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Positionality and Identity: Tracking my Developing Consciousness

Introduction

“Identity formation...is an alchemical process that synthesizes the dualities, contradictions, and perspectives from these different selves and worlds”

(Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), *Light in the Dark: Luz en Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*)

Processing identity and cultivating a sense of one’s positionality proves to be an ongoing process that requires constant reflection and flexibility. Throughout my life, I have written a significant amount of personal reflections that frequently center my understanding of my racial identity. Each time I begin a new one, I look back to ones I’ve written in the past for inspiration and guidance, as well as to examine how my thinking/writing has evolved since that paper. After doing so again for this paper, I considered the fact that I have never explicitly linked any of this writing together or fully explored the meaning behind any growth in writing or thinking. Therefore, I have decided to directly connect this paper to a reflective piece I wrote in 11th grade as a way to gather insight into the ways in which my sense of self/positionality has shifted, developed, and become more clearly focused.

When I was sixteen, my paper “[Discovering and Navigating My Latinidad](#)” was the final written assignment for an elective course I took on Latinx Literature. Throughout the trimester, we learned so much wonderful Latinx history, theory, writing, art, music, language, culture, etc. This piece felt important for me to look back on as it is one of the first times I felt clarity about myself and my various intersecting identities. It was through a blend of stories, analysis, poetry, and theory that I wove together not only what I learned from the course, but also how I grew as a person — I felt more deeply connected to my Latinidad and felt I understood myself in a more evolved capacity. As I wrote: “This year I have felt a desire to write about myself. To explain the distinct process I have been, am currently, and will forever go through as I figure out my identity. This paper explores the ways in which I have analyzed and discovered my “different selves and worlds.”” While this may be the result of a sixteen year old who has had a little too many self-reflection opportunities and believed she was becoming someone new, the experience of writing that paper still offers a valuable mapping of my past self.

Personal Vignette: A Formative Awareness of Race

My parents and step-parents have always been consistently intentional in the ways in which they worked to nurture a secure sense of racial and cultural identity. To provide some background on my racial identity: me and my brother’s biological mother, Sandra, is Puerto Rican and Dominican, and we have different biological fathers. Mine is African-American and my brother’s biological father is a white

Jewish man. These men, Junius and David, are partners and met each other and our moms when they all worked at a small progressive private school in Manhattan. To add further complexity to my family, my parents split up when I was nine and my white mother, Laura, remarried Monica, a black woman from North Carolina, when I was 12. Then when I was 18, Sandra remarried Imani, a Latina woman who is also from NYC and has an 8 year old daughter named Alejandrina. Evidently, the racial and ethnic diversity of my family is enough to teach me about varying forms of identity even if my parents hadn't purposefully educated me on anything.

However, my parents were extremely intentional with the way they raised my brother and I; teaching us how to engage with, be proud of, and find community in our race/culture. Race consciousness is a process that generally comes early for children of color as every part of our bodies and lives are systemically racialized and profiled. I have many early memories of race and racism as my skin color and culture was, and will always be, non-normative and Othered. What's more, the internalization of these messages I, and other children of color, receive terribly impacts the ways in which we see ourselves in relation to white kids and even other kids of color. I remember that, when I was about nine years old, my family went to the Dominican Republic for a week during summer break. It didn't take long for me to notice the differences between me and the many brown little girls speaking Spanish to one another. I saw them and, sadly, immediately distanced myself from them. I didn't even think to connect our similar Dominican roots or same tight curls because I subconsciously exclusively associated these girls with "poverty." This horribly unfortunate mindset was exacerbated by the fact that we were staying at a resort type hotel, which I mentally disassociated with some of the areas we were in. It's confusing and sad too given that, in New York City where I grew up, there is extreme poverty and wealth disparities all around me. I wonder now how this belief that the poverty on the island was all that different to my home came to be. In part, I assume it's due to how loaded this word is with negative associations and prejudices spread by dominant discourse that I evidently fell victim to. What's more, although a deeper part of me wished I could speak Spanish, I still saw it as *their* language, as if it came from an entirely different world and wasn't a part of my own culture.

Encountering your own culture from what felt like an outsider position was isolating and honestly embarrassing. I didn't want to be ashamed of my culture, especially given all I had been shown that is beautiful about it. I remember when I was about 11 and my brother was 7, my mother Sandra had us draw an entire map of Puerto Rico to learn about the history and culture of one of the islands our family is from. She sat us down and told stories of the genocide of the Indigenous people of Puerto Rico (the

Táinos), enslavement and plantations, wars, colonization, and the evolution of the island's relationship with the rest of the United States. She also told stories of culture and language, food, family, and the visits we took when we were younger. These connections were then made to our lives in NYC and how our people, like the Young Lords (a group of Puerto Rican activists from NYC founded in 1968), have always collectivized and resisted oppression. Though I did not appreciate these at home history lessons at the time, eventually I found this holistic image of the island and my people had truly helped me feel similarly holistic about myself and my racial identity. I now long to return back to Puerto Rico, in part to restore my relationship with the island and return without the internalized outsider position I previously held. Rather, I will think back to how my mother directly engaged us with our culture and helped us to recognize where it existed in the communities we're a part of. Knowing about empowering work and perseverance, beauty and culture, pushed me to combat the confusion and ambivalence I had about myself as a racial being.

Identity Theorists

“As Blackwomen we have an identity, and therefore a politics that requires faith in the humanness of Blackness and femaleness. We are flying in the face of white male conceptions of what humanness is and proving that it is not them, but us... We will show you what it means to be human, what it means to really care about humanity.” (founding Combahee River Collective member Barbara Smith, unpublished paper).

The foundation to all consciousness that has been raised for me was through exposure to the work of women of color identity theorists. In “Discovering and Navigating my Latinidad”, I reflected on the women of color I had been introduced to for the first time such as Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and the members of the Combahee River Collective:

The first time I ever heard about the Combahee River Collective (a beautiful group of queer Black Feminists) was this year in the Latinx literature class. I have never been exposed to Black Feminist theory and was blown away at the similarities between their thoughts and mine. I remember sitting in class quickly feeling ashamed at my surprise. *These ideas are not new!* Obviously Blackwomen have been experiencing sexism and racism from the beginning of time. Black Feminism has always been and will always be a “logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (Combahee River Collective, 210).

These people oriented me towards the familiar, fluid, and multidisciplinary nature of women of color feminisms. The impact was from everything; even smaller practices like capitalizing “Blackwomen” felt meaningful to me. I’d written that I was (wonderfully) overwhelmed by the knowledge I’d taken in as I had never felt so transformed by an entire course — I remember feeling that all the authors, content, and

conversations were revealing things to me about myself that I didn't even know were there. I now recognize all that needed time to be processed and I no longer feel overwhelmed by this familiarity when I encounter new theorists, books, authors, disciplines, etc — but rather feel supported and sustained.

Geographies

“Latinx and Black geographies are inextricably linked, because Blackness and Latinidad are not mutually exclusive and because Black thought, experiences, history and politics, along with the legacy of transatlantic slavery, profoundly shape contemporary social and spatial arrangements in las Americas” (Madelaine Cahuas (2019), “Interrogating Absences In Latinx Theory And Placing Blackness In Latinx Geographical Thought: A Critical Reflection” p. 1)

Recognizing the importance of space and place has been an additional radical component to my identity development that I have more recently become explicitly aware of. The quote above is one of the two in this paper that is not initially from my 11th grade paper, and this is because after taking geography courses or classes that include an examination of space/place, I have been more exposed to geography theorists and have adopted a geographical lens of analysis. Cahuas' article fused my awareness of my internal identity as an Afro-Latina with the similarly interlocking geographies of Blackness and Latinidad.

Making this connection with land/space and identity felt relatively new to me; however, in reflecting on my past writing, I was always engaging in geographical analysis and it was actually quite explicit. Honestly, I'm not sure why I only recently connected what I've learned in Clark geography courses to my work in high school. Perspective and hindsight are truly valuable internal states of being. I'd written in “Discovering and Navigating My Latinidad” that “navigating physical geographies is a constant struggle that requires a certain amount of flexibility...One has to be able to move freely in and around the different environments they are a part of. Anzaldúa writes that “rigidity means death” in that being restrictive about your identity is (unfortunately even if it is unknowingly) self-destructive (Anzaldúa, 1987).” I've returned to this idea many times throughout my academic life as I found again and again the value of expanding my understanding of space and geography to be more fluid.

Writing and Language

“We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work.”
(The Combahee River Collective (1977), *A Black Feminist Statement*)

The experience of writing/storytelling and speaking/dialogue are essential to how I absorb and process everything. When writing my piece in 11th grade, I talked about the disconnect I felt with my Latinidad

because I don't speak Spanish. Though I knew this didn't mean I'm any less Latina, it was (and is) saddening to feel distanced from such a connective part of culture. Especially given how immensely important conversation is for my processing and development, I wished to participate in these Spanish dialogues with other Latinx people. I had written that "Not knowing Spanish feels like a gaping hole in my Latina identity," which is disheartening to re-read and remember that this feeling impacted me so intensely. While this is still something I think about, it is lessened by the fact that I am trying to learn Spanish and by general growth that has allowed me to be more secure in my sense of self compared to when I was sixteen. This growth involved understanding things with more nuance, rather than extreme either/or. "Gaping hole" is an extreme, and I now regard my relationship to the Spanish language, especially after completing the praxis project, with much more flexibility. It hasn't changed that I strongly desire to learn and know Spanish, but I now see language as more than simply verbal communication.

Still, writing has always been comforting as I am a very circular thinker and require time to organize or think through my ideas. Thus, since high school, it has been meaningful to have spaces to write it all out and then share with others. The quote above from the Combahee River Collective is the second one that was not initially part of "Discovering and Navigating my Latinidad." However, I included it here because even though I have read *A Black Feminist Statement* numerous times, each time I get something new out of it. Most recently, this line in which the members uplift the political value and power of shared written work really resonated with me. In addition, it is in alignment with what I was thinking about as I wrote this section in 11th grade. I wanted to be "documented"; to have myself (my experiences, thoughts, feelings, opinions, relationships, etc) written down somewhere that could be read and understood fully — a desire that feels related to the intentions of the Combahee River Collective. Again, these sixteen year-old desires were undoubtedly still written in more extreme language, but the sentiment of being able to return back to myself at that age still rings true. As the Combahee River Collective understood, creating and reading (listening/understanding) alternative narratives to share with yourself and others is meaningful work.

Expanding Consciousness

"Identity is the essential core of who
we are as individuals, the conscious
experience of the self inside"

—Kaufman

(quoted by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 62)

Most often, I am subconsciously working to expand my personal consciousness (whether that be related explicitly to race and gender, or education, or relationships), and the moments that I am suddenly pulled into awareness of that work are genuinely valuable. Each piece that builds upon my collection of reflective writing presents a moment like this where I must consider what's remained significant, what's changed, and how I've grown. For example, in regards to the quote above, while I still feel identity is an active "conscious experience of the self," I'd add that it's not only internal, but also is greatly shaped by and experienced externally through interactions/relationships. People, spaces, and encounters inform the internal self as much as our internal self informs the ways in which we operate in the world. It's much more beyond the self, and sixteen-year-old me clearly needed to first work through this internal journey before moving outward.

This sentiment is directly linked to how I see myself positioned in relation to my praxis project: my internal subjectivities have informed my project as much as the project has informed my internal subjectivities. The research Kaila and I embarked on centers around cultivating a space for youth to engage in a dialogue about race and racism. As demonstrated throughout this paper, race is immensely important in my life and critical to how I participate in the world; and as such, this praxis project was largely influenced by my developed race consciousness. My formative understanding of race, my experiences with identity theorists, geography, writing, and language...these have all been so significant to me and, through this praxis project, I had the initial goal to facilitate similar personal growth with youth. My process happened throughout many years of exposure and subsequent reflection, and I was excited at the thought of creating a moment of exposure to race consciousness with people at early stages of their life. Even though there was no dramatic shift (not that I was expecting there to be), the children hopefully had an experience to look back on and point to as a time they were pulled into awareness of the work they were already doing to expand their consciousness.

Critical Theory of Social Inequality: Racialization and Educational Inequity

Introduction

To make sense of and resist social inequality, we must consider all the systems, institutions, experiences, and knowledges simultaneously at play. These forces determine how we encounter social inequality and, when all examined fully, reveal the complexities of our lived experiences. Racism has been at the forefront of my understanding of social inequality because, as a Black and Latina woman, the way I am initially perceived is racialized. I've always been aware of this, though it took time for me to recognize the intricacies of the aforementioned additional forces which construct my particular experience. Namely, I came into greater consciousness through schooling. I've only gone to private predominantly white institutions and, as one could infer, I've had many racialized experiences in school as well as had to (with others) resist racist structures and people. While this was (and is) a challenging and important reality, after many experiences observing or engaging with students in public, low-income or under-resourced schools, I am now better able to locate my privileges and recognize the complexities of racialization in schooling.

Personal Vignette: Coming into Greater Consciousness

In my junior year of high school, we organized social justice trips within a specific topic of our choosing. I was on the education justice trip to Baltimore and Washington D.C. to learn about the school to prison pipeline, restorative justice, and police presence in schools by visiting a couple of schools and meeting with some D.C. council members. The first school we visited in Baltimore was the Frederick Douglass School which is partially known for instigating the series of protests after the murder of Freddie Gray in 2015¹. Before we entered, my teacher prepared us to walk through the metal detectors and possibly be patted down as the students had to everyday. However, when we went in, we were escorted around the metal detectors and continued on for a tour of the school. We later reflected on how this experience exposed us to the privilege we came into the school with as 'outsiders', despite the fact that we were high schoolers too, and many of us were students of color. At the moment, I didn't think much about the implications of this dynamic, and it only occurred to me later when a couple of Fredrick Douglass students shared their experiences during a dialogue with our group.

Though our teachers were present, we were not prompted to talk about any particular matter, and mostly listened to the Douglass students explain how they have been racialized, criminalized, and profiled as an entire student body. All the students we spoke with were BIPOC and, as I mentioned, the majority of the

¹ See "Baltimore Riots: A Timeline" (Joshua Berlinger, 2015)
<https://www.cnn.com/2015/04/27/us/baltimore-riots-timeline>

students (and both the teachers) on our trip were also students of color. Because of this, we shared a lot of experiences. We both told stories of approaching teachers with racialized issues within the school, and the subsequent empty promises that were made in response. We both shared frustrations with the lack of specifically Black and Latino teachers at our schools and noticed the burden put on the few teachers of color because of the extra labor they put into supporting students of color. One student from Douglass mentioned how he wished teachers would get to the root of the problem and we shared how similarly our high school would sometimes use band-aid solutions to try and fix our greater institutional problems.

Yet, there was a lot that was significantly different about our racialized experiences. Because the school was seen as the source of the Baltimore protests, afterwards the police presence in their school rose immensely. The Douglass students spoke about coming to school and everyday seeing police officers all around the exterior of the building, in the halls, and even in classrooms. One student said that the “police go over the top...they make us feel uncomfortable” — I worried what “over the top” implied and how these students were able to make it through the day whilst constantly in fear (4/28/2017). The violence this student was insinuating was scary to imagine and it was in this moment I came into greater consciousness about the clear differences in our schooling experiences.

Further, the Douglass students shared that their entire school was criminalized by those who blamed them for the protests. They referenced a documentary in which Frederick Douglass High School was framed as a “bad school” that was incapable of ‘controlling’ their students. This designation perpetuates the dichotomy of ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ which dangerously neglects an “analysis of the distribution of power,... also...of the consequences of particular social structures” (Payne 1984, p.13). Rather than point to the systems of power in place that demonize Black students, high schoolers were exploited by the media as reporters approached them convinced that they were all involved in instigating violence. The city went under martial law, a curfew was instituted, and the students recalled that their social media was monitored as they experienced constant and terrorizing surveillance. The students we talked to feared that we too had been indoctrinated by the media’s constructed narrative about the school as they told us “You can’t look at it from the outside...You have to come into Douglass to see how Douglass works,” (4/28/2017).

What’s the Source?: Surveillance Practices in Schools

Evidently, despite our similar racialized experiences, the events centered around the location of Frederick Douglass High School and the disparity in economic support it had in comparison to ours caused for

distinctly different racialization. Before this trip, I had never heard a first-hand experience of students in such an extreme state of surveillance and criminalization as the students at Douglass. As Charles Payne (1984) writes, “how we choose to see educational inequality is related to how we see inequality itself” — the extent of my awareness was my own experiences and the relatively detached information I had learned (p.7). I’d grown up in the bubble of my own progressive, privileged, private school which limited my understanding of the trauma in schooling to the few news articles or stories I heard. I saw inequality more intimately in the context of my school, and unfortunately assumed that extreme instances were rare. This awareness expanded when the students expressed that this experience “took a lot from a neighborhood that didn’t have much” as they reflected on how, before the Baltimore protests, they still navigated immensely challenging racialized issues (4/28/2017).

The policing, testing, discipline, and overall surveillance within schools creates an environment in which children are being constantly evaluated in a way that narrowly decides their ability to succeed. Policing and harsh disciplinary tactics evaluates student behavior by assuming students will be acting in ways that require punishment with extreme force. The inverse of this would be restorative justice; and the Douglass students were interested in this alternative as it centers on healing and reconciliation, rather than discipline and punishment. When asked about the prospect of restorative justice at Douglass, one student responded that the school “suspends kids everyday. That’s not helping with education...Douglass should bring that [restorative justice] into the school,” (4/28/2017).

Moreover, testing similarly evaluates student success by placing immense pressure on students’ ability to be successful within this one form of learning. In my experience observing a first grade classroom, I was directly exposed to the ways in which testing pressure is even placed on young children.

As I interacted with the kids and got to know them, the classroom, and the teacher, I recognized that there is a push to have the children learn the most simplistic way of completing a problem in order to get them to perform well on testing...Since test scores are so important, [the teacher] remarked with an eye roll that she would have to return to basic number sense and basic reading levels in order to help the kids catch up...[However,] even though teachers want to help kids succeed, only a “segment of society gains the resources, privileges and support necessary to advance,” thus complicating their ability to change these standards (Salazar (1997), 6). -- *Observation Analysis, 2019*

The emphasis on testing is clearly not unique to any one school, and many students are affected by this sentiment from a young age as they absorb the notion that testing is *the* way for them to succeed and learn. Further, as mentioned above, this evaluative environment is not simply the fault of any individual teacher, and instead is a result of a lack of equitably distributed capital and resources for schools to investigate alternatives to testing. Similarly, overall surveillance in schools is present in everything from

teachers patrolling the halls, to cameras in the classrooms, to locker searches that all contribute to this experience. This disproportionately leads to the punishment of students of color as an unnecessary disciplinary response. Thus, causing students to feel as if they were “problems that our society must find ways to eradicate” through a militarized police presence in their place of learning (Billings (2011), 9). Everyday, students endure this oppressive force because, as Billings (2011) states, society “hate[s] that they [students of color] challenge authority and command so much social power” simply through their existence and resistance in school (9). They are too frequently seen as an automatic threat to be made docile and disempowered.

Clearly, it is rational that the students feared we too had a negative idea of Douglass as dominant racialized narratives have the capacity to completely shape the perception of a school. The media constructed a story of violence in need of control, and these young people received the majority of the backlash. Rather than framing the rightful outrage at the murder of Freddie Gray as protests, ‘riot’ was used to insinuate that the reaction was excessive and misguided. Moreover, this story was selective as the mass media neglected to portray the students holistically. Alternatively, for my classmates and me, we came into the space first learning about the learning, growth, art, music, scholarship, and community of the student body — and this was further confirmed in our conversation with students where we engaged as peers and got to hear the whole story.

How does this Connect to my Praxis Project?

I feel that, in order to truly reconstruct the education system, we need to completely revolutionize the language, tactics, and systems of care for students of color. This thinking was critical for the praxis project Kaila and I worked on as we constructed a curriculum which explicitly functioned to investigate how students understand racialization. Particularly for the students of color who experienced this curriculum, we knew it must be interwoven with language that addresses power inequities, tactics that prioritize their needs, and ensure they are knowingly cared for throughout the process. As we learned, these endeavors can be planned for as much as possible, but we can never know exactly what will be needed until we work with the students. In the planning stages, however, my entry point to brainstorming was through the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), as it is a system of knowledge formulated to examine and resist the invisibilized ways in which systemic inequities are sustained by white supremacy through the logics of race and racism. Furthermore, this theory contends the notion of a post-racial society and the forces which attempt to disguise the realities of racial violence. Organized through five main objectives, CRT insists upon interdisciplinary social, political, and economic consciousness around race and other hierarchies of domination. The five sections are as follows: (1) The Centrality and

Intersectionality of Race and Racism; (2) The Challenge to Dominant Ideology; (3) The Commitment to Social Justice; (4) The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge; and (5) The Interdisciplinary Perspective (Solorzano (1997), p. 6-7).

My input to our curriculum, which utilizes race dialogues, was significantly informed by the methodology of CRT as it established what must be at the focus of what students will learn. For example, the first, Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism, explains how CRT is grounded in the idea that “race and racism are endemic, permanent” and central in the makeup of our society (Solorzano (1997), p. 6). For me, this principle guided the overall purpose of our curriculum plan: to provide a space which centralizes race and racism through an intersectional lens with youth. Similarly, in alignment with the fourth component, the Centrality of Experiential Knowledge, I hoped to uplift youth to recognize their agency and be positioned as stakeholders in their race-consciousness. Youth have so much inherent knowledge and it was critical we unveil this to both our readers and the youth themselves.

Conclusion

Both within our curriculum unit and more generally, we had to alter our ways of thinking and dismantle the knowledge systems that support the dichotomy of hyper-visualization/invisibilization. Kids of color are simultaneously hyper-visibilized through the ways in which they’re policed, and at the same time, their individuality, intelligence, and humanity is invisibilized (or fully taken from them). After my experiences with and exposure to youth who have endured this dichotomous racialization, I am wholly focused on uplifting students and constructing communal systems of care and healing for students of color.

Theories of Social Change: Children as Revolutionary Theorists

Introduction

Children are capable of and interested in understanding so much more than our society gives them credit for. Through my experiences in educational settings, I have come to recognize more and more the ability children have to engage with complex topics with such thoughtfulness, curiosity, and intelligence. It is essential that we give kids the tools and support to talk about issues such as identity, race, and racism so that they are able (and willing) to fight injustice and function in our racially diverse world. Personally, I am deeply invested in creating these tools, facilitating these conversations, and encouraging this work — hence the creation of this praxis project. I imagine that this radically different form of education can be a catalyst for long lasting and sustainable change. As part of all schooling, children would learn to support one another and develop an understanding of how they can be advocates for justice, even in elementary school. Schools could create more collaborative (rather than competitive) environments, offer opportunities to become involved in their communities, and so much more.

Context and Background

As I've come into my identity as an (aspiring) educator, I have learned a lot from the many teachers around me who have exposed me to the possibilities created through the intersection of anti-racism work and schooling. In both of the pieces above, I emphasized that race is often central to how I navigate the world and that addressing racial injustice has always been a huge part of how I become involved. As explored in my Positionality and Identity paper, this first component (understanding race) is intrinsically connected to my identity development and personal experiences with racialization throughout my life. This second component (addressing racial injustice), as similarly unpacked in my Critical Theory of Social Inequality paper, has a lot to do with how I experienced or saw racism in schools. Together, these have informed my internal consciousness around anti-racism and schooling. Simultaneously, the guidance of the many teachers around me growing up has also informed what I am attentive to when observing other teachers as well as how I make an effort to present anti-racist pedagogy at the forefront of my own teaching moments.

For my high school senior project, I interned in a public school classroom. I chose this setting, in part, because I had previously only worked in private schools. However, I was also interested in observing how (or if) other classroom teachers utilized anti-racist and feminist pedagogies. For the project, we were required to interview people who were in the field we were going to be working in, so I decided to interview one of my moms who has been an educator for many years. In our conversation, she went

in-depth about the challenges she was facing as she worked to implement racial affinity groups in the elementary school she worked in. She experienced the backlash of many (white) parents who asserted that their child was not ready to talk about their race, and/or that learning about racism was too scary/overwhelming, and/or that (in the case of some parents) their kid was Jewish and did not experience whiteness or need to talk about it. Some Jewish families felt that their marginalized religious and ethnic identities absolved them from their racism, despite still receiving privilege from whiteness.

More generally, my mom mentioned numerous times the emotional energy it takes to be an elementary school teacher as you often stress about the well-being of so many children, with different needs, interests, and home backgrounds. She emphasized that it was challenging to maintain high energy and effort every day when parents, administration, and even fellow faculty members tell you that what you're doing is harmful to children — despite seeing how incredibly wonderful the kids respond. Rather than feel discouraged by this message, I was motivated to take on this responsibility and continue the legacy of anti-racist teachers that spans much farther back than my parents and will extend much farther forward after me.

Social Change of Interest

In my experience, creating a productive space and opportunities for children to engage in conversations about identity, race, and racism is a rare component of child development. As mentioned, children are not typically recognized as fully functioning people able to participate in difficult conversations, especially when it comes to race/racism. However, as black feminist scholar bell hooks (1991) expresses in “Theory as Liberatory Practice”, children make some of the best theorists as they ask “general and fundamental questions” and can “imagine possible futures, [or] a place where life could be lived differently” (1, 2). Evidently, not only are kids excluded from complex conversations, but their unique capabilities as thinkers are also ignored or unacknowledged. I have been in spaces where children ask phenomenal questions, offer generative knowledge, and imagine some of the most radical futures of justice. For example, my younger sister asked to play school with me in summer 2020, when she was 6 years old, and as the teacher, her question to the class (made of myself and some stuffed animals) was “Does America belong to the Americans?” I was blown away at how simplicity and such complexity coexisted in her question; and following it, we had a long discussion about the history of America, Indigenous people, and immigration. In my role as an older sister, I could provide language, context, and tools to talk about these issues which allowed her to better understand what she had already observed about our nation. This further exemplified the truly special skill children have for discussing race and racism and formulating thoughtful ideas about how to address injustice.

An article by the American Psychological Association further confirms children's ability for engaging in conversations about race as they authors state that "Children are capable of thinking about all sorts of complex topics at a very young age...Even if adults don't talk to kids about race, children will work to make sense of their world and will come up with their own ideas, which may be inaccurate or detrimental," (Sullivan et.al, 2020). Evidently, kids are already conscious of race and racism around them, and it is beneficial to offer spaces that help guide them in productive and supportive ways. If this work is not done, it may further the racialized harm children endure. In *Racial Trauma in the Lives of Black Children and Adolescents* by Maryam M Jernigan and Jessica Henderson Daniel (2010), the authors examined hows black children consistently "present with post trauma symptoms, many present with intense fear, anxiety, helplessness, re-experiencing the event, and avoidance in response to racial incidents," (p.125). Given that we live in a highly racialized world, traumatic 'racial incidents' will keep happening again and again. Children constantly experience and/or witness discrimination that could potentially be holistically addressed with them as it happens, rather than after built up racial trauma. Ultimately, this reality affirms my decisions to work towards providing youth with "strategies for countering the negative stereotypes associated with group memberships," (Jernigan & Daniel 2010, p.127). Just as I did with my younger sister, I hope to continue to offer the tools necessary to support the knowledge youth instinctively generate and thus help them to grapple with the injustices they experience and/or observe.

Another Note on Positionality...

Whenever I enter an educational space, and especially when race/racism is part of the discussion, I am very conscious of certain parts of my identity — yet sometimes neglect to center others. My racial, ethnic, and gender identity are usually what I feel most comfortable or most willing to share and use to connect with youth. Given that, frequently, the other teachers in the room are white, I strategically use these identities to ease comfortability/relatability. My identity as a Black and Latina woman is significant in navigating my role in the classroom. The article entitled "After criticisms about lack of diversity among Worcester Public Schools teachers, here's what the superintendent and school committee have in plan" by Melissa Hanson (2020), uplifts how Latina middle school teacher Johanna Merlos is similarly cognizant of her identity in the classroom. Hanson writes that Merlos' "youth and ethnicity made students feel at ease talking to her about school and their personal lives" which is a fact I must keep in mind when planning a race-centered curriculum (Hanson 2020, p.2). My ability to relate to some students can help them feel safe engaging in the lessons we plan which is a strength I can use to further aid students of color

in fostering self-empowerment. Hopefully, my positionality also lessens any possibility of re-traumatizing and acts as a counter to the restrictiveness and dehumanization in some schools.

On the flip side, I continually have been so focused on the racial aspect, that I overlook important other positionalities such as class, age, language, citizenship, etc. As analyzed in my Critical Theory of Social Inequality paper, through experiences with schools of differing income and locations like Frederick Douglass High School, I have become more knowledgeable about my class privileges. Yet, it is also important for me to continue working on integrating other positionalities into this analysis — my location and citizenship abilities, or the experiences of young adulthood, or even being raised by teachers who exposed me from an early age to the capacity children have for comprehending more than we think. In particular, this praxis project revealed the complexities of language and the dominance of the English language in our society. Overall, these roles also shape me as a person just as much as my ethnic, racial, and gender identities. All these positions inevitably affect how I participate in creating opportunities for youth to discuss identity, race and racism. They both complicate the relationship I've tried to base in similarities and push me to work beyond the same few frameworks.

Praxis Project

The classroom can be a space to foster liberating learning if class climate, curriculum, and the teacher/administration all invest in transformative conversations about identity, race, and racism. Unfortunately, many schools do not see the value in this investment, despite how this particularly affects students of color who are disproportionately underrepresented in curriculum and teacher populations. Moreover, white children who do not experience a school climate, curriculum, or teachers/administration that encourages complex conversations grow up with lack of knowledge about the racialized world around them (specifically how their whiteness functions). As stated in the article by the American Psychology Association, “many white parents often use well-meaning but ineffective strategies that ignore the realities of racism...Some harmful approaches include a colorblind strategy or refusing to discuss it,” (Sullivan et.al, 2020). These tactics influence children dramatically and are much harder to deconstruct later in life when children have become more fully developed.

To work to address this issue, Kaila and I created a curriculum for our praxis project that explicitly focuses on facilitating a dialogue about race and racism with young people. The curriculum was designed to offer a holistic understanding of identity, race and racism through narratives, activities, histories, and context which counters dominant frameworks orchestrated by white supremacy. Part of this holistic lens involves intentional practices to nurture identity development and a sense of responsibility to promote

social change. Given that it was primarily students of color who participated, it was crucial that we worked to make this curriculum restorative and motivating at its core. We hope it was beneficial and felt even remotely empowering and knowledge-producing for the kids as these conversations are challenging and exhausting (even, if not especially, for adults too).

Conclusion

Many educators in my life have exemplified how to go about this particular social change with both vigor/intentionality as well as humor, fun, and enjoyment. Though kids are able to have conversations on race and racism, they find much more pleasure in play and togetherness. I have learned so many wonderful ways to integrate play and togetherness into these conversations about injustice/justice while still cultivating generative and meaningful change. Additionally, the two are not inherently separate; humor and fun are amazing tools for fighting injustice and building liberation. It was fantastic to have so many moments throughout the implementation of our curriculum that were filled with jokes and laughter with the children. In my experiences, children are often experts at doing this as they use their community, relationships, emotions, and interests to guide their values. Just as their unique moment in life allows for them to radically theorize, I've seen how children are also able to successfully utilize these mechanisms for resistance on a day-to-day basis. They inspire me just as much as the older mentor educators I've come to know, and I learn just as much — if not more — from their experiential knowledge.

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