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Three Theories of Understanding

Identity and Positionality in the World

Working with youth has always been an interest of mine. My first job was at an indoor bounce house park called Cowabunga's. I loved working there because it was such a fun place, and it was my first time formally working with youth. After two years, most of my work friends had left for college and I felt that I had outgrown working there. In my senior year of high school, I started working at the "school's out program" at the YMCA, and later at the YMCA summer camp. I took the job for no particular reason aside from the fact I needed a job, and the free gym membership appealed to me. What I never imagined was how hard it would be and how I would often be too tired to go to the gym after work. Working at the Y was an impossible balancing act of trying to keep the proper staff-to-child ratio in the classroom, while constantly being pulled away from the classroom to supervise frequent bathroom trips and whatever other crises arose. There were endless rules, paperwork, and constant training sessions. I spent every shift feeling like I was failing because there was always a tiny issue that needed to be explained and documented, like a kid being late for dismissal, or someone who fell and scraped his or her knee. It was also really hard to get a room full of 50 kids to line up and move quietly to the next room without disturbing all the other activities at the facility.

Sometime during my time at the YMCA, I was taking a girl to the bathroom and she struck up a conversation with me. She said, "You know there are nice counselors, medium counselors, and mean counselors." She then listed off a few staff and the category into which they fell. Nice counselors were the ones who always said yes to playing games and didn't enforce many rules, and mean ones would yell often and say no to taking you to the bathroom. I asked her what I was, and she said I was a medium counselor because, "You will play games

with us, but you make sure we go places on time, and you to tell the boys to stop being rude." I remember being very flattered by this analysis. Her comment made me feel like I was maybe pretty good at my job because I was able to be responsible and fun, and that was later confirmed when I got a promotion and a raise. Despite my personal experiences with the challenges of youth work, the phrase "those who can, do; those who can't, teach" rang in my ears. I never thought of being a youth worker or a teacher as a viable career path. Youth work used to seem like a hobby, something I could enjoy until I finished college before I had to get a real job. My high school, like most, encouraged and celebrated students who wanted to be doctors, lawyers, or engineers. I never even thought of youth workers as being professionals despite my time at the YMCA in high school. Everyone who worked there was so young; my bosses were in their 20s for the most part, and it felt like a temporary gig.

That preconceived notion was shattered for me when I came to college. I remember going to the community engagement fair at Clark and being drawn to the Jumpstart table. I met a woman named Lynn who explained the program to me and gave me an application. It was a preschool program that consisted of teaching language and literacy skills to preschoolers at schools who wanted the extra support in Worcester. I was wary of the twelve-hour-a-week commitment; it was going to be hard to do with my classes because the Jumpstart hours were during the school day. After a serious look at my schedule, I decided to try it. Little did I know then that it would be a life-changing decision, and that I would still be with Jumpstart three years later, preparing to start my praxis project with them. My time with Jumpstart made me realize how much research and planning goes into youth work, and that teaching is a complicated and critically important profession. I took my first education class at Clark and declared my major the spring of my freshman year, and my life has been so much more meaningful because of it. I

felt so much freedom in my education at Clark, like my professors did not have to hold anything back. I learned a lot about injustices in the world I had never heard about before. It was both eye-opening and heartbreaking. Another thing that I was confronted with in my education at Clark was my own privilege. I had always been aware of it, as a white cisgender woman whose parents were able to afford private education. I knew that I was given opportunities in life that others were not. However, college was the first time where I began to interrogate my privilege and biases. I have learned the importance of noticing my biases so that they can be noted in my work.

Looking back on my life and my insecurities in taking the career path of teaching, I realize that a lot of it was probably a result of my own internalized misogyny. A woman's role in society has almost always been to take care of the children and to nurture, which are qualities needed to be a youth worker. Teaching is a woman-dominated field, which in my opinion, is why it is seen as an inferior career. I used to subconsciously equate femininity with being inferior and that is what made me feel so insecure about wanting to teach. Making teaching a women's profession discourages men from joining. It is so important for young boys to have someone like them to look up to and to feel cared for by them. Assigning a gender to teaching also excludes other gender identities from joining, which is also important. For classrooms to be inclusive spaces, teaching itself needs to be an inclusive career. At the end of my first year of college, I told some of my friends from home that I was going to pursue teaching. One of them told me I was too smart to do that, and then they all joked about how I must have coloring pages for homework. This is another reason why I felt that I was wasting my potential. I felt like I had to prove that I was capable of challenging work.

Over time, I've learned to embrace my femininity and find power in it. I have also learned that pursuing your passions is never a waste of time and that I do not have to prove my intelligence. Coming to Clark has helped me to challenge my old ways of thinking because it showed me how many intelligent and passionate people want to pursue youth work. I have also been lucky to have brilliant and encouraging professors, many of whom have become role models to me. It is refreshing to be encouraged to enter this field by my professors when I have faced so much discouragement from other people. Jumpstart, my praxis site, mostly consists of people who identify as female. Through Jumpstart,I have made some great friendships with people from other schools in Worcester and I am grateful for the sense of community that has given me. I feel that my time with Jumpstart has made me a more empathetic person. At my praxis site, I want everyone to feel included. I want my cohort as well as my Jumpstart teammates to be able to talk about my research with me if they are curious about it, and express their ideas and concerns. It is important to me to be able to hear from many different voices and to make my praxis collaborative, even though I am technically working by myself on the project. I hope this project allows me to build a community that includes both Clark students and Jumpstart members.

Theory of Social Inequality

It was a chilly Friday afternoon at the preschool where, through the Jumpstart program, I had just started working a few months before. It happened at the end of the day during dismissal time. I was playing with one of the boys who was left. It started with me saying my dad was picking me up to take me home for the weekend. The boy said, "You have a dad?" I said yes, "You didn't tell me," he said, "I also have a mom and a sister," I said. "I know that, and I know that your sister lives at home." I did not mention my family too often because it was not relevant in most of our conversations unless we were reading a story related to family. It was endearing to me that he remembered that my sister lived at home. There was a moment of silence until he asked a follow-up question, "Are your mom and your dad white?" I said yes and he said, "My dad is Black, I'm white and Black." I said, "That's wonderful, do you and your dad like to spend a lot of time together?" He replied, "Yes." After that, we talked about things we liked to do with our dads until he was dismissed. At dismissal, I would normally talk to the parents and tell them about things we learned today or what their child excelled in. When I saw his mother at pick-up, I told her about that conversation. She told me that he had recently developed an interest in race. She said that the weekend before, he asked an Asian boy on the playground if he was Chinese. She said he was increasingly curious about race and that she would talk more about it with him. She was happy that I told her about our conversation because she knew that it was time to open up a dialogue about it.

This moment made me reflect on my own life. I am not sure I ever really thought about my race deeply until I was in high school, and now here was this four-year-old, talking about his

race and inquiring about mine. Part of me was embarrassed after this realization; this young boy was more thoughtful than me, a college student. To me, social inequality is the reason that I was able to go my entire childhood without thinking about my race, while this young boy thought about his often. While it is wonderful that he is curious and proud of who he is, if he was noticing these types of differences, he was also most likely noticing negative differences associated with race. In our Jumpstart training, we learn that Black and Brown boys are the group of people most likely to be disciplined and called out by the teacher. I think about this statistic often. I try to check myself before I react to situations in order to make sure that I am not contributing to the problem. There were times in that classroom and in other classrooms where Black children were met with a shorter fuse by the head teacher than other students. This boy was also very smart; he remembered every fact I ever told him about myself and would recall them at random times. The week after that interaction, he asked what my dad and I did while I was home. It was impressive that he remembered our conversation and wanted to follow up on it. I even talked with my major advisor who I met with frequently to talk about Jumpstart about him because I felt that he was bored with our curriculum and I wanted to find ways to engage him. These examples are what led me to believe that this boy probably did notice differences in the way he was treated versus other people in his life. He may not have had the whole picture yet, but it was only a matter of time before he caught on. I have always wondered how his mother's conversation about race with him went. He was such a curious and intelligent child that I imagine that he asked a lot of follow-up questions. I hoped that it was a good conversation and that he left it with the answers he was seeking.

That conversation would probably be the first of many for him about race. As a young Black person living in America, he was going to be forced to grow up and become aware of his

surroundings much younger than most people. The process had already begun at four years old.

He will have to have difficult conversations about how to stay safe when confronted by a police

officer, or be told what a Sundown town is and to avoid them. This is the reality for young

people of color in America. They are forced to learn at a young age how to survive in a racist

system. It is even more disheartening when I compare it to my own experience. I am someone

who is able to go places without fear of being harassed or assaulted because of my race. This

paper asks how we make sense of the world, and I have often asked myself this question. It is

hard for me to make sense of it when the world is structured in such a cruel way. I decided to

look for answers in my education at Clark. I picked up a history minor, and I am slowly learning

about race relations in the United States throughout history. I feel that this foundation has helped

me at least fill in the gaps of how this system came to be from a historical perspective.

In "Black Bastards and White Millionaires" by Charles Payne (1984), he talks about how

academics theorize about educational inequality. Something that struck me was when he said,

"Producing work that serves our social and emotional needs, work that makes us feel good about

ourselves, is not always going to be the same as producing work that contributes to change"

(Payne, 35). My biggest fear in my youth work is being self-serving and actually hindering

change, which is something I try to counteract by trying to educate myself through my classes.

Learning about social movements throughout history, and what their successes and failures were,

has helped me to better understand what I can do in my life to help advocate for change. I hope

that educating my future students and helping to build their social-emotional skills gives them

the tools they will need later in life to enact change. Payne says, "While top-down change may

improve the life conditions of those at the bottom, we have every reason to think that when those

on the bottom themselves participate in changing their lives, they may also be significantly

changed as persons, becoming more creative and effective social participants" (Payne, 1984, p. 29). In many moments throughout history, the biggest change has happened through grassroots movements, which are often led by students who are able to articulate the problems they are facing and then organize to find a solution. I believe that a bottom-up approach can be very effective in challenging social inequality and that students are a key part of that. So I hope to help my students develop their language and literacy skills so they can play a role in that change. I hope that through this class and my other academic pursuits, I can combine what I have learned to continue to make sense of social inequality and develop my personal philosophy.

Theory of Social Change Essay

In my first year of Jumpstart (a national Pre-K program with a chapter in Worcester, MA), there was a boy who was very difficult to work with because he was easily agitated. All of the mentors dreaded having him in their group. He was a dual language learner who immigrated to the United States at the beginning of that year, whose first language was Twi. He knew little to no English when he first started school over the summer. By the time I met him in the fall, he could understand most of what was said, but he would not speak it back. One day the teacher pulled me aside and explained that his English was not where it should be for him to move on to Kindergarten. She said she would start to work on it with him individually and asked me if I could work with him one-on-one during our Jumpstart sessions. Working with him was a bit of a challenge. Given his lack of spoken-English vocabulary, it was extremely hard for him to express himself. He would often get frustrated and cry because people could not understand him. On occasion he would hit. I was very nervous to take on this new role. I was not sure if he would like to work with me, but I was also flattered that the teacher put her confidence in me, so I agreed. The only objects we had to use during the reading portion of the Jumpstart session were the books of the week, flashcards with vocab, and a whiteboard with a dry erase marker.

The main objective was to get him to speak English more, so with some trial and error, the boy and I came up with a system to get him to learn the Jumpstart vocabulary words with the resources I had. The system is best explained through an example. One time, one of the week's vocabulary words was "stomp." To begin, I would write "stomp" one letter at a time on the board and make him repeat the letter and sound it made back to me, S-T-O-M-P. Once I was finished writing the letters, I would underline them and say the word as a whole, and he would

repeat the word as a whole. Then I would demonstrate the meaning. For this one, I pulled him out of his seat and began to show him how to stomp. He was a very active child and I thought moving around might help him focus. Luckily that day he was wearing his favorite cowboy boots, so he had so much fun stomping that he was giggling. We needed to take that moment to play and be silly while working. Taking that extra moment to act the word out helped him to remember it better too. By the end of the year his vocabulary had drastically expanded, and he seemed to be a happier kid overall now that people could understand him better. Instead of crying and screaming, he would give hugs and be very affectionate with his new friends. I picked up my hours at the preschool and began working with him four times a week. The transformation was amazing, and it was evident how much work both he and the teacher had put into his learning, and perhaps I played a small role as well. I had my own growth that year too, I went from being wary of working with this student to starting to cry when he hugged me goodbye on my last day.

What I learned from working with this student is how vital strong language and literacy skills are for a child to be happy. I also learned that learning through play is a powerful tool in the classroom. The first observation may seem obvious but witnessing it first-hand is a different experience. The child in my story was miserable and angry when I first met him. He had no real friends, and all the other students were afraid to play with him because he was so easily upset. Learning how to communicate with others and how to read changed his demeanor. By the end of the year, he was one of the most popular kids in the class. The more they are read to, the more vocabulary they are exposed to, and the more likely they are to use it. This expansion does not just make them smarter; it also helps them to have the words to name their feelings. When children can describe how they are feeling, they can understand and regulate that emotion better.

This makes them stronger and healthier people. I know this because I have seen first-hand the power language and literacy have on a child's well-being.

My first year of Jumpstart made a huge impact on my life and is the reason I am pursuing teaching as a career. I wrote about another anecdote from that first year in my second portfolio piece on theories of inequality. That anecdote helped me to see how I understand inequality and this one helped me to understand what I want to do about it. There is a relationship between literacy skills and inequality. Students who do not develop their language and literacy skills will suffer the consequences of it later in life. In my praxis project, I am interested in the relationship between the development of literacy skills and play. The problem with that is that I am not sure what change I would make. I know I want to follow in the footsteps of my Jumpstart mentor and build on the organization's research. However, if I agree with their programming, I am not sure how to be an agent of change. The other struggle with working with a national organization is that even if I do find something I would change, it would be unlikely for it to be implemented by the organization. For these reasons, I decided to switch my focus from studying the students to working with the Jumpstart college student members, specifically the team leaders. They are the ones who implement the curriculum and who are hands-on with the students. I am interested in their perspective in the work that they do, what they like about it, and how they help students build language and literacy skills. I am also interested in their relationship-building with each other. Jumpstart sessions cannot be run alone, it requires teamwork and trust between members, which is facilitated by the team leaders. Team leaders are also the bridge between the supervisor who handles all the curriculum and the team members who implement it, which puts them in a really interesting position with unique responsibilities. I am a better person for my time spent with Jumpstart, so it only makes sense to partner with them for my praxis and build on their

work. I am hopeful that I can provide support to the Jumpstart team leaders who have given so much time and energy to the organization, while also providing helpful information to my supervisor by expressing the needs of team members, toward the goal of making Jumpstart a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved.

Reflection on Three Theories of Understanding- 1 Year Later

Positionality and Identity

I still align with what I have said about my positionality and identity because none of it has changed. As I enter Clark's MAT program, I will continue to think about this essay and the way that my identity impacts those around me.

Theory of Social Inequality

In the past few years I have had a lot more conversations with students since the one I described in this essay. It has made me realize how I cannot control everything that happens outside of the classroom, but I can control what goes on in my future classroom. I have also taken an interest in equity over equality to implement in my future classroom. Students have different needs, and providing them the same solutions to problems will not help them as much as trying to tailor solutions to fit their individual needs. I have also taken an interest in possibly pursuing my license to be a high school history teacher, which I never thought would come out of my minor. I have developed a real love for history and have learned so much that I want to be able to share it with students.

Theory of Social Change

In my praxis project, I attempted to engage in social change within Jumpstart, but I did not see any immediate impacts. My hope is that it will inspire change in the future. By showing

how collective efficacy is valuable because it enhances the team leaders' performance, perhaps more of an emphasis will be put on the team leaders collaborating and getting to know each other. I hope that this will also create change on the community level because it will improve team leaders' interactions with the kids they work with.