

Theory of Inequality

Learning to Critically Read Our World:

During my freshman year at Clark, I volunteered in a third-grade classroom at Woodland Academy. Throughout the duration of the semester, the teacher I worked with (who I will refer to as Mrs. Smith) consistently asked me to work with a few students who struggled with reading the assignment at hand. During my fourth week of observation, I arrived as the students were about to begin a practice standardized exam. Each student had forty minutes to read a short passage and write a paragraph in response to the prompt given at the top of the page. After ten minutes had passed, Mrs. Smith asked if I could work with one student named Josie who was struggling to read the passage. I sat down and began going through each sentence with her, making sure that she was not just reading the passage but also understanding it as well. However, by the time she had finished the passage and had the chance to write her response, she only had five minutes to write and submit the paper to Mrs. Smith. If this exam was not practice, Josie would have failed because she could not read the exam without assistance. Later, at the end of the day, I was speaking to Josie and listening to her talk about what she likes to do for fun and who she usually spends time with at home, during this conversation I asked Josie if she had time to practice reading at home. She responded by looking down as she described how her mom did not have time to help her because she had to work two jobs to pay for their home.

In this situation, there were many different factors that could have contributed to Josie's difficulty with reading which further caused disadvantages for her within the classroom. On one hand, if we were to cast blame, we could criticize the institutionalized structures that were put in place within the educational system such as standardized testing due to the fact that these exams ultimately cater to wealthier families as they have better access to resources that can help their

children succeed. As a result, due to Josie's familial situation, this caused her to not receive the amount of support she required at the time. Although, if we were to examine this scenario through the perspective of problems that occur outside an educational setting versus the inside of the classroom, we could infer that Josie's family is most likely being affected by policies such as minimum wage which further forces Josie's mom to work two jobs in order to afford a living wage for her family. However, since her mother must work two jobs this then affects Josie because she may not be receiving enough support to reinforce her reading skills beyond the classroom. In addition, there is a possibility that Josie could be undiagnosed with a learning or reading disability or she may require glasses. Consequently, when Josie enters the classroom, she may struggle to learn these skills due to the fact that her class is very large, and her teacher can't spend as much time working with her or she could have fallen behind during an earlier grade and now that the curriculum is more difficult it makes it increasingly challenging to catch up.

Moreover, in his piece *Black Bastards and White Millionaires*, Payne writes that, "any theoretical perspective diverts attention from some of the logical possibilities. Every way of seeing is not seeing" (14). So, if we were to look at this scenario from the single perspective of it being Josie's fault or it is the institution's fault, we would be taking away from the nuanced and complex nature of this dilemma. When analyzing Josie's situation, it is important to note that often these issues cannot be individualized due to the fact that they compound on one another, which in turn makes identifying the "sole" reasoning as to why young students struggle nearly impossible. To move forward I believe that we must accept that there is no "one explanation" for our society's problems but we must work through these issues with a multifaceted, holistic lens to find solutions and move towards action. However, in order to do so we must begin by asking ourselves questions such as "what is going on here?" Or "what are the different factors at play?"

While the questions I have posed are only a few examples, they act as a catalyst to further our understanding of the situation and instigate deeper thinking about what exactly is going on.

Without asking “why” Josie was experiencing what she was, I may not have been able to identify and understand the potential different factors that could have contributed to her struggles within the classroom.

Thus, I believe that this process of asking questions acts as the first step towards invoking change and that it is vital to create an environment for young students where they are encouraged to ask and share questions about the material they are exposed to within the classroom. In doing so, this could help schools work towards fostering their student’s curiosity to broaden their initial understanding of the world and instigate greater engagement with the material at hand. Through learning to ask questions about new information, this skill opens young learners to creating different ways of viewing and understanding both themselves and their world.

Looking back on Josie’s scenario, while there does not exist a sole reasoning for as to why Josie struggled with completing her practice test, the reality is that she couldn’t read the exam without assistance at the time. When students struggle to read, this not only puts them at a disadvantage within the classroom, but also closes them off to various mediums of obtaining new information such as books, news, magazines, etc. which could potentially expose them to new ideas and perspectives about the world. Thus, I believe that the act of reading can act as one of many channels to open individuals to new ideas they may not have thought of prior. While reading is only one way to expose young learners to new perspectives, it is a method that is deeply ingrained into our society. Today, when we read, we are not just reading books, but we are also exposed to ads, articles, social media posts, etc. that can influence our views.

This has become more apparent especially over the last year, due to covid-19. Due to the fact that most learning and social environments have transitioned to online spaces, more students than ever are faced with having to sift through the bombardment of information, ads, infographics etc. that are shared to the internet. As a result, I feel that because there is so much more that children are exposed to, it is especially important for them to be encouraged to question the new information they are exposed to. So, while asking questions about new information is by no means the final step to invoking change, it is a necessary start.