring and learning the difference between white and white passing. That said, my thinking about identity and positionality has stayed roughly the same, though like my other theories, has progressed and grown. When I began this process my theory of identity and positionality was based in insider vs. outsider, privilege and silence, all things that carried through my project. While I was an insider with the organization, I ended up being an outsider to students as the teen program was new. Not only did the teens not know me but I was an outsider in terms of language, race and culture. Something that stuck with me is that "...coming from a privileged background with no economic, cultural, linguistic or racial oppression, means that I need to be aware and ok with not being able to connect with all students, or that I won't always be the best resource for them." A true fact that points to the importance of representation within all of the organization's programs and something myself and volunteers struggled with as predominantly white college students. In all honesty, I think I needed to reread my theory as I continued through the project because even though it was based in the different iteration of my project where I creating culturally sustaining curricula by myself, it has important points on necessary self-reflection and holding myself accountable when I back away from a conversation, just as I did with the young Latina girl in the summer half-day program. Though slight shifts and growth have occurred, I still have a focus on silence and how staying silent or backing away*

*reinforces societal norms and upholds systems of oppression. This theory is every growing, evolving and changing.*

*In terms of the future, there is one quote that I think will drive me as I move forward: “As I continue with my future work, these questions will not be ones that can be easily answered, rather, it will be a process of learning and growth, listening facilitating and overall just supporting a strong young generation of leaders who I believe have the power to begin dismantling these oppressive systems.” A strong young generation of leaders who have the power to begin dismantling oppressive systems. A bold statement rooted in agency, trust and hope and one I will stick by. As I move forward, I will keep this in mind and continue to reevaluate this theory. Like all theories it will continue to change slightly, but for me it is important to take the time to reflect. I will continue to hold myself and those around me accountable and I hope this is something future leadership in Core Stage will do as well. Rather than stay silent I will speak out against oppressive systems, yet also sit down and listen to those around me. I will learn and also educate other white people and support their growing of critical consciousness and continually check myself and my privilege.*