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CYES294

Professor Eric DeMeulenaere

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### Theories of Understanding

The course that led to me choosing to major in Community, Youth, and Education Studies was a fairly complicated one. I had only discovered the major halfway through my sophomore year, and at that point I had already gone through half of my Psychology major as well as four different minors in my trek to choose one that fit my goals and also brought out my curiosities about the world and the people in it. Now, as I am finishing my undergraduate career and moving on to new experiences, I can look back and confidently state that I made the right choice. Aside from the countless nights working on my thesis, trying to wrap my brain around what exactly a conceptual framework is - not to mention what my own was, - and still being vastly indecisive regarding my prospective career path, I am grateful for how much the major had challenged my thinking and urged me to constantly check myself and my perspectives compared to others. I walked into our first praxis class incredibly shy and unsure and walked out having made genuine connections and doing work that was not only important for my academics, but for my future endeavors as someone who never wants to stop learning.

In the next three sections, I will be presenting my personal theories of understanding. The first will be regarding my own beliefs on social inequality as a compilation of what I have learned based on what I have seen and read. Then, my understanding of my own positionality, and how I as a person can reflect back on who I was in my Junior year now that I am completing my undergraduate career and have worked on praxis. And finally, I will present my theory of change, and how I've learned to make it come to be.

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#### *Portfolio Piece #1 — Critical Theoretical Explanation of Social Inequality*

The society that we have created has made leaps and bounds throughout history. People have discovered different forms of sciences and cultures and understandings that have forged the path we are on now - where we are constantly changing and expanding in order to learn and improve. We have opened doors for education and opportunities to hone in on an abundance of skills and knowledge. And yet, with all the incredible technology and theories the human race steadily continues to discover and research, we are also plagued with manmade systems of discrimination and hatred amongst ourselves. It is hard to understand why, as one species each with one life, we choose to limit our potential and love with blame and forced statuses. We have social inequality within races, classes, genders, nationalities, and religions. There are so many biases and gaps in awareness that it is difficult to know where to start - to pick which one is most relevant and imperative to focus on. Because, in the position we are in - where we are regularly surrounded by differences and prejudices - they are all important.

Many social inequalities are interconnected within groups and places. In the education system, specifically, social inequalities can come in many forms depending on what type of school it is and where it is located. In Worcester, where there are a variety of cultures present but not enough money and resources for them to flourish, minority students struggle to succeed. We have so many children of diverse backgrounds who are told the same thing: “they won’t go far,” “what are they going to look like when they’re older.” “they’re born into failure.” With these low expectations constantly plaguing their mindsets as they grow up, it is only natural for them to expect to fail. It is astonishing that in “the land of opportunity” students are not expected to grow further than their parents did. Intersectionality leaves young women of color facing doubt at every corner, whether it be in getting a job or doing well at school. Young men of color are looked at with fear and hesitation. And, to make matters worse, many of these students have parents who are struggling and they are forced to focus on supporting their family rather than work to better themselves. With situations and responsibilities such as these, how can we blame them for needing help or giving up when life becomes too hard. How can we compare them to students with successful parents and can afford to participate in extracurriculars, as well as pay for tutors and expensive colleges? We live in a society that degrades students who were raised with adversities and call it a miracle if they succeed. We allow them to suffer due to the color of their skin or the cards they were dealt with and then we question why they fail. It is a cycle of constant hardships that is sustained by misconceptions and the longer we allow it to continue, the worse our mindsets will become.

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For the past seven years, I have worked as a preschool and infant/toddler teacher at a low income daycare in inner city West Haven, Connecticut. My center takes children in and has parents pay their fees based on their own income. We have had a single mother pay ten dollars a week for her daughter to be cared for. I believe in the principles of the daycare in that they believe that children are our future and treat them as such. Regardless of what income their parents make, what language they mainly speak, or what background they came from, they are taught and cared for with just as much love as the next. They are encouraged to continue trying when they struggle and we give them our focus when they may need help. While the outside world will belittle them for who they are, we ensure that our daycare advocates for equality and encourages them to believe in it as well.

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Young children are believed to be the most innocent of all human beings. They have not been touched by the prejudices of others and still believe in kindness before anything else. It is when they grow up where they begin learning of the harsh expectations the world has to offer. We separate ourselves between races and classes so often that we feel trapped where we stand. Social inequalities often feel inescapable, especially when it feels as if the entire world agrees. I believe that it is time we start teaching our students and young children that they are allowed to fight back. That these man made barriers are not permanent and we should adapt to the progress we make. I get more and more impressed by the constant advancement of sciences and historical discoveries. We are learning more and more about our world, both its past and present, and yet we are cornered by ideologies created by people who lived in a world that was far different from the one we have now. Social inequalities have its most painful effects on people of color and in disadvantaged areas and our attitudes towards them only allow the divide to grow. The ideology

we have of placing blame instead of moving forward has halted our progress as human beings and the more we allow for it, the more the cycle continues to revolve.

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### *Portfolio Piece #2 — Theory of Identity and Positionality*

I feel like I have always struggled with my identity. I have always loved the fact that I am an immigrant woman. I loved telling stories about my home in the city and living on an island. I loved how different our style of cooking is and how our family parties are just a little bit more fun. I was born in a house with a tin roof that housed around nine people when it was probably built for three and I was the happiest I could be because they were all family. We may not have had three meals a day but my cousins and I got to run around in the rain on the streets because there were never any cars. I know we struggled, but I was young and we were happy, and that's all I really needed. Where my naivety lied, however, is why other people may have seen differences such as mine as a bad thing. After moving to the states, I was brought up in a predominately white, sheltered community in Connecticut. I never experienced racism and the injustice people have to live through. It wasn't until middle school when I realized that other children of different races were heavily discriminated against in my own neighborhood. And, despite all of that, I didn't know where I stood as an immigrant who was just invisible enough for that fact to go unnoticed. By high school, I was completely lost in my identity and what part of my being mattered the most to me.

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Now, as a slightly older woman who is about to graduate from college, I still tend to struggle with who I am and how my identity affects others. Especially working in a low income daycare, where many families have seen me as a teacher they could connect to and even ask me how I managed to succeed so they can teach their children to do so as well. But I have had to learn to not relate to children and families in difficulty because, in reality, I don't. I have to put myself in their shoes even when they assume that I'm already in the same ones. I have empathy for the children who are going through similar language barriers that I encountered, but I cannot act like I grew up the same way they are. I was very fortunate to go to a good school and never really worry about financial insecurities. I got to participate in extracurriculars like theater and yearbook club and I was never tracked in my academics. My guidance counselors encouraged me to apply for top schools and I was never looked down upon because of my race. I didn't face the same struggles they will and their parents currently are.

I know how fortunate I am now. When I moved to the states, I was enrolled in a very good district that had high achievements. Because of that, I am now in university and learning how to help people. If I had stayed in the Philippines for a longer amount of time I may have been in the same place, trying to get opportunities that just weren't offered in my home country. But I wasn't and I was much luckier. I am in this position where my race does matter, because kids have seen me as a teacher whose skin color looks like theirs and who can sing them lullabies in Spanish like their mothers can. If anything, I have learned that I need to be grateful for my identity and positionality, because they allow me to connect with my students and offer them this sense of safety and importance. But it also pushes me to reflect on my differences from them in

terms of class and background, and understand that these differences give me the chance to be their teacher and I have to honor that by constantly working and learning to be a good one.

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It has been said that growing from your past is possible with time and effort. Individuals can change their beliefs and their actions based on one instance that may have forced them to think differently. Despite what many may say, in this world, no one has their hands tied. Regardless of the situation or the place they may be in life, a person always has the agency to change their path and even change their own history - whether it be by forgiving someone who has hurt them or forgiving themselves for a time they might regret. And it took me a very long time to understand that. It took me a very long time to understand that I am not trapped under the magnifying glass of expectations it felt like the world had on me. I was not one thing or another, but whatever I deemed important to me. I am not just my mother or father's daughter nor am I independent of them in any way. Everything that I have experienced and every action I have performed has puzzle-pieced me into who I am now and I am excited to say that my puzzle is far from being complete. I have more to learn and more to discover every day. But for now, I find it safe to say what I do know with confidence. I am a twenty two-year-old student at Clark University. I am Filipino but was raised in the United States. I am a daughter, I am an older sister. I am an artist and I am a teacher. I care a lot about everything I do and everyone I do it with. I think learning is the most powerful thing a person can do and I believe that wanting to learn more makes a person even more special. I am aware that I could not possibly be in the place I am today, with all the opportunities I have, without having to learn about them from others. And I am eager to see what I have next to discover.

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### *Portfolio Piece #3 — Theory of Change*

Change has always been something daunting. People are often afraid of change because it is always much more complicated than simply "changing" and moving on. There are always steps to take and I have personally seen that those steps tend to feel like they take a thousand years and more criticism than praise or acceptance comes in between the beginning and the goal.

When I had started as a CYES major, I had no intention of making a big or deliberate change. I wanted to help people and teach children to become good people because I believed that that was the best impact I could make. And, now, I still think that. I believe that children are our future. While they may make up less than a quarter of our population, they do make up one hundred percent of our future and I think that is a reality that is often dismissed. Every decision that is made, whether by politicians, school board of directors, or even parents, has an impact on the youngest generation. Children see the war and discrimination in our society and though they may not completely understand, they are constantly effected by the events of their surroundings. I believe that change starts with them, because if we teach them to be good and to fight injustices as much as we do ourselves, then we are raising a generation of forward thinkers and caring individuals who believe in justice and equity to be a priority that should be constantly acted on.

And even as I write that I feel guilty for not wanting to enact a bigger or more "powerful" change. I have often criticized myself for believing that my work as a preschool teacher is almost

unconventional or inactive when I think about all of the discrimination and injustice that occurs every single day. But being a part of CYES has encouraged me to find the power in the change I am making. My praxis project itself did not feel like it was transformative or groundbreaking in any way, but if I made any difference or broadened the thinking of even one of my peers, then I consider myself successful. We were working as students in the position to help educate the youth in the community that our school resides in but is still so separate from us. I didn't want to be an outsider taking up space where I didn't belong but rather reflect on my position as a college student who wanted to help those who were struggling. I have learned to refuse to feel remorseful for my version of change feeling small compared to others, because I have learned how to reflect on my work and the change I am trying to put forward. I think change takes people who are willing to see the value in what may seem simple. There can be just as much value in long-term works of influence and advancement as there are for those who are in the frontlines of changemaking and fighting for innovation and diversity, as long as the end goal leads to a better future. I have come to understand that change is about reflection and appreciation as much as it is about action and power, and being able to encompass both makes an individual capable for growth and helping others to be accountable in their own approaches to change.

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Being a student at Clark has always set this expectation that I had to do something bigger than myself. This university and its students are often so passionate and driven that it becomes overwhelming trying to figure out just what kind of change I could find myself making. I think there is a little bit of 'I change to save the world' in all college students, and as valiant as that may be, it is also slightly unrealistic. Through CYES, I think I learned that it's okay to change even just one person, and that it's okay if that one person is myself. Working on two theses projects during a pandemic was a challenge that even now I'm not surprised I took on. I have always been an overachiever and have embraced difficult works because I know at the other side of it all I will have learned more. And while this past year has been a rollercoaster of trial and error with never enough rest, I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about my capabilities and reflect on my beliefs and understandings as an individual. I have my cohort and advisor to thank for constantly lifting each other up and reminding me that we're never alone in our efforts to do good. None of us have been able to do the projects we had started out with, but I know we have ended with a better appreciation of our work and a better outlook on our capabilities as changemakers. We've all come out of this year different than we were before, but I have hopes that it has made us stronger both as learners and as educators to those we encounter next.

CYES has given me the tools to think critically about the differences and hardships people face in the world. It has taught me that we have serious work to do to make our society a kinder and more accepting place. With the ability to constantly reflect on ourselves, the work we do, and how we affect others, we can show that there is value in even the smallest of movements.