Theory of Change: Working Towards a More Equitable Future

As a white youth worker and aspiring teacher working in an urban setting in an increasingly diverse world, I hope to use my privilege and power to question norms, disrupt inequalities, and equip students with the tools and support they need to advocate for themselves and their communities. Some ways in which I intend to do this include interrogating dress code, discipline, or other policies that disproportionately affect students of color, being intentional with my curriculum design by including materials that reflect different perspectives and identities, including those students identify with, and providing students multiple means of engagement and expression with opportunities to connect their learning with their experiences. Additionally, I believe that by practicing critical self-reflection, engaging in difficult conversations, and promoting student-centered learning[1], I can push back against norms and barriers within the classroom and empower youth to be agents of change beyond school walls.

Before I can question systematic inequalities within the school system and encourage students to do the same, I must question myself because I believe change starts with looking introspectively and reflecting on how our identities and experiences shape how we show up or engage in different spaces. Within every space exists power dynamics and norms, whether explicitly defined or not, and we all enter these spaces with multiple identities that may grant membership or privilege/power depending on their alignment with the dominant group or what is considered "normal". This impacts how we relate to and are viewed by those around us and whose knowledge or perspectives are considered valuable. While we may not always be able to control whether we are an insider or outsider in a particular space, I think that being aware of our

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[1] Student-centered learning is an approach to teaching that acknowledges and incorporates students' individual needs, interests, experiences, and knowledge into their learning experience. It can look like giving students options when it comes to what they are learning, how, and why. An example may be allowing students to be the expert on a topic of choice and teach it to the class.

identities and how they influence our relation to those around us can help us challenge power dynamics and make space for others.

As a white youth worker who grew up in a predominately white rural community and planning to work in an urban setting with a diverse student population, I recognize that my identity impacts my relationships with students and that my awareness and understanding of their identities or lack thereof shapes my understanding of and connection to them. When observing a classroom last year with a large population of Hispanic bilingual students, for instance, my identity as a monolingual English speaker limited my ability to understand what some students were saying at times. This caused me to miss out on the connections students were making to the content and the value of their contributions. It also made it difficult for students to connect with me, express themselves freely without the burden of having to translate, and ultimately feel heard. My ability to create a space that acknowledges and values students' cultural capital or the knowledge, skills, and assets that they bring from their communities and backgrounds, though maybe different from my own, can have a huge influence on their sense of belonging, trust, and safety. As I discussed in my previous Theory of Understanding pieces, my identity grants me privileges such as having access to education resources and opportunities and the ability to distance myself from inequalities that those with marginalized identities are confronted with each day. To avoid allowing my privilege to blind me to the systematic barriers that exist for many students and unconsciously reinforce such barriers, I must constantly question who I am, how it informs my practices, and in what ways I reinforce or disrupt inequalities. How does my background and the messages I received about race growing up contribute to the associations I make about members of different social groups? How might these associations influence which student I tend to call on to answer questions, who receives discipline, and what expectations I

have for my students? Whose voices and experiences are represented in the books and materials I choose for my students? Whose are erased or negated, in other words, rendered invalid by not being represented or included in the curriculum? What conversations do I have with my students and what message does this send? What messages do the conversations I don't have send? These are the kinds of questions I must ask myself to recognize what biases I hold and be intentional about creating an inclusive and equitable space for my students.

In addition to reflecting on my identity and how it informs my teaching practices, I believe that creating change requires leaning into our discomfort by facilitating and participating in difficult conversations. The idea of leaning in means being willing to have our perspectives and assumptions challenged, admitting that we don't know everything, and approaching difficult conversations with the intention of learning and understanding. From what I've seen and heard, conversations about racism and other social inequalities are avoided by those in positions of privilege or authority because they don't think such issues impact their lives, they are afraid to say something wrong and be seen as a bad person, or they simply don't know where to start. Part of the privilege I have as a white person is I haven't had to think about inequality because I didn't see it directly impacting my life. As a result, I think that it's easy to claim neutrality when it comes to issues like racism, acknowledging they exist but seeing them as outside of my responsibility or influence. However, for change to occur, I and others must acknowledge that we all operate within systems of oppression, whether we benefit from them or are harmed by them, and that we all make assumptions about others based on biases shaped by our experiences. This doesn't necessarily make us good or bad but rather means that we all have a role in perpetuating inequality and, therefore, a responsibility to create change. An analogy that I learned in the class Racism and Educational Inequality, which illustrates our responsibility and the need to account

for our actions, is that we all exist on a conveyor belt that is constantly moving in the direction of racial inequality and white normatively. While some people are running with the conveyor belt, meaning that they are knowingly contributing to inequality by being actively racist and intending to harm, most of us are just standing and moving along with the conveyor belt, unaware of how our actions or rather our lack thereof perpetuates inequality. Those standing are often those who claim to be neutral or claim to believe in equality without taking actions to directly challenge inequality. This meaning of the conveyor belt analogy is that unless we are actively resisting inequality, running in the opposite direction at a faster pace, we are still moving in the direction of racial inequality and reinforcing it by saying and doing nothing ("Teaching and Learning about Race"). It emphasizes that neutrality doesn't exist and suggests we are always either reinforcing or disrupting inequity. This is why I think it is critical to have conversations about race and other topics that might be challenging to talk about because staying within our comfort zones and avoiding challenging conversations means standing on the conveyor belt and, therefore, maintaining the status quo.

Along with engaging in self-reflection and engaging in difficult conversations, I believe that centering students' voices and needs within the classroom, by offering opportunities to connect their learning to their interests and experiences and providing multiple paths for students to accomplish learning goals, is essential to challenging educational inequalities and creating an inclusive community. Welcoming students to share their lived experiences and bring knowledge from the different communities and cultures they are a part of by getting to know them, making learning materials and activities reflective of their identities, and encouraging reflection helps in building a culturally responsive classroom. Such a classroom honors students' identities, recognizes the value in diverse experiences, counters the deficit narrative about cultural

differences being obstacles to learning, encourages students to address real-life challenges that impact them and their communities, and creates a culture of understanding and belonging. Learning should be relevant and meaningful for every student, which means involving them in the planning and assessing of their learning so that they can address the issues they face individually and can advocate for change. Additionally, recognizing students as their whole, meaning recognizing their individual needs, interests, learning styles, strengths, and weaknesses rather, is important in creating an inclusive environment because it helps in recognizing and providing the support that they need to be successful in the classroom.

Overall, as a future teacher, I intend to use the power I have to influence what students learn about and how to challenge current norms and structures that provide barriers for students with marginalized identities and inspire students to advocate for change in their own lives. Ultimately, I want to create a more just learning environment for students and inspire change, for which I believe encouraging self-reflection, engaging in difficult conversations, and promoting student voices in the classroom is crucial. All of this is part of an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and adaption by me and other teachers hoping to create more equitable learning opportunities, especially for those who may carry privileges their students don't have. There is no one-time solution for change.

Works Cited

"Teaching and Learning about Race: Fantastic Practice in Late Elementary

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