My Theories of Understanding

Theories of Understanding of Social Inequality: Students with No Voice Against Teachers Who Have Lost Their Patience

Over the extended winter intersession of the 2020-2021 academic year, I applied to work as a substitute teacher at an elementary school close to home. The school is a relatively large K-8 school, and I was hired to work with the Lower School, kindergarten through fifth grade. On my first day, I was brought to the Kindergarten Excel classroom, one of the very few classrooms with students due to a high rise in positive COVID cases in the town. This classroom is centered on the idea of placing ESL students into a fully English speaking classroom to quickly and smoothly transition them into the new language. Many of the students had very recently moved to the Massachusetts town from the Dominican Republic, and others from Guatemala. Half of the students in the classroom were of kindergarten age, and the other half were old enough to be in first grade. The first grade students were in the same Kindergarten Excel classroom last year, however due to the school year quickly being made virtual at the end of the previous year, the school decided to combine the two grades. It was explained that the first grade aged students weren't quite ready to move on, so they thought the older students could be a good role model for the new kindergarten students.

Before I entered the classroom, the Associate Principal of the Lower School gave me a very quick rundown of what to expect. Three of the students in the classroom, twin sisters in kindergarten and an older sister in first grade, were having a lot of difficulty in school. For all three of them, this was their first year of being in a school environment. They all spoke varying levels of English, and had not been socialized very much at home. The mother told the school's faculty that she cannot handle bringing the girls out of the house to the grocery store or the park,

and keeps them at home. I was told that it would be a challenge, and starting my first day with this pep talk was very intimidating. Two aids, myself and another, were in the classroom every day. All of the faculty working with these girls would warn me of how difficult it would be and how disruptive they were. All of the faculty and teachers just had a very negative opinion of these young girls who have never been taught how an American classroom works. The white teachers would bring up how their mother wasn't doing a good job at home with them, how the language barrier is creating more problems, and using aspects of their social identities to justify their behaviors.

After spending time with these girls, I could tell that they really didn't mean to be disruptive in the classroom. They're very smart, however they were definitely behind the rest of the students academically because they had never experienced an American structured learning experience before this year. A lot of the reasons they would "act out" were because they were frustrated with the difficulty of the work, were struggling to understand the directions in English, or because they were jealous of the attention their other sisters were getting. All of these problems have the ability to be solved easily. However, many of the teachers just didn't have time to do so and would blame their outbursts on the students' home lives. It was very discouraging to see, because I've never imagined teachers being so outwardly judgmental of students' home lives, especially newly immigrated students in a classroom created to cater to their needs.

The teachers, after months of receiving almost no help with these girls, had resorted to blaming the disruptive behaviors on the girls' socioeconomic status. It made it appear to me that the teachers believed the lives of their students who are not white are more difficult to teach. However, it was so evident that the teachers felt like they've tried everything. It wasn't so much

that they blamed their home lives, but more so the fact that they have nothing else to blame. Just because the students were not born in the US, don't speak fluent English, and have different colored skin, the teachers would think they know everything about their lives. These attitudes would affect the way the girls learn, and the way they are getting accustomed to the public school environment.

As I think of my analysis of my time at this school, I've applied somewhat of a progressive theorist perspective, in Payne's (1984) words. I've taken note of the relationship between those with agency, white middle class teachers, and those with no agency or voice, newly immigrated students of color. I acknowledge that there are no parties here that can be seen as "the top" of the social hierarchy, however there is a strong power dynamic between the teachers and their students (There is an obvious power difference amongst the white teachers and the students of color. What I mean by no "top" of the social hierarchy, I am referring to the white teachers not having full authority over the social hierarchy of the public school systems). The relationship between these two groups of different power status accounts for those who exhibit higher rates of "undesirable" behavior (Payne 10, 1984). The power difference has affected the way the teachers are treating their students. These face-to-face interactions between those with agency in the school and those without demonstrate the influence of our institutional power structures on a smaller scale. However, there is no good or bad side to this. Most of the teachers do care about these girls as individuals and as students. Many of us were trying our best to help them understand the curriculum, to give them the most assistance we could. The girls were also not always the victim. They did intentionally "act out" at times to get a reaction out of the staff. Most of the time, these intentional outbursts were in protest to how a sister was being treated. They were aware of how they were acting and how at times it was not appropriate. To take a

progressive point of view is not always the best, because there are limitations to our understanding of inequality. Payne's (10) progressive point of view sees the causal factors of inequalities as being some aspect of a standard arrangement of core social institutions. I've noticed how the structures of the school system kind of helped implement these unfortunate situations of the girls, however, Payne's theory ignores some of the face to face interactions that can be seen as well. While there are some structures in place to enforce the power dynamics, the everyday instances cannot be pushed aside.

Another concept taken from studies of education disparities that relates to my experience is Ladson-Billings concept of the "moral debt" (8). As Ladson-Billings puts it, a person's moral debt "reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do," (8). As I think back to my part in those conversations amongst staff, I recognize that I did not do my best at easing the conversation topics. I took a back seat in conversations, never speaking poorly of the students. However, I did not tell the other teachers that the home lives of these students are none of our business. To expect a parent to be able to sit next to their child for a full day of online school is not one that I shared. I understand many parents and adults at home are busy as well, they work, they take care of all the children at home, they are just busy. On the weekly virtual days, the girls were rarely at the computer. They could be seen running around or playing games or watching TV. But the teachers would exclaim that the mother should have been making sure the girls were paying attention. I should have spoken my piece, however I did not, and I recognize this as a moral debt of mine. However, to repay my debts, as best as I could, I worked as hard as I could with each of the girls individually to try and help them catch up in the lessons. What they missed while home, I would take the work and help to teach them what they were unable to do alone.

A more prominent theory I've used in this retelling of my time is Critical Race Theory. CRT analyzes the intersections of race and education, often studying the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor (Leonardo, 11). I've analyzed the importance of race in the school system, and how white teachers will make assumptions of their students of color. Leonardo explains that "CRT in Education proceeds by unmasking apparently nonracial phenomena as precisely racial in their nature," (19). I've explained the normative conversations amongst teachers, stereotyping their students' home lives and worked to highlight the racial undertones of their language.

Moving forward from this, I hoped to promote a safe space for children free of biases. The preexisting opinions teachers and adults have of those different from us should not be fostered into their work with youth. Nobody should be judged based on how they look or what languages they speak. They should be thought of as their own person, unique from stereotypes.

As I moved through my Praxis project, I hoped to foster this concept through our mentors in the All Kinds of Girls space. The majority of our mentors were white and worked with mainly young people of color. It was always important to remind them that we all have biases, small or large, and it's important to be wary of them. To be working with youth, you must know that everyone will have biases and opinions, but that youth are not meant to be thought of with these biases. You cannot bring your stereotyped opinions into a space with youth.

Theories of Understanding Positionality and Identity: Setting the Bar Too High

I've spent my summers since I was 13 at my town's Parks and Recreation summer camp. I started as a volunteer and have since worked my way up to being the camp director, and some of my favorite memories of working with youth have been from my time at summer camp. The summer of 2020 I was an age group supervisor and was presented with a lot of new challenges as we went about our program through a pandemic for the first time. Lots of new campers enrolled due to other camps closing, and one camper in particular had some difficulty adjusting to the new environment. He was in my age group, and with our limited numbers I created individual relationships with each of my campers.

This camper had a lot of difficulty working well with other campers, following the expectations we'd set, and overall struggled to settle into the new camp setting. I spent most of my summer working with him individually to explain why we had certain expectations and rules at camp, and why some of his behaviors weren't appropriate. At times he would get extremely loud, and verbally aggressive with the campers, sometimes getting physical, and overall acting poorly as a friend and a camper. I spent lots of one on one time with him to work through the daily frustrations he faced. He would struggle with safely expressing his emotions in different situations, like how his friends didn't seem to want to play with him, when he would unfairly get out in a game, or if he wasn't prioritized in a new activity. We worked on finding safer and better ways of expressing what was wrong that helped us staff help assist in the situations. It took a lot of intervening conversations and games, but by the last week of the summer it felt like real progress had been made. Six weeks is not a long time to spend with the campers, and being able to see real progress being made was so rewarding.

After some ongoing differences between this camper and another, on one of the last days

of camp he was extremely frustrated with some comments made by other campers. He started to walk into the trails of camp and refused to leave the trails. I spent so much time building this relationship between this camper and me, and this split second a switch was flipped and he began turning his frustration to me, and throwing small sticks at me. This really hurt me and felt as if all the hard work I'd spent this summer helping him find a place within the camp and the safe space we'd created was gone. It took a couple days for me to realize that I didn't do anything wrong, I just set such high expectations for myself as a camp counselor that I just wasn't able to achieve.

I think looking back, I'd consider being a helper as the overarching theme to my identities. Growing up, I was the oldest sister and cousin of a large extended family. At family events I've been asked to help take care of and watch the younger family members. This made me appreciate the family I have and how important it is to support one another. However, I've also grown to see the roles of sister and daughter to also mean helper. I'm there to help when needed. This has sort of manifested itself into other aspects of my identity, and I seem to base myself around that role as the helper.

The more objective aspects of my identity play a large role in who I am as well. Objective aspects meaning those parts of myself that I don't consider questionable. The parts of who I am that just aren't up for debate. As an Asian American female college student, my identity allows me to relate to many of the youth I work with, but it does create some barriers as well. Being a female person of color allows me to create stronger connections with some of the youth I work with. However, I faced a lot of internal confusion surrounding this characterization of myself. I am very white passing, and grew up in a White suburban New Hampshire town. I have experienced constant confusion as I think of who I am and what I've experienced. I don't

face the same realities as the majority of people of color, however I still feel a strong cultural connection to my family. As I work with many youth of color, I can't help but question if I'm an insider or an outsider to them. At times, they don't know either. I remember during my Sophomore year I told some of the girls in All Kinds of Girls that my mom immigrated to Massachusetts from Thailand when she was young. The girls were pretty surprised, saying they thought I was white or Latino or just couldn't really tell what my racial identity was. They shared some similar experiences though of other people not knowing their racial identities as well. I can relate to the youth of color that I work with on a smaller level, sharing some family traditions and experiences, however I don't always face the same individual experiences that they experience. I've worked my hardest to find the line between relation and separation.

Being a youth worker is another large part of my identity. At home and at Clark I'm constantly working with youth either in a mentor/mentee relationship, educational setting, or daycare setting. I find it difficult to go through a period of time without working with youth, as it's been a constant in my life for so long. I'm constantly finding ways to work with children whenever I can, and find the most joy when doing so. I love forming relationships with the children and being able to both teach and learn with them. Looking back, the role of the helper is also ever present in this aspect of my identity. However, after this summer I learned that my role as the youth worker is only so limited. I can do my best to set goals but at the end of the day, I cannot always achieve those goals. I can only spend so much time with the youth I work with, and can only accomplish so much. I can't expect myself to be able to create huge change amongst youth that I only spend a summer or a semester with.

As I continued to analyze myself within my Praxis site, I found myself to be an insider to my research as a part of my program and to my peers. I planned on doing research regarding

myself and my peers and how we interacted through our positions. I planned on doing a lot of self reflection and introspection. This experience really allowed me to dig deeper into what it means to create an impact on an organization and with youth individually.

Another important aspect of my identity is the concept of being a student. It's one of the most defining aspects of a lot of youth from ages 6 to 22, that's who you're told to be. However as I go through my time at Clark I acknowledge the transition I'm going through to move from being a student to being a teacher. As I navigate my way through this change, I notice how all aspects of my identity are intertwined and form this greater role for myself. My objective identities of race and gender combine with my subjective identity as a youth worker to create a new identity for myself. I reflect on the internal confusion of defining my "ambiguous" racial identity and wonder what could have been done from a young age to help me avoid this. Along with this, I work to develop my identity as just a youth worker into the identity of an educator.

As my identities make up who I am, they influence how I interact with others and my experience in the world. I continue to think about what can be done to foster a safe and comforting environment for young children and youth as they navigate into their own worlds, developing into their own persons. I want to think about what could have helped me, and turn that into what can help any other youth experiencing similar questions and confusions. I wonder what impact I can have on the youth I'm working with, and if I can help them in any way. My social identity has helped put me on the path to working with youth, in a way that would ideally foster safe and supportive environments to promote the healthy growth they deserve.

Theories of Social Change: On a Small-Scale

      To ask someone to create social change can be a daunting question. It's so often spoken about as changing the lives of a whole group of people, making a positive impact that can be felt by many. However, social change can be done on a small scale as well. I hope to accomplish this small positive impact eventually, as I think of myself as a future teacher. I think of what was important for me in school, and how that can be turned into what's important for other young students as well. I believe fostering a safe space and a sense of comfort for children through a classroom or youth work environment can make students feel secure in who they are and what they can learn. I hope that through strong relationship building, and making a space free from biases can work to allow students to feel valued and confident in who they are, creating that small social change.

      As I've written in my previous piece, over the winter intersession of 2020-2021 I spent time working with three sisters, twins in kindergarten and the third being in first grade. The girls were from the Dominican Republic, and had moved to Massachusetts within the year or so. They had never been in an American public school environment before this academic year, and struggled to adapt to the new space. They would grow frustrated and run around the classroom or disturb the other students in the class. There was a strong language barrier between the girls and most of their teachers, which created more tensions. The teachers would grow frustrated, not having access to Spanish speakers all day to assist in translating lessons and assignments. However, the teachers underestimated the amount of English the girls could understand, and would constantly speak about their frustrations while around the girls. As I think of this theory of understanding, I want to highlight how the atmosphere of the classroom shifted due to the

teachers conversations amongst themselves. This made it really difficult for the students to feel comfortable in their classrooms, feeling like they were a burden or a problem to be dealt with.

As I think of the change I wish to make, I constantly think of this time I spent working with the ESL classroom over intersession. The girls I worked with over the few months time felt alienated from their teachers, knowing that there was a disconnect. The girls complained to their mom about how the teachers were talking about how difficult they were in the classroom and how frustrated they were. The teachers expressed how they were helpless, not having the right resources to help these girls and then turning their frustrations into hurtful words. The girls were helpless as well, not knowing how to voice their feelings in a safe way. They would try to explain something in Spanish, and when none of the adults in the room could understand they would show us they were frustrated by throwing their hands up, letting out a big sigh, or throwing their bodies onto the floor in extreme cases.

I feel passionate about this situation, because I feel like a lot of the roadblocks that were faced could have been avoided. I think that the girls really struggled because of the language barrier, making them feel even more behind academically because they couldn't always understand the lessons being taught or the instructions given. If the teachers were given more assistance with the girls, they would not have been so outwardly upset with the girls directly. I hope to be able to help avoid these challenges, as I envision myself as a teacher in the future. I hope to not only be given the resources and materials to ease these troubles, but also I aim to have the patience to work through these battles day by day. I know it becomes exhausting, facing the same issues everyday, but I understand the individual struggle of the girls and know that they feel just as exhausted. I want to be able to share this feeling, and find a middle ground between

myself and my future students, and feel satisfied with the ways we provide and take in educational lessons.

I feel as if a more inclusive and welcoming classroom would have helped to ease the problems that were faced. I don't feel as if it would be possible for just one person to solve all the issues that were being faced. Spanish speaking aides would have greatly helped the teachers in my vignette, and I hope that this would be a resource for myself in the future. I guess my passions would be making sure students feel comfortable in their spaces by allowing myself and my students to know that it's ok to express our frustrations in safe ways with open communication. I don't want to see anything similar to the attitudes the girls expressed in retaliation to how they'd been treated. My passion of being a teacher drives me towards wanting to create a safe and secure environment for future students. Rather than patronizing students for being proficient in speaking and understanding English, I'd work on alternative ways of providing lesson materials. I would make students feel welcome, rather than alienated in their classroom.

As I think of who I am, and what I've been given through my experiences and positionality in the world, I can hope to accomplish these goals I've expressed. I've spent most of my teen years working with young kids, at summer camps or part time jobs. I consider a large part of my identity to be a youth worker. I spend so much time with young children, many of them I see each year, and value the relationships I build with them. I work to develop these bonds and foster a safe space for all of them. I work to find ways of creating strong connections with students, maybe finding similarities between ourselves or bonding over differences. I would find ways to relate to students and build those relationships of trust to ensure they feel secure in the classroom. I'm constantly finding spaces to continue my work with youth, working towards

relationship building and learning more about what it takes to create a safe space. I think that with the time I've spent in youth work spaces helps build who I am and what I am capable of doing.

I hope to work towards creating a safe space for all youth, in any type of youth work I do. Long term, I hope to be able to teach in a classroom that students love, and feel comfortable being in. My goals in the future remain in the interest of students, allowing them to create the space alongside me. As a teacher, I will allow students to speak for themselves and who they are, providing the spaces and opportunities to do so. Rather than shaming or diminishing students' identities, I will celebrate those parts of themselves they wish to share with me. I hope they're able to feel secure in themselves and their relationship with me as I become their teacher.

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