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### Theories of Understanding
My Philosophies of Social Inequity, Positionality, and Change

School has always been a relatively safe space for me. I have been an academic high-achiever since preschool, when my teachers used to ask me what the correct pronunciation of "ankylosaurus" was. My teachers noticed and praised my ability to be a good peer model. As a result, I was regularly pulled into special education classrooms to assist my peers academically and socially. According to my teachers, I could be trusted to show my peers how to behave. I was six years old, so I did not question their judgment. I wanted to be a good friend, so I did as I was told. When my peers resisted being helped, I assumed they were tired or bored. I did not realize I had never asked them if they wanted my assistance.

Disability has been stigmatized in the United States since the country's creation. Special education in the United States has consistently undermined the autonomy of disabled students. Even the name "special education" exoticizes disabled people. Generations of Americans have been taught, explicitly and implicitly, to see disability as an inherent negative. American public schools perpetuate these beliefs by segregating disabled students and punishing "abnormal" behaviors. Disabled students repeatedly see their struggles trivialized as "attention problems" or "behavior problems" that need to be corrected instead of neurological differences that ought to be accepted. By acting as a peer model, I perpetuated the ableist systems that refused to acknowledge my peers' needs. I was, and often still am, an implicated subject: "neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator" (Rothberg 1). While I was far too young to understand the

structural inequalities that continue to make it impossible for disabled students to thrive in schools, I perpetuated those inequalities by participating in unjust systems. I thought I was helping my friends when, in reality, I was enforcing the ableist idea that they needed to learn to be good students by masking their neurodivergence. In short, my privileges allowed me to assume the role of the oppressor.

Ableism has historically validated oppressive systems. In the nineteenth century, evolutionary theory shifted to accommodate the pervasive belief in the importance of progress (Baynton, 2013, p. 19). Anything deemed "natural" or "normal" was thought to be inherently progressive. The unnatural or monstrous, "functioned as an ideal and excluded only [those] defined as *below* average" (Baynton, 2013, p. 19). The abnormal could not be progressive; only the fittest could survive. This narrative continues to impact how we view disability. Disabled people were deemed subnormal, their existence regressive. The concept of disability was attributed to other groups in order to justify discriminating against them (Baynton, 2023). African Americans, women, and immigrants were all at one point deemed disabled to validate intolerance (Baynton, 2023). While these narratives have shifted into something subtler, ableist discrimination has continued to be normalized, especially in school settings. Students may not be openly shamed for being disabled, but they are shamed for showing visible signs of disability. This restricts students from authentically participating in their education.

Ableism is at the root of the systems of oppression that governs the United States; therefore, ableism is a sociopolitical and cultural facet of this country. Our institutions reproduce the hierarchies of power that keep those who are privileged at the top and those who are oppressed at the bottom. Public schools are some of the most influential institutions in the country. When gone unchallenged, they can reproduce systemic ableist harm (Giroux, 1983).

Disabled children lose access to their agency when non-disabled adults decide only certain behaviors are acceptable in the classroom. Non-disabled students then perpetuate these standards, allowing ableism to continue to thrive in American society.

Every American school student has their agency constantly torn from them to ensure that systemic ableism goes unchallenged. I believe that reclaiming agency is a necessity if any change is to be created. We must reject our complacency in the system and choose to see ableism for what it is. Combatting all types of systemic injustice follows this same pattern. Our complacency and bias cannot go unchecked. When you want to facilitate change, you must begin by accepting change in yourself.

I spent so much of my life in relative ignorance because of the normalization of whiteness. In the essay "The Matter of Whiteness," Richard Dyer argues that, "Racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world" (Dyer, 2005, p. 9). The United States is structured around race, with whiteness at the top of the hierarchy. White people are thus granted intrinsic access to systemic privileges that people of color are never allowed. However, white people can ignore their racial status and the privileges that come with it. White people have become non-raced, allowing them to exist as "'just' human" (Dyer, 2005). White supremacist systems cause people to view whiteness as "normal," which deems any non-white person abnormal. This dehumanizes people of color by reducing them to their race. White people, in contrast, never have to speak for their race and can claim their humanity in full. White people are also represented in media in a variety of distinct, human ways. Racialized people, in contrast, are relegated to stereotypical and one-dimensional representations. Whiteness continues reproducing its power by claiming humanity: "as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it" (Dyer, 2005, p. 12). The systemic

normalization of white supremacy has allowed white people to take their humanity for granted in a country that continues to dehumanize and disenfranchise people of color.

I grew up in Plymouth, Massachusetts. My hometown is 90% white (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Throughout my time in the Plymouth public schools, I only had two teachers who were people of color. My classes were almost entirely white too, especially as I got older. My high school AP classes were full of wealthy, white students who could afford to pay $94 per test at the end of the year. My classes were still relatively large, though, because of how affluent Plymouth is. Data taken from 2018 through 2022 places the median household income in Plymouth at $107,067 (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Only 5.8% of the town is "in poverty," to borrow the language of the Census (2023). I was, and still am, incredibly privileged. I am a white, upper-middle-class person from a white, affluent town who attended white, affluent public schools. These privileges continue to inform the way I view the world. I do not walk into spaces and feel unwelcome. I do not struggle to access academic and vocational opportunities. I got to spend the first section of this essay discussing all of the opportunities I *did* have. That is a massive display of privilege.

In the United States, race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability determine one's access to power. Power, in this context, refers to "access to and through the various social institutions" and "processes of privileging, normalizing, and valuing certain identities over others" (Kang et. al, 2017, p. 32). Certain identities allow one more access to power because, "they are contrasted to identities thought to be less valuable or less 'normal'" (Kang et. al, 2017, p. 32). In the United States, those who can hold power do so through meeting the "mythical norm." Audre Lorde defines the mythical norm as, "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (Lorde, 1980, p. 2). The "trappings of power" in American society live within this norm,

meaning that those who hold identities tied to the mythical norm have more access to power than those who do not (Lorde, 1980, p. 2). I am a white person from an upper-middle-class family; I celebrate Christian holidays despite being non-religious; I can always find clothing that fits me in stores. I have access to the vast majority of this country's resources because I am lucky enough to have been born into a position that aligns with the mythical norm.

If I am to reckon with my privilege, I must be cognizant of its constant effects on my life. We are taught to assume that oppression has material consequences allowing, "oppressors to maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions" (Lorde, 1980, p. 1). When one cannot see the impact of their oppression, they are taught to expect the oppressed to educate them on their transgressions. This places undue responsibility on the person being oppressed. I need to remain aware of the biases I hold as someone who aligns with several aspects of the mythical norm. I know how to use "the language and manners of the oppressor" because of how and where I grew up (Lorde, 1980, p. 1). I am rarely asked to justify my presence in spaces, as my appearance grants me blanket access. I also grew up surrounded by upper-middle-class white people because of my hometown's homogeneous demographic. We were united in our ignorance, reproducing systemic injustice by not knowing that it existed. Now that I am aware of my privileged position, I am responsible for dismantling it. I cannot and will not continue to live in ignorance. I must use the agency I possess to change the system I unfairly benefit from.

I want to assert that there is no singular way to accomplish social change. I refuse to disparage those who have and will create change in a manner that I would not. We cannot hope to change anything if we spend all our time theorizing about the "correct" or "best" way to accomplish that change. Of course, I am now sitting here, philosophizing about just that. While my musings may seem antithetical, recognizing these inherent contradictions will help frame my

perspective. I have classified myself as someone who aims to create change since discovering the word "feminism" while scrolling through Tumblr in 2012. I could not fathom living in a world where inequality was allowed to fester, so I began considering careers where I could make a difference. Unfortunately, most of the options I volleyed between did not make me happy. Working in politics was overwhelming; entering the justice system was antithetical to my abolitionist goals. I discovered my eventual path while sitting in an English class taught by a woman I resented. I had always enjoyed English, but her unemotional demeanor and penchant for assigning hours worth of homework were beginning to make me change my mind. One morning, she asked if anyone was considering going into teaching. No one raised their hands. She shook her head, sighed, and said, "You all want to become doctors or scientists to change the world. Well, I believe we can change it through education."

This is not an inspirational story, per se. She did not become a mentor in my life; I went on to hyperventilate in the bathroom during her class. However, she made a dent in my psyche that remains to this day: I believe we can change the world through education.

My mission began in the cramped dance studio I had attended for a decade. I volunteered as a student helper for the third-grade class because my sister, Ivy, had enrolled. She has autism and ADHD, so my parents asked me to ensure she followed the routine without complaint. I quickly found that the other students were better at helping her than I was. When I reminded her to stay on task, she would get frustrated. When her friends asked to do warm-ups together, she would jump right in. I ended up helping other students more than Ivy most days. They asked to be re-taught the steps in their routine or have their shoes re-tied. They wanted advice about friendships and complained about their parents' rules. In February, Madison[1] pulled me aside to show me her diary entry. I was her favorite dance teacher. According to her, I was always in a

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[1] This is a pseudonym.

good mood, had an awesome personality, and wore shirts with kind messages. She'd named her guinea pig partially after me. Her entry explained that she had recently moved to Plymouth. Her changing life had been made a bit brighter by the hip-hop class I assistant-taught.

Assisting at my dance studio solidified my desire to work with children. It also solidified my conception of social justice. I wanted Ivy to be treated justly, despite being the only student in the class who was visibly disabled. I wanted to treat the other students justly, despite not really knowing how. I found kindness to be the cure for both ails. The other students treated Ivy with genuine care, which allowed her to be included in a group activity that was not specifically designed for neurodivergent kids. By showing my students kindness, I helped Madison feel at home in her new town. By showing me her diary, she taught me just how much could be achieved through kindness.

Kindness as justice has become my central philosophy. I believe that in order to foster equity, our actions must be rooted in care. We cannot lift people up if we do not care enough to ask them how high they would like to go. In educational spaces, I aim to manifest this philosophy by centering joy. I want school to be a safe place for my students. Many kids have difficult home lives, so they need adults in their lives who care for them. Even the happiest people benefit from being shown someone cares. Of course, being kind alone is not enough to facilitate justice. I will incorporate culturally sustaining principles and intersectionality into my pedagogy as a teacher. However, I view kindness as the first stepping stone to liberation.

In all honesty, I am not sure that I am the best person to accomplish the kinds of change I would like to see. I progressed through the American education system relatively unscathed. While I am under no delusion that I can change a centuries-old system alone, I do believe that I can make the world a safer place for a handful of people. I want to work toward building a site of

resistance within schools, where students can actively participate in restorative justice through collective action (Giroux, 1983). I want to foster spaces where disabled students can address the underlying problems with the public school system and combat them. I want to improve lives by showing up with a smile on my face and a slogan on my tee shirt.

I will spend my adult life misbehaving through kindness. It is the only way to disrupt the systems of oppression that want to squash us all.

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