

Theory of Positionality and Identity

Growing up on Cape Cod, many of the people I interacted with on a daily basis were similar to me. I am white and come from a middle-class family, with my father coming from a lower-middle class family in rural New Hampshire, and my mother coming from an upper-middle class family in suburban New York, both with European ancestry. I didn't feel like I had to think about my identity much growing up, because I grew up mostly around people with similar identities. Currently, in the school district that I attended, about 75% of the students are white, and the majority of teachers that I had were white as well. Although the district has not shared information on the economic statuses of students, most of the students I knew were middle class. The district is located in the town I grew up in, which is about 90% white.

While growing up around people with similar identities as myself and not having to worry about my own identity as much is in itself a privilege, I have also enjoyed the privilege of connecting with people who have different identities and/or different ways of viewing the world than myself. One space in which this has happened is this university. I am grateful to have the privilege of going to college, because Clark, and CYES especially, has exposed me to many different viewpoints on education and other topics.

Teaching is another way that I have connected with others whose identities are both similar and different from my own. While teachers are often not afforded much power in the educational systems they teach in or privilege in society as a whole, being a teacher comes with many responsibilities. I am in a position of power in my classroom, which means that I make decisions every day that affect my students, how they view the world, and how they view their position in the world. I teach students who not only have many different backgrounds and identities, but are also in the beginning stages of the process of figuring out who they are and

what it means to be part of their communities and society as a whole. The school I work at is more diverse in some ways than other schools in the area, including the district that I attended from k-12. For example, my school tends to have more bilingual students and students who are from other countries or whose families come from other countries than other schools in the area. This means that all of my students are exposed to other children of similar and different backgrounds than their own, and it also means that I interact with students whose identities are similar and different from my own every day, and that I have a lot to learn about and from every single one of them.

One way I have done this is through language. I teach a Spanish class at the school, and I encourage all of my students to participate as much as they can, no matter if they already speak Spanish or if they have never been exposed to Spanish before. I once had a three-year-old student whose mother was from Brazil and also happened to be a teacher at the school. The student was fluent in both English and Portuguese, but usually did not want to connect with any of her teachers besides her mother, and wouldn't always answer me when I spoke to her. One day, she was making shapes out of play-dough and when I asked her what she was making, she pointed to the heart shaped piece and said "coração". She was delighted when I replied "corazón" and explained to her that the words were similar in Portuguese and Spanish. Eventually, this student began to participate more in my Spanish classes as she discovered more words that were pronounced similarly in both languages, and she began communicating with her teachers more in general. Interactions such as these allow students to be more connected to their teachers and more open to communicating with us.

As I share my knowledge with the students, using English and Spanish, the students become more comfortable sharing about their own languages and cultures, no matter if they are

similar or different to mine. Some students also share with me how they use their own languages and cultural knowledge in the classroom, such as when two students discovered that they both spoke French, and then told me about a conversation they had in French at the lunch table. My co-teachers and I create as many opportunities as we can to open conversations with our students about their families, the languages they speak, the holidays they celebrate, the foods they eat, and anything else the students want to share about their personal lives. We have found that this has created an environment in which everyone, the teachers included, can learn more about each other, and about our own identities.

In my praxis project, one of the types of communication that I looked at was called “teacher-led conversation”. One common type of teacher-led conversation was one in which teachers ask each student, the class as a whole, or a large group of students a question that pertains to the students’ own experiences or a common experience that the class had. Each student who wants to answer then shares their own experiences. This often leads students to initiate a similar type of conversation by asking their friends or teachers similar questions to what teachers ask. This is one way in which students and teachers use our own experiences to connect with each other by learning more about each other and bonding over shared experiences.

Something else that I have learned through teaching is how to create effective working relationships with a variety of people with identities that are similar and different from my own. I have worked with many different teachers over the years, some of which I already knew in other contexts, such as some of my own former teachers, teachers that I knew prior because they went to the same high school as I did, and even my own mother. My co-teachers and I each have identities and methods of teaching that affect how we work and how we interact with each other and our students. For example, like many other younger teachers that I have worked with, I have

felt pressure to be the “fun teacher” who doesn’t enforce rules, while older teachers may feel like they have to be more authoritarian. It can be difficult to remember not to give into such pressures, but it is important that I teach in a way that is best for my students, which may include aspects of many different styles of teaching, including being “fun” while also enforcing rules. My co-teachers and I each also have identities that we can use to our advantage in the classroom, such as how my identity as bilingual and my role as a Spanish teacher help me connect with students through language.

Teaching has also affected my identity and how others outside of the school view me. In an education in film class at Clark, I learned how the media portrays teachers in a variety of different ways, such as heroes, villains, or ignorant bystanders. This helped me understand why I feel pressure to be “one of the good teachers” and why some people view teachers as a heroes to society, saying “I could never do what you do”, while other people say it’s an “easy job”, or even view teachers as villains, saying that we are not doing are jobs correctly or even that we are “indoctrinating children”.

My upbringing, my experiences at Clark, and my experiences teaching have all shaped my identity greatly. As I teach, I need to take into account how my identity fits into the classroom environment, and how this affects how I interact with others and how others interact with me.