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My Theories of Understanding the World

Theory of Social Inequality: Systemic Racism in the American School System

Throughout my K-12 experience in the school district I grew up in, the student body was almost entirely white and there were zero staff members of color. The white supremacy that was deeply intertwined with my learning clouded my understanding of the world in ways I am still only beginning to understand. Because of this, I know that when I reflect on my experiences in school there were many instances of social inequality that I overlooked at the time by not having a good understanding of my white privilege. One example of social inequality that I still think of now, however, happened at a pep rally during my senior year.

Our school pep rallies were small, low budget, and often ridiculed by most students who didn't want to waste their time celebrating a school they didn't feel connected to. Each grade would sit in one section of the bleachers that hugged the walls of the gym and look out into the center of the courts where games would be running. Essentially, everyone was sitting in one big circle and had a good view of the people surrounding them. This opportunity for attention may be why, at this particular pep rally, two white boys from my grade stood up on the top row of the bleachers and held up a flag associated with white supremacy and the alt-right movement. They erupted in laughs and cheers and raised their arms into powerful fists. People snapped photos and then, after a few seconds, they sat back down until the pep rally ended.

When we all got sent back to class, students who didn't see the instance occur started to hear about it from others who did. Many people didn't recognize the flag they waved, only that it closely resembled a Nazi flag and was upsetting at first glance. After an internet search, we quickly discovered that the flag represents a fictional country and religion that originated online

in order to mock “political correctness” and other liberal ideas that threaten white male nationalism. What started as a meme that gained traction in popular alt-right forums was now being used by white supremacy groups as a symbol of hatred and racism. It was clear that the display of this flag inside my school was driven by hatred, power, and ignorance. Yet after discovering this information, without hesitation, class members started to brush off what happened as a joke. They made excuses for the boys, saying they must not have known what it stood for and that they didn’t mean any harm. If a quick Google search told me that this symbol was hateful, why would the boys who own the flag not know?

When I got home from school, pictures of them holding the flag at the pep rally were showing up on social media. In the foreground of every photo, one of my biracial classmates was shown in the center of the gym playing a game in front of them. Now they were not only holding up a white supremacist symbol in front of the school, but they were doing so in front of one of the only people of color in the district. At this point, the situation became undeniably about race and racism in my school. But even when my Black classmate was eventually the one to file a complaint with the school and state, many of my classmates framed her as someone who could not take a joke. She had to speak out against the school for being a target of hate, and she still faced more animosity from my classmates than the two boys did. Our community made her feel responsible for being the one to speak up despite the power that their white voices would have had in being heard. We failed to listen to her or any of my other classmates of color who came forward with both short- and long-term plans to handle what happened and reeducate the student body on racism. If more white people had rallied alongside them and put in work to ensure change, maybe the inequality in my school would feel less unmanageable. Instead, the school

released a statement about being committed to creating a culture of respecting diversity in the school, brushed the incident under the rug, and the boys faced no repercussions whatsoever.

Throughout the entire situation, I was a bystander. I saw what had happened and did not take action against the boys or stand in solidarity with my Black classmates in the ways I could have. I knew that what happened was wrong, but I trusted that the administration would sort it out. Even if coming from a good place, this trust I placed in the system was naïve and privileged. Many people, similar to how I felt, trust that things will be made right without any effort or involvement on their part. This is the passive behavior that puts marginalized people in a position to take individual responsibility against their oppressors, who usually have more power and resources to ignore their pain. I did not think of myself as an agent of change who can bring about solutions in problems that are bigger than me. I did not think enough about the intrinsic problems in my school or country that led these boys to feel comfortable holding up a white supremacist symbol or that led my Black classmate to feel it was her sole responsibility to speak up. By not speaking out against the failure I saw from my administration in addressing the situation, I perpetuated white supremacy in my school. Today, by thinking with others and reflecting on the past with new knowledge, I can use this example to make sense of the social inequality in our world.

At the root of this example, there is racism and white supremacy that is fundamental to American schools and society. I believe that social inequality comes from the refusal to acknowledge the existence of institutional racism that gives white people unchecked power, and the accompanying actions necessary to restore racial justice. My school adopted a “colorblind” approach to racism in our education by never acknowledging our collective whiteness or talking about race in the classroom. If we did talk about race, it was through a whitewashed lens of

history that only acknowledged racism as something of the past that “we” overcame collectively. My school taught us that there are no differences between being white and being a person of color, and that, if we work hard enough, we all have equal opportunities. In this example, my superintendent talks about being committed to respecting diversity in a broad sense but doesn't call out racism for what it is or acknowledge that it plays a part in his school. He pretends as though the white supremacist symbol has nothing to do with racism, and so the issue will be resolved without acknowledging racism. In doing this, he further perpetuates the ideas that led to this event happening in the first place. Onlooking students learn that these things just happen, but that there is no relationship between the hate displayed at my school and larger scale problems in the United States.

Charles Payne's (1984) chapter on *Black Bastards and White Millionaires* would label my school's approach to social inequality as a denial theory. By teaching us to be colorblind to race, they denied the possibility of a causal relationship between the “Haves and Have-nots” who Payne refers to throughout the reading. More specifically, Payne would say that my school shows “An over-reliance on subjective, especially moralistic, explanations, thus obscuring the objective nature of the relationships between whites and Blacks,” a type of denial theory called mysticism (p. 11). By teaching us that all races are objectively equal in society, they implied that there was some moral reason for why disadvantaged people were put in or earned their positions. Furthermore, they enforced a Good Person-Bad Person conception of social issues by framing discrimination as a strictly interpersonal occurrence rather than acknowledging the oppression created by larger social structures (Payne, 1984, p. 13). In the example I chose, the school, or the “Good Person,” tried to distance themselves from the boys, the “Bad Person,” with a statement that claimed what happened was against their values and what they teach. They treat the boys'

actions as a singular instance of discrimination that has no connection to the country's history of racism or what they have taught their students about it. I completely disagree with this way of thinking and choose to embrace a theory of social inequality that more closely aligns with Critical Race Theory.

As explained by Zeus Leonardo (2013) in Chapter One of *Race Frameworks: A Multidimensional Theory of Racism and Education*, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is built on the idea that "Race is central to the inner workings of schools and society, woven into the common sense that drives decisions as formal as policy making and as quotidian as where kids sit together in the cafeteria" (p. 20). CRT not only says that the construction of race and racism are the forces behind social inequality but emphasizes that this is a manufactured system. By stressing that structural racism is "*built into* a social system, brick by brick" CRT posits social inequity as something that can be broken apart (Leonardo, 2013, p. 25). While racism is pervasive, a world can exist where social equality is reached if all of its inhabitants – especially white people in power – are willing to dismantle it. However, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) points out in *From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools* that there is a growing educational debt caused by ignoring the under-lying problems in schools outlined by CRT, and the longer it is ignored by policy makers and school administrators, the further we get from being able to create true social equality. The only truly just approach to handling what happened at my school would be with an absolute reconstruction of how schools in the U.S. operate. This would mean changes to the curriculum, faculty, testing, grading, punitive systems, funding, and many other factors resulting in a new structure of school unrecognizable from what exists now. CRT argues "for the total emancipation of society as the liberation from racism and other forms of oppression. It is a theory of a new society" (Leonardo,

2013, p. 26). Still, there are smaller steps we must take first to get us closer to this new society. My school should have taken responsibility for the role it played in allowing a situation like this to happen. They should have protected my classmates of color instead of leaving them to be the only ones speaking out against what happened. Any scenario that I can imagine where my school decides to take action at all is better than them deciding to do absolutely nothing and pretend there was no problem. A new society cannot emerge with the denial of social inequity.

Racism and white supremacy are the very ideas that made these boys feel comfortable holding up a hate symbol in school. They argued that they did not know the meaning of what they held up, that it was intended to be a joke, and that they could not be racists because they had never done anything racist before in their lives. People in the community said it was unfortunate for the boys to be facing backlash and having their reputations damaged. The school decided that this was punishment enough, and the boys said they wanted to move on and put the situation behind them quickly. This situation shows exactly how white privilege, especially white male privilege, allows people to get away with their mistakes without making any changes to themselves or taking any action in solidarity with the community they hurt. Claiming they are too young to understand the consequences of their actions is in terribly poor taste when Black boys die for much less every day in the U.S. These white boys walked away with zero repercussions, and only learned that they should and will be allowed to do things like this. Inspired by CRT, there should have been extreme reorganization and reeducation efforts from my school to ensure that no one would ever think something like this was okay to do again. Instead, they covered their tracks with a statement that didn't require them to make any real changes to how they operate.

While race is a social construct, how society has treated people of different races has real implications that affect society today. It is not okay to pretend that racial problems do not exist in the United States and that people somehow deserve social inequality by not working hard enough. Social inequality stems from white supremacist values deeply rooted in our country and reproduced in our schools.

Positionality and Identity: How School Has Influenced Who I Am

When thinking about the formation of my identity, like most coming-of-age stories, I think about how I spent my final year in high school. This was a period in my life when I felt like I was saying goodbye to so many comforts, norms, and routines that I defined myself by. Everything was changing so fast: my home, my friend group, the teachers I knew, and the job I had. I was both scared of and confused about what I was supposed to do next, though I knew that the traditional next step is higher education. The coming-of-age characters in my position usually feel a similar way, until they discover their passions and get into the college of their dreams with ease. Now that it was my turn to do that, I was hit with the realization that I had no idea what my interests were, how the process worked, and why I was even applying to college in the first place. Despite never having given me information about college beforehand, I felt pressure from my guidance counselor and teachers that I should have full control over my future by now. Instead, I was cycling through questions like “What is the FAFSA?,” “What should I write in a college essay?,” “Am I qualified to go to college?,” and, if so, “Who will I be there without the constraints that high school put me in?.” Besides my older sister, no one else in my family had ever gone to college. It felt like I was being told to do something that I had no real preparation for, and I was terrified of what I didn’t know. It was during this time of extreme confusion that I

started to question what was missing from my school experience to help me feel worthy, skillful, and prepared for life after graduation.

Simultaneous to the doubt I was feeling in myself and my schooling, I was preparing to leave my job at the after-school program where I had been working most weekdays for a year. Even though I still work here during summer and school breaks, at the time I was really heartbroken to leave a place I loved being every day to go somewhere I was so afraid of not fitting in. When saying goodbye to the children I had gotten to know over the course of the school year and summer, I thought a lot about how their school experience in our district was preparing them to be in my position. I thought about the teachers and adults who helped me feel capable and worthy of a successful future, and how I held a similar role in their lives. I realized while working here how much I love working with youth, which had a large influence on what I became involved in at Clark.

This time in my life outlines some of my fundamental feelings about school and youth work and highlights how some important aspects of my identity were constructed. My experience feeling unprepared for life after graduation left me with an ongoing interest in the workings of schools. I wondered what the purpose of schools in the U.S. really is, and if it should change to better fit the needs of students. As I become further removed from high school, it is still emotional for me to remember how lost and unsupported I was at the time. I think that is why my interest in school reform has become such an important part of my identity, because I know how it felt for me, coming from privileges many do not have, to not get what I wanted out of my education. My high school was predominantly white and less than a quarter of the population was considered economically disadvantaged. As a white cisgender woman, I did not face most of the same problems in school that disadvantaged groups do. While I cannot compare

my experience with those in worse positions, I can use it to inspire the work I want to do in the future. My schooling experience has impacted my desire to create change in schools and my decision to become an educator.

This experience also introduced me to my identity as a youth worker. Working with the children at the after-school program was something I enjoyed, I was good at, and that I found a lot of value in. As a youth worker, I have discovered that I can be much more outgoing than I am in everyday situations when I am working with kids. I aim to bring lots of energy and creativity to my work, so that children feel happy and comfortable expressing themselves with me. However, I do recognize that there are aspects of my identity that many children do not share and that can serve as a hindrance when trying to make connections. For example, being a white, monolingual English speaker can make me an outsider to groups of children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and can affect the relationships we are able to build. I must continue to consider the barriers my identity poses in connecting with youth and what steps I can take to break them, along with my biases, down to become an inclusive and thoughtful youth worker.

Another important aspect of my identity that began to develop during this period in high school was who I am as a student. I had to figure out my learning style and strengths when starting college because I became much more in control of my own education. I have discovered that as a learner, I can often be insecure, quiet, and a bit of a perfectionist. I am also hard working, full of ideas, and love to collaborate with others. Listening is one of my greatest strengths, and I am very interested in what others have to share about their opinions and experiences. I try to listen to understand rather than to share my own related experiences. Being a listener, to me, means I take a lot of personal reflection time before speaking up. Hearing from others can help me discover new ways of thinking about a topic and can lead to stronger ideas

than I would have alone. I think that the learning community that we are creating in our cohort will be really good for my success on the project, as I know I have a lot to learn from others. I feel as though who I am as a student changes more than any other aspect of my identity as I continue to push myself and learn new things.

How my schooling experience has impacted my identity as a youth worker and student is ultimately important to who I am hoping to become in the future. As a teacher, my students will feel supported and prepared like I wanted to feel. They will be successful not because they are checking a box but because I will do all I can to support their needs and interests. I will use my experiences to influence the interactions I have in my classroom and beyond. Most importantly, I will continue to dissect the complex aspects of my identity and the baggage attached to them, so that my biases do not negatively impact those I am teaching.

Theory of Social Change: Teaching as a Tool for Transformation

Both our identities in the world and our theories of inequality play a role in constructing our personal theories of social change. Change makers must recognize that there are innumerable injustices facing the world that they cannot take on alone or all at once. Instead, they must reflect on the relationship between their positionality and the power it gives them to make change in a field they are passionate about. They must identify which parts of their identity will serve them as assets and which can hinder them from creating the types of change they are interested in. In reflecting on my first two Theories of Understanding, I can create a theory of social change centered on my passion for youth work and change in schools.

In my theory of social inequality, I reflected on my school experience and wrote about injustices I witnessed. Specifically, I talked about the racism embedded in my school system that

enabled my peers to hold up a white supremacist symbol at a pep rally. My theory of social inequality closely aligns with Critical Race Theory because I think social issues stem from the white supremacist values deeply rooted in the United States that are reproduced in schools. In the section on my positionality and identity, I wrote about isolated feelings during my senior year of high school that led me to develop a passion for youth work and education reform. I felt extremely lost and unsupported during the time I was applying to college because I realized I didn't get what I wanted out of my public-school experience to prepare me for higher education. At this time, I had also just started my job at the after-school program where I grappled with questions of how prepared the kids I worked with each day would feel when they were in my position. This period of time helped me form fundamental questions about who I am as a student and who I would be as an educator that are essential to my identity today. Due to my belief that schools could play an essential role in creating greater social justice and the parts of my identity that stem from my experiences in school, I know that I want to create change through my passion for teaching.

The pieces of my identity that center on school and teaching help me know that I am committed to creating change in this field, even if it requires making changes to myself first. As a teacher, there are aspects of my identity and positionality that could have a negative impact on my effectiveness in the classroom. First, like the majority of the preK-12 teacher population, I am a white female. I grew up in rural New Hampshire, was raised in an upper middle-class household, and am a monolingual English speaker. These parts of my identity are not shared by everyone and may make it hard for me to understand students from different backgrounds. Good teachers must be able to form authentic relationships with their students by being able to relate to and respect them and their cultures. The parts of my identity that I have listed may make it a

challenge for me to be able to do this. I may carry undiscovered biases about those who are different from me that can push students away from feeling connected to their education. Being white, I do not have to think about race on a daily basis or in everyday situations like BIPOC do. This could serve as a hindrance in the classroom, as many white teachers are prone to under-represent their students of color and fail to give them the critical tools to think about race. There are many pieces of my identity that can hinder my ability to make change as an educator, but I am also optimistic in believing that I will do all that I can to overcome these obstacles.

In order to become a teacher who makes a real impact on my students' learning, I must remain aware of the disconnects caused by my positionality and identity. I need to continue thinking of teaching as a form of activism and cannot get comfortable in a routine simply because it is easy. I must remain open to the idea that I am in a constant cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning things about the world and the best way to understand my students. I must embrace their feedback and criticisms, and constantly be adapting who I am to best serve them. If a student is not performing well, I need to ask myself what I can do to better meet their needs instead of letting them slip by and feel unsupported. A student's relationship with school is one of the most important pieces to their success, so my students need to feel safe, happy, in charge, and represented in my classroom. Representation does not simply come from the implementation of diverse materials but has to do with how I use them to engage the students. I will talk about identity factors, such as race, with my students that will give them a better understanding of the complexity of the world and empathy for the problems we face. I will consider their identities in order to contextualize the curriculum in a way that relates to their experiences in the world and will help them develop a greater passion for learning. I aim to

create change by teaching with my students in mind at every step, leading them to develop agency over their education and become open minded with one another.

With much reflection, I am slowly accepting the fact that there is only so much a teacher can do to change the systematic social issues that persist in educational policies and the organization of society. Injustice is not going to go away overnight, but teachers have the ability to help shift the world's thinkers toward a future where large-scale change can happen. The social change work that teachers can do begins with creating a space where all their students feel valued, smart, and worthy of their education. It leads us toward a world where students of every background receive equal quality of empowering education and are able to create long lasting positive change. While the impact I will be able to make is mostly on a personal level, I hope that I can contribute to a larger system of educators committed to social justice.

References

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