

## Critical Theory of Inequity

When I was a junior in high school, I was assigned a personal essay on privilege. This topic stumped me, as I had never thought of myself as having privilege or lacking it. Some of my identities seemed to cancel each other out or oppose each other, such as how in situations where I might have some privilege because I am white, I may also lack other privileges because I am a woman. I did not know if I was allowed to write about a time in which I was both privileged and not privileged, because the concepts of “privilege” and “lack of privilege” that my teacher described seemed to be mutually exclusive. I didn’t have enough points of comparison to write about other identities, such as growing up middle class or being born in the U.S.

One question I did not ask at the time, however, was if there was any point to labeling my individual identities. This leads directly to the question of who is to blame for the privileging of some identities over others. I felt that if I made a claim about how privilege was connected to my whiteness or a lack of privilege was associated with me being a woman, I needed to find a specific place in society that this privilege or lack of privilege originated from in order to prove that it was real, and to prove to my teacher that I could correctly identify what “privilege” is.

According to Charles Payne in *Getting What We Ask For*, there are many different ways that scholars attempt to place blame for inequity. Payne identifies ways that scholars place blame on specific attributes or aspects of culture of those who are disadvantaged by systems of oppression, such as by saying that those who are oppressed passively accept their fates or did something to cause this oppression, or place blame on the most disadvantaged of the “haves”, such as by saying that racism is only caused by poorer classes of white people. He also identifies ways in which scholars trivialize interactions between those who are of different social classes by only taking into account face-to-face interactions, or by denying that there is a relationship

between those of different social classes at all. Payne concludes that these approaches oversimplify the problem, as placing blame on a specific sector of society and not taking into account that systems of oppression involve interaction between various groups demonstrates a denial of how these systems work.

In a utopian world, no one would need to reflect on privilege or lack thereof, however, our world is not a utopia, and there are systems in our society that afford varying levels of privilege to different people. Instead of placing blame, we need to reflect on what roles we play in these systems. For example, as a teacher, I need to be aware that I am in a position of power in my classroom, which means that I am given opportunities to challenge or uphold systems of oppression, because my students have trust in my co-teachers and I and are always listening to the things we say. I also need to be aware that there are people in positions of power above me who are given similar opportunities when designing the structures in which I teach, so that I can take into account these structures as I teach. Payne references a cartoon from the Vietnam War that explains how systems of oppression can be upheld even if no one believes they are responsible for upholding them. In this cartoon, “[a] man working in a munitions factory explains that he is not killing; he’s just trying to get out a product”, while the man who crates bombs says he is “just packaging a product”, and the pilot who flies the plane that drops the bomb is “just pushing a button” (Payne, 37), and no one takes responsibility for the killing that occurs when the bomb is dropped. A similar phenomenon can occur with the systems of oppression that exist within education. An administrator could say they are simply running a school or district based on what they have been told is best by other administrators or what has been done in the past, a teacher could say they are simply teaching by the guidelines given to them by administrators, and students could say they are simply following the expectations of the

teacher. If the students were being taught in a way that upholds oppression or inequity, by oppressing them or leading them to oppress others, neither the administrator nor the teacher would take the blame.

I can't remember what I wrote about for my essay in high school, but if I were to be assigned the same essay now, I would consider that the concept of privilege can be best described not by a specific moment in my life or a specific identity I have, but by considering the larger systems that I am part of at my job and in other areas of my life. My decision to become a teacher has allowed me to assume responsibilities that I have never had before. Among these are the responsibility to teach my students in a way that is equitable, and the responsibility to ensure that they also treat others with respect. My praxis project has only strengthened my belief that I need to take these responsibilities seriously. Students see both their teachers and their peers as role models, and therefore, they listen to and copy the things that others say in the classroom, and ideas spread quickly from teachers to students and among students. How I approach my job as a teacher directly affects my students and the classroom community, and if systems of oppression are challenged or upheld in this community.

#### References:

Payne, C. M. (1984). Black Bastards and White Millionaires. *Getting What We Ask for: The Ambiguity of Success and Failure in Urban Education*, Greenwood Pr. pp. 7–42.