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Theories of Understanding

My experiences within education have been shaped by a variety of factors, but the major theme that I have seen is overall inequality throughout education. There have been some ways that I have had more privilege within these systems, and some ways where I had less. Being a low-income first generation student in schools that were underfunded and labeled as struggling caused many challenges in the trajectory of my education, but due to other aspects of my identity and experiences, those challenges did not impact me equally. As a white student, and a student who had access to a lot of educational resources that other students in my schools did not, I had privilege that allowed for me to navigate and succeed within the educational system with more ease than others.

My mother worked at a preschool that was considered one of the best, so I was able to attend for no cost. Attending this school set me up to succeed in public elementary school. By the time I entered kindergarten I already knew most of the material. I received a lot of praise from my teachers about my academics, and this created a cycle where I was confident about my education and would continue doing well and receiving more praise. I was also a white child in rooms where most students were not. It was obvious that race had also played a role in my experiences. Teachers would pay less attention to other students' success and tended to assume the worst of some students instead of supporting them in the same way that they supported me.

From a young age, I had a strong support system to connect me to resources that could be helpful to me, such as youth work programming. Some of this programming was not the most effective, but a lot of it I really enjoyed and benefited immensely from it. I loved the community and support system that I found within these programs. They were extremely helpful as I got older and started to see that I could go to college if that's what I wanted to do. Coming from a family that didn't know a ton about education at all, it was the teen programming that I was involved in that helped me navigate that. I would have not had these opportunities without the large support system that I had the privilege of having.

The reason that all of these factors so heavily impacted my education is due to the widespread inequity in the educational system. There are many layers of injustice that exceed the educational system, but greatly impact them. One layer is that there are issues in the larger structures that make decisions regarding schools, such as funding and curriculum decisions that give disproportionately less needed resources to schools in areas with larger populations of people of color and design curricula without considering how race plays a role in schooling dynamics. Another layer is personal factors that impact a student's academic life, such as food access, family involvement, and educational support outside of school. Considering how much schooling has an impact on career outcomes and later lives of students, this injustice has extreme implications. These different layers, and all of the small factors that influence how a student is able to interact with education, give insight into what led to my specific experience with academics and schooling.

Due to all of the factors that impact injustice in the education system, it is impossible to find solutions that will fix everything within the system. The system will never be completely just until all of the inequity that impacts students is eradicated. Sometimes, this can lead to a

feeling of powerlessness and a lack of hope in bettering education for all students. However, there are still ways to make a difference within education and do things that have real impact for students.

There are so many layers of oppression and injustice, it is hard to assign blame and accountability to the issues within systems. Many blame individual institutions for harm caused within them, but when the systems that inform institutions produce inequality, how much of the inequality within the institutions is that individual institution's fault? In addition, on the individual level, how much blame can we put on the people acting within an already harmful structure? These questions have no direct answer, but accountability is needed on all levels to mitigate some of the causes of inequality. White supremacy and classism have informed so many of the systems that we still utilize today, so the harm continues to be reproduced. As long as we use these systems, a problem will still be present. Even if only one system is fixed, it will not actually be fixed until all other systems are because they are all interconnected.

It is difficult to fix a structure when inequality is built in at all levels, and it feels like no individual is to blame. However, there needs to be constant critique and pushback of these systems in order to mitigate it at all. For example, teachers may not be the root issue in a racist education system, but a teacher that allows themself not to acknowledge how their actions that possibly have racist impacts affect their students and actively change that behavior. The complicated, larger structures of society may be the largest issue, but complacency at all levels only allows a more rapid reproduction of the inequalities in our society.

As I have progressed through my education and career, I have found that I really enjoy working with youth and in educational spaces. While it is sometimes stressful, I usually go into each day excited to be there and leave feeling like I have done something useful. I enjoy how

personal the field is and how much of the work is building connections and really getting to know everyone whether they be coworkers or students. I grew up in these environments and youth work really helped in developing the person I am today. I built really great and supportive relationships with the youth workers in my life and understand the impact that that can have. I am passionate about working to create supportive relationships with students where I can be a consistent resource within their lives. I also saw first hand the ways that youth work can be ineffective or harmful. Just because a program has good intentions, does not mean that young people are benefiting from it or that there are not major issues within the structure of the program. Throughout my work, I plan to look critically at programming, and ensure that it is effectively achieving the goal of supporting young people to the best of its ability.

I do not think that I am going to solve inequality within education and fully change the realities of all of the youth that I work with. However, I hope that within my work I will be able to have an impact on a student to student basis, and serve as a tool that will help them navigate their experiences. In all work I do, I also plan to hold myself accountable for understanding the positionality that I hold within the system and think critically about how I can make changes within my work and actions to ensure that I am not perpetrating these cycles of oppression to continue even further. I also think listening to students and proving that you have their best interest at heart by continually showing up for them allows for a more supportive environment where students are able to grow and learn, so I plan to make that a large priority within my work.