

*The following contains two entries: one being an essay that I wrote back at the start of my praxis project, and the other being my current response to what I wrote then. I write this way because I find great personal value in visiting and revisiting what I have previously written. It is a space for my past self to affirm and challenge the thinking of my present self and vice-versa. I feel that my perspective has grown and changed greatly within the year that separates these two entries, just as I have grown and changed greatly, and I want my Theories of Understanding to be a reflection of this. My ways of understanding, after all, have changed and will continue to change again and again throughout the rest of my life.*

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Testimonial Injustice

“I actually do need your help today,” Alissa told me when I asked her if I could help with anything during class. I sat down next to her desk to take a look at her poem with her, but as this 9th grader started talking about a boy in her class before I was even fully sitting down, it became clear that she had little interest in discussing her poem. As a classroom observer in my sophomore year of college, I worried about whether or not I would be able to ethically respond to her concerns, but she was already talking and was clearly anxious about this, so I did not stop her.

Alissa told me about this boy in her grade who would regularly be mean to her. He would insult her, subtly shove her as they went through the hall, and as far as Alissa could tell she did not know why. Apparently, the guidance counselor was no help. She dismissed Alissa’s concerns by saying that the boy “probably likes her,” that teenage boys were “just like that.” The guidance counselor ultimately did nothing. Alissa was really shaken by this. She asked me, “Will, you were a teenage boy once. Are all boys really like that?” As she asked, I noticed that the surrounding girls had turned their chairs a little towards me, leaning in waiting for my answer. I said the best thing I could think to say: “No, not all boys are like that, and even if that is what

he's thinking, it doesn't change the fact that he is still hurting you, and that is not okay. I'm surprised that the guidance counselor is not being more helpful with this, and I'm sorry that you have to put up with this. But no, not all boys are like this, and regardless of the intent you don't deserve to be treated that way." Even though I had no way to actually change the situation, Alissa seemed comforted by this. Still, I was stunned that the guidance counselor was not doing more to help the situation, and once I got confirmation from my female friends after class that this was not a great thing to be teaching young girls, I emailed Alissa's teacher to discuss my concerns. Her defense of the guidance counselor was immediate. The teacher exclaimed that it "did not sound like her," and that "she was probably joking." Furthermore, the teacher asked me to point out the student in class (I had not named Alissa out of confidentiality, and much like any student I write about I have changed her name in this paper to keep that confidentiality) so that she could discuss this with her. The teacher shared my concern about the message that Alissa received from her talk with the guidance counselor, but insisted that the guidance counselor could not have been at fault, and her push for me to name the student was concerning. Looking back, this could have been a well-intentioned attempt on the teacher's part to clear up the situation with Alissa, but at the time I was concerned with breaking Alissa's trust. She had confided in me about something that was distressing her: wouldn't it be inappropriate to turn around and tell the teacher about it and make it into a bigger situation that Alissa might not want to deal with? The next day, I declined to point out the student, and the teacher respected my decision. In the end, however, I am doubtful that Alissa received any more help with this situation.

I am unsure what primarily influenced the responses of the guidance counselor and the teacher, but in any case it seems to me that Alissa's testimony was completely dismissed by both her guidance counselor and her teacher. Her experiences and concerns seemed to be ignored by the guidance counselor in favor of focusing on the boy's potential motivations and needs. The teacher's email and immediate defense of the guidance counselor also showed me that the teacher did not entirely trust Alissa's testimony. At an institution that should exist for the benefit of these students, where faculty should always trust the students and be on the side of students, I was surprised. Instead the teacher chose to immediately come to the defense of the guidance counselor rather than accept that Alissa's experience was accurate to her. Regardless of the intent this is the message that she received from the guidance counselor, and that this was not okay.

School is a space where Alissa has very little power. As a nonwhite student among a majority-White staff, there is the potential that teachers and faculty might discount her perspective without even fully realizing it, instead looking to the white professionals to determine what may have happened. That, too, is a power imbalance: the guidance counselor has a degree, is older, and is perhaps more trusted than the testimony of one student. It seems to me that ageism pervaded many other areas of schooling in this class during my time of observation, so who's to say that it was not a factor in Alissa's experience as well?

Miranda Fricker defines testimonial injustice as "a case where a hearer assigns lower credibility to a speaker due to identity prejudice" (Fricker 2007). Expanding on her idea in her 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker explains how individuals can be shut out of communication and the knowledge-creating process due to this lowering of credibility. If a hearer is not able to look past the identity prejudices that they may hold, either consciously or unconsciously, then the speaker's testimony will not be trusted, heard or validated, no matter how true those experiences may be. I tend to fall into thinking of this within the academic context of classrooms with the knowledge-creating process centered around analyzing a text or discussing the course material. Alissa's experiences here, however, show how important it is to consciously work against testimonial injustice even when (and especially when) the subject is outside of the course. This goes beyond someone's interpretation being ignored in class and enters the realm of neglecting one's direct personal lived experiences when they reach out for the help that they need.

Zeus Leonardo would further motivate me to label such interactions as resulting from racial oppression. Critical Race Theory asserts that "Racial Inequality and its vestiges in education are products of historical events," and that "their reach into daily practices should not be underestimated" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 15). Historically, Whiteness has been associated with expertise in academic fields. From the oppressive re-education programs forced onto Native Americans by Whites, to the White male-controlled academy that has historically denied recognition of Black and Brown scholars' works, to the current problems behind a vast majority of White teachers teaching a majority of Black and Brown students, Whiteness has dominated American education. This domination has created a cultural association of academia as a space created by and for White people. With that Whiteness in control, the White voice is valued as the authoritative voice. Consciously or unconsciously, people might assume that someone who is

White is the expert on a given topic or situation over a person of color. This assumption might motivate a White teacher to trust her White colleague versus a student of color's lived experience. As I stated before, I do not believe that the teacher intended to be malicious about this, but this does not mean that this racist association would not exist. "Oppression," Leonardo writes, "is neither the masochistic drive of the first nor the inadequate properties of the second, but the resulting dynamics of a social relationship that favors Whites and dispossesses people of color" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 16). Despite the intentions of Alissa's teacher, that immediate value of her White colleague caused her to be suspicious of Alissa's testimony, and thus racial oppression takes root and influences the social relationship in the classroom in such a way that neither the teacher nor the guidance counselor are affected, but Alissa is.

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Response to "Testimonial Injustice"

It's been a long time since I've reflected on my experience with Alissa (which, to be clear, is a pseudonym), and I am glad to have the opportunity here to reflect on this moment once more. Though with my other Theories of Understanding pieces my thinking has shifted somewhat, I find with this piece my stance and thinking stays the exact same now as it was a year ago. I still find myself angered by the responses of the teacher and the guidance counselor. I think that as someone who is about to enter a graduate program where I will be working with school staff that might act similarly to these two figures, it is important to reflect on what I might be able to do as a student teacher for students like Alissa. Most recently in one of my classes, I was asked the question "what will you do in the MAT program when you come across a situation when you see a teacher say or do something problematic or borderline harmful for students?" Though I did not share this aloud at the time, in my head I thought that my instinctual reaction would be to keep my head down, to let those hypothetical teachers/administrators handle their business, and I'll simply do what I can in my classroom to act differently. I think this thought comes both from the doubting of my own qualifications (i.e. "this teacher has been teaching for X years and I'm just

starting, what do I know?") and from my inherent desire to be nonconfrontational, but regardless, reading what I wrote about Amelia's story last year makes me want to fight this instinct. For the sake of my future students, I want to challenge myself to use my position as a student teacher to say something where I can, knowing that I'll have the support of my MAT cohort as I do so, though this is easy for me to say while I am speaking about hypotheticals and not actually in this moment. Regardless, I am happy to have reread my writing on this situation and see it as a call to action in my future work.