

Theory of Understanding: My Positionality and Identity in the World

My passion for youth work began in middle school as I worked alongside youth organizations in my community, like my local recreational center, town library, and the summer basketball camp the next town over. Having participated in the educational, social, and recreational programs provided by such organizations throughout my childhood has left a lasting positive impact, as it helped me to explore and develop my passions, instilled important values such as teamwork and accountability, built lifelong networks and friendships, and offered a fun and creative space to grow. I felt a calling to give back to these organizations and help create a similar impression on other children in my community. Through various opportunities to engage with youth, such as coaching basketball, facilitating sports events, leading crafts, overseeing after-school and summer camp activities, and mentoring, I discovered the rewarding experience of youth work. While my experiences working with young people in my community led me to pursue education studies at Clark University, my time at Clark as a CYES major has helped me to look introspectively at who I am and who I want to be as a youth worker. While I knew from my past experiences that I could influence the lives of young people through youth work, I'd never considered how much understanding and reflecting on my own identity could shape the influence I have.

Engaging with and reflecting on my educational experiences in classes such as Complexities of Urban Schools and Building Community through Research With has allowed me to recognize my privilege growing up in and identifying with a predominately white, middle-upper-class, small rural community. At my school, I had access to resources such as free SAT prep, advanced placement courses, community college classes, personal school-provided iPads, brand new textbooks, an expansive school library, comprehensive health classes, college

readiness classes, support with finding and applying to scholarships, and more. Additionally, my ability to identify and relate to my peers and teachers through sharing race, class, and similar backgrounds helped me build positive relationships that contributed to feelings of safety and belonging. I remember thinking at the time that I was lucky to have such resources, as I was often reminded by my teachers and parents that not everyone in the world has access to the same educational opportunities, but I never considered what shaped this access. Looking back now, I realize that I wasn't "lucky". My access to such resources and opportunities was not simply by chance or accident, but rather a result of benefitting from a system designed to categorize students and therefore maintain and reflect the social hierarchy in our society. It was and continues to be a luxury that youth from underserved, underfunded, marginalized communities often aren't afforded due to an inherently unfair system that upholds inequities and reproduces a system of social stratification. This reflection has been valuable to me, as too often disparities in academic achievement, drop-out rates, disciplinary infractions, and more between BIPOC and low-income communities and their white higher-income counterparts are attributed to individual or cultural shortcomings rather than the shortcomings of the system that serve them. As a white middle-class adult coming from an advantaged educational background and aspiring to be a teacher in an urban setting, unpacking my privilege is crucial. I must ask myself how my ideas and actions are informed by my experiences to understand how I enter a space with young people of different backgrounds, what assumptions I have based on my own experiences, and how I can better support my students.

Another aspect of who I am related to my educational experience that impacts how I see myself and my role as a teacher in the future has to do with my disposition as a perfectionist. Since middle school, I've struggled with perfectionism, holding myself to unreasonably high

standards and evaluating my worth based on my ability or inability to meet these standards. My perfectionism first manifested in the classroom as striving for perfect attendance and high marks in all my classes largely due to the expectations I perceived others had for me. While my perfectionism made me dedicated to my schoolwork and drove me to work diligently and with close attention to detail, it also caused me anxiety around tests and assignments, made me interpret mistakes as failure, which led to feelings of embarrassment when I didn't give the "right" answer, and made me overly critical of myself.

Reflecting on my adoption of perfectionism, I believe it was influenced by the emphasis my school placed on standardized test scores and grades as measures of student competency and performance, the way that students with the highest marks were always praised, as well as the narrative reinforced by my teachers and counselors that good grades lead to getting into a good college, having a successful career, and living a more fulfilling life. Additionally, the way teachers would ask close-ended questions, or questions with a limited set of predetermined answers, with the expectation of students providing the "right" answer before evaluating our answers with simple responses like "ok," "good," or "not quite" made me feel pressure to be correct. This pressure made me afraid to give the wrong answer and receive negative feedback, leading to me hesitating to raise my hand unless I was positive that I was right. Ultimately, the emphasis my school placed on student outcomes socialized me into being obsessed with academic validation and afraid to make mistakes.

My adoption of perfectionism and reflection on how my school experiences contributed to this inform my goal as a future teacher to create a trusting space that encourages mistakes as part of the learning process. The pressure I put on myself in school to be perfect and the fear I developed around making mistakes is something that I've sadly observed in other students while

engaging with youth in the classroom setting. For example, last year while observing an 8th-grade math class at a local Worcester public school as part of a research project for one of my classes, I and my peers surveyed students about how they felt when their teacher asked them to explain their answers to the class and whether they felt their contributions were valuable to the class discussion. While there were varied responses, multiple students expressed being nervous about possibly giving the wrong answer and feeling that their contributions would only be valuable if they gave the right answer. These same students didn't participate as much in group discussions, missing out on opportunities to ask questions, reflect, revise, and co-construct meaning. In my classroom, I hope to reframe ideas about success and failure so that students aren't afraid to stretch out of their comfort zones and be challenged, as I believe this is where the most growth and learning happens. Focusing on the process of students' thinking rather than simply evaluating their answers as right or wrong and encouraging self-reflection and revision is one way that I can hope to combat perfectionism in the classroom.

Overall, my reflection on aspects of my identity such as privilege and perfectionism, how they have both shaped and been shaped by my educational experiences, has helped me to navigate my position as a youth worker and understand the influence that I can have on my students as a future educator.