Positionality and Identity

We sat down and introduced ourselves to our fellow table group members as is very normal for any class here at Clark, sharing names and why we joined the class, but this class was a little bit different. While I saw many of my fellow Clark students in the class, the other half of the class was made up of adult youth workers from the Worcester community who would be learning alongside us to get a certification through the Youth Workers Training Institute. The class started with this binary of Clark students and Youth Workers, kids from all over the country and mainly Worcester natives. Just like I knew my fellow Clarkies, many of these youth workers knew each other or had worked together in some capacity.

My table in particular consisted of two other Clark students, three adults who I assumed to be youth workers. I quickly learned that the women worked at a local after school program that took all the kids that had been kicked out of other places, that they had kids walk to their place in the middle of snowstorms hoping they would be open because they did not want to be at home. Through her stories and our discussions over the course of the semester, I saw the compassion that this woman had for these kids but also learned the tough love she imparted on them innately based on her lived experience in a way that seemed to gain her respect. The other two adults always came together, one clearly an adult, the other maybe 3-5 years older than the college students that populate Clark and the other half of the room. The older man was a rather large Black man who I later learned had experienced life in a gang himself. The other man seemed to be there in some sort of mentee capacity, and over the course of the semester ended up giving a perspective more reflective of the youth that we were discussing. On that first day when it came my time to share why I took the class I recited the normal spiel of what I was interested in, about working with youth and connecting to the kids who were often written off by other peers and adults. The older man questioned why I wanted to work with younger kids and it threw me off guard. He was very direct with his criticism and it was intimidating to confront such an explicit question of my methods. I believe I responded saying that I thought it was rewarding to work with kids as they were still not concrete in their identity and that it seemed easier to start them on an easier path earlier. He countered with a discussion of how he worked with so many teens that basically programs like I described had not been able to reach and it felt like a critic I had never been expecting.

Most of the time, when a family member or friend asked what I would do with the rest of my life and I said that I wanted to do youth work, it often received praise as a compassionate career path with the occasional criticism solely because it would not make me the most money. In this instance, I was forced to stop and think about my identity as a future youth worker. After leaving that class I realized that part of my hesitation with working with teens at the time was a sense that we were too close in age, that we would be too much like peers and that it would be like “who is she to come in here and try to be a mentor, or try to help when she is not more than two years older than us?” Since then, I have questioned this thought; it was never my intention to feel more comfortable when I had authority. I always think that what makes it easier for me to connect with kids is based on me treating them with respect, but then why did this closeness in age make working with teens seem so daunting? My thinking on this has become more complicated and more critical. I realized I did feel more comfortable when I felt that I was solidly viewed as an authority figure, that teens seemed too close in age and I was not as comfortable holding this position, even if it was a mentor relationship. But then again what authority do I really have over younger kids anyways and was that how I wanted to frame myself in the context of working with these youth? When I examined my own behavior, I identified a deficit mindset I thought that I had avoided through my education at Clark. At the time, I knew that I had been taught all the fancy terms like deficit mindset and the myths of the achievement gap and therefore I had figured it out. But if the reason I was more comfortable with youth is because they were more malleable and trusting, maybe I had not been thinking hard enough about my positionality as a white middle class female in addition to my position as a Clark student interacting with Worcester and the Main South neighborhood.

The people I have learned the most from are the people from Worcester that have lived experiences so far from my own. The youth worker that questioned my plans offered a new perspective and encouraged me to continue pushing my intellectual comfort zone by facing real life experiences. As Milner discusses in his article, researching others requires “researchers' engaging in evolving and emergent critical race and cultural self-reflection”(395). He uses Critical Race Theory to support this argument, a theory that explains how our systems of government, economy and society are inherently racist and that the White people within this system perpetuate it, in turn maintaining their power within this system. This man’s experience was so far from my own, and it is important to acknowledge that part of this was related to race and class. The way in which he brought about this critique was direct and somewhat intimidating. The difference in our cultural experiences due to these factors even affected how we critique others and what standards we held each other to. Looking back, I see how I came across as this naive college student out of touch with the life she was planning on pursuing and the space I was attempting to interject myself into.

I am now realizing that this act of interjecting is key, that this is where I am trying to soften the landing in spaces that are different from the one I grew up in. Due to my experiences, I feel able to address the differences in experiences no matter how much and actively work to have it enhance our work that we do together. My experience in this youth work class taught me that even when a person might think they have done the work and have developed the skills to be the more respectful and intellectual and successful individual there are still nuances to our behaviors that promote those original characteristics that were meant to be corrected. As a white person I am a product of a racist society, for example. And growing up in an upper-middle class neighborhood that was extremely white had an influence on how I act towards others. My mother’s work as a women and gender studies professor and her work in academia in general encouraged me to be interested in other perspectives and experiences outside my own and to view myself with a critical lens. I am accustomed to my peers seeing school as a way to be successful in the world. And I have been encouraged to believe an over simplified notion that you should treat people how you want to be treated, but for other people the reality is not always that simple. I realize that I can still have this idealized view of the world that others cannot when the system privileges me.

Now going into this large praxis project, I am able to frame myself in a way where I recognize the significance of my identity in the space I am researching. I will be working with the Center for Nonviolent Solutions, implementing some of their curriculum in a summer camp in hopes of examining how trust is required to commit to more difficult situations that arise during conflict. I will be working with kids between the ages of six and twelve, an age that I am relatively comfortable working with. But even in this comfortable space, I hope to push the boundaries in terms of how much I trust them as well. I hope to take what I learned from the youth worker and the class we took together and rearrange how I distribute the power I inherently hold through my identity and empower the participants of my praxis project in a way that privileges their experience as a tool towards their success. I would hope to function as a facilitator of the project and to empower the members of the project to take charge in interrogating their conversations closely and do so in a way that is comfortable and familiar to them.

Theories of Inequality

At Clark any Community Youth and Education Studies major is required to take the course Complexities of Urban Schooling. In that class you are paired with a teacher in one of the Worcester Public Schools to observe their classroom. I was assigned to a third grade classroom at Columbus Park Elementary and I remember my excitement the night before about all the kids I would get to meet and interact with. Unfortunately, the next day I found that the reality fell quite short of my expectations. The teacher seemed surprised to see me there as if no one had told her I was coming, and she took my meaning of “observation” to mean that all I would do was stand at the back and watch. Or at least this is what I figured when I received a suspicious look after working with the one girl who did not have a partner. This woman was a middle aged white woman teaching a class of I would guess 80% students of color and by the end of the class I was horrified by the impact I knew she was leaving on these kids.

The following occurrence was directed towards the larger class as they worked on their multiplication tables. Just as I had done in third grade, they had weekly timed tests as they went through the 10s, 5s, 2s, 3s and so on and so on in order of complexity. Each student was in a different place and it was clear that she was unhappy with the progress of many of the students of color. I vividly remember her admonishing the students, criticizing the small missteps of students of color while praising those who often succeeded (mainly White kids as well as one Southeast Asian boy). Even when she pulled aside the kids who were struggling into a small group to work with them, what I observed was continued bullying on her part and an abnormal expectation of silence and attention. She would repeat herself many times attempting to get their attention when there was very little talking going on. One particular student that got picked on the most was a Black boy who often forgot his pencil or some other small infraction that caused the teacher to reprimand him in front of the class and at one or two points send him out of the class to the disciplinary room. At one point this teacher looked at me as if to say, “You understand how unruly these kids can be, how annoying!” as if I were an understanding ally.

Although I knew immediately that we were not on the same page, it took me a while to identify exactly why it made me so uncomfortable. Looking back, I felt that if I even appeared as though I was “on her side” that would mean that I was against the students and that was something that felt very wrong. But that was how the classroom was run, this white woman versus most of the students of color in her classroom. The way that this class was run set up the students of color in the classroom as others and blamed her criticism on their performance. But ignoring race in the classroom is just as harmful because, “If we do not do all that we can to prevent [injustices], we are accomplices, violators of an absolute human command that says accept life for all together or not at all” (Payne 40). By not acknowledging how the system disadvantaged her students, this teacher was further harming her students of color. It was clear to me that this teacher did not see any wrong in how she was teaching. Those in a position of privilege often are oblivious to inequalities and those that are othered by them. The look in particular highlighted the divide between this teacher and her students. Perhaps most days she feels as though she has no one to look to for sympathy about her “struggle” with dealing with these kids. I was supposed to share her position of power in that moment as potential teacher and authority to those kids, while if I tried to work with the kids I had overstepped my role as a student to her as well.

Ultimately, I think that inequalities come down to the distribution of power. Society has given White people privileges based on disadvantages of others, particularly people of color. When these inequalities are present those in power attempt to maintain their positions by maintaining a system that unfairly awards resources and advantages to some at the expense of others. The longer unequal systems progress, the more ingrained these relationships become and the large that divide becomes. For example, wealth disparities between communities and neighborhoods become more concrete and limit social mobility, while White communities strengthen the upper middle class, maintaining their positions of power in large and small systems. This perpetuates the problems in place. It is not always a conscious action but often masked as “liking the way things” are and not being willing to give up what you feel entitled to even if it might be at a cost to others. What I believe makes this possible is a dehumanization of individuals of the other groups. Marx presents an argument that racism is based in economic insecurities and is an aspect of class divides. More specifically, “racism is ultimately about the control of circulation of materials such as access to jobs, housing and income” (Leonardo, 2013). Although I do not agree with every point made in the Marxist argument, I do appreciate the connection between race and class that highlights how economic instability maintains class lines that keep generations of BIPOC in positions of low social mobility and little economic power (Leonardo). As a result, the Whites that are already favored by previous racist systems maintain their positions of power. Many of the students in this third grade class were economically disadvantaged as well and for those students of color their disadvantage was amplified. The teacher held assumptions that maintained their positions. In this particular situation, inequalities were highlighted by the vast difference in lived experience between the teacher and the students. There was a lack of familiarity or understanding of how these children experienced life due to their race. Although there was not an explicit criticism because of these factors, there was a lack of awareness of race when criticizing their performance. The way the teacher criticized these students of color suggested she had very little expectation of their ability. She reinforced stereotypes and called out the Black and Brown students at a higher rate than White students for the same behaviors, in some cases causing students to miss valuable class time. Working within a racist system, this woman did nothing to counteract it and labeled these students as incapable or destined to fail. She benefited from the inequalities between her and them and reinforced the power relationship in front of the entire class.

Ultimately, the thing that I still think about is that look she gave me. It was if she was assuming that I was on her side, that since I was White and was financially able to attend Clark that I would understand her “struggle.” I hated how she automatically assumed that I was on her side and that she was in the right and that the students, including the ones she favored, saw it too and learned that, in some ways, that is how the world works. But when it comes down to it, I will always be on the student’s team and hopefully make it clear to those around me that I mean every single student.

Theory of Social Change

A lot of the issues that arose for me when observing classrooms and teachers in the Worcester Public School district were systematic ones, involving race, class and a common thread of punitive punishment. I have always valued a respectful and democratic relationship between me as teacher or group leader and the kids I might work with. In dealing with conflict, I feel it was always necessary to talk it out and identify what each individual was feeling and looking for before and after the incident happened. By attempting to understand what truly causes the event to happen often reveals hurt feelings that can be identified and more communal solutions beyond the disciplinary methods that many adults fall back on in these situations. Ultimately, I discovered that the methods I tend to identify with is the philosophy of restorative justice. This is a practice that values peaceful conflict resolution that aims to repair relationships through respectful community dialogues that result in recognition of wrongdoing and relevant restoration to what has been harmed. I really aligned with and wanted to utilize it in the ways I approached youth work and interacting with my community. But first I had to think about what I have the capacity to do and change while being respectful of the people and space I might be working with.

For one, I must acknowledge that my identity as a middle class white woman positions me in a position of privilege in our society, especially when exploring how to effect change. In a philosophy class I am currently taking, we are discussing humans’ obligations to obey the law and when it is within reason not to do so. The Philosopher Candice Delmas brings up the point that if a society is unjust, that not only do we have some obligation to address and reject this injustice but that it requires a person who is a member of the privileged group to take on this responsibility to resist that unjust scheme. This is based on the idea that a citizen cannot reject a scheme that they are actively participating in without leaving the society completely or working to change the unjust practices. This idea aligns with my feelings about addressing inequalities that I may benefit from. Understanding that we live in an unjust system it is therefore our duty to not only acknowledge the problem but act in efforts to improve the system. What I see that I can take on to address the issues with our system relies on changing our mindsets around others and humanizing our peers. I feel that humanization and trust are interconnected in conceptualizing how we can make progress in changing society. That is why I see restorative justice as an important place to start.

Part of the shift that I hope to see as we work towards a more just society is a justice system based in restorative practices, which is in opposition to our current method of retributive justice. This method requires that one must, “imagine those who committed crimes, their victims, and the communities in which they live in ways that “repair the harm” rather than ways that punish” (Levad, 2012). It can be contrasted with our current model of justice that is best described as retributive. What makes these processes so different is the motivations behind them. Our current system, and therefore current ideologies are based on an idea that justice requires the perpetrator suffering just as much if not more to resolve the issue. But this only adds harm to the world without actually healing the harm that was caused in the first place. While retributive justice, like its name suggests, aims to seek retribution and find a punishment for any given crime, restorative justice attempts to fix the problem for all parties involved with a solution that directly reflects the results of the incident that occurred. There is value placed on “giv[ing] attention to victims and to rebuilding relationships between a victim, an offender, and their community” (Miller, 2008). By prioritizing each individual and repairing the harm that occurred between each party, restorative justice allows for a more thoughtful and meaningful system than the retributive one currently in place. This process disrupts that structures of our criminal justice systems when, “the normative interpretation of offender accountability (i.e., the delivery of punishment deemed proportionate to offense) is redefined in terms of desire for offenders to both understand the impact of their wrongful behavior and participate in decisions regarding the best course of action by which to make things right” (Miller 263). By reimagining what should come of the way we distribute justice, prisons would become less necessary as results of conflict resolution would rely less and less on punitive systems.

I feel that this is something worth trying to achieve in our society, but I also realize that our society is not at a place at this moment in time where this is achievable on a large scale. As we address the issues of injustice in our society, I believe that it is important to keep this tenet in mind even as we resist those who attempt to keep inequalities in place. This is not to say that it is always possible at this time to act within the bounds of restorative justice in a society that values the opposite. Part of what I find so valuable about restorative justice is the way that it humanizes the parties involved. This is something that I feel would be beneficial at many levels of conflict and might allow us to make more progress in issues of human rights and equality where we currently struggle to make progress at the moment.

We must work as a collective and leverage our positions of privilege- whether large or small- to make a more just society. Each effort might be large or small but being complacent in injustice is not an option. Restorative justice is a broad scope idea that can be implemented at every level, whether that be international, domestic or individual, and that is why I find it so appealing as a theory of change. With a conscious community effort, I believe real change could be affected with the implementation of restorative justice practices and I plan on utilizing them in my personal practices.

For my praxis project, I will be working with the Center for Nonviolent Solutions, an organization in Worcester whose mission, according to their website is “To provide education and resources to help people in the Worcester Area to understand nonviolence and peacemaking as a way of life and to reject the use of violence in resolving conflict.” Restorative justice is closely related to many of the methods that this organization is implementing in their efforts towards resolving conflicts justly and nonviolently and I hope to formulate a project that represents these foundational ideas. From there I am interested in examining what level of trust is required in order to effectively implement these strategies in a meaningful and effective manner.

Work Cited

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