Positionality and Identity

The past few years at Clark, I have really had the opportunity to look at my positionality and identity in ways I have never looked at myself before. I have worked and volunteered in many different spaces in very different settings, and it has helped me recognize my privileges in life. In my hometown of Thompson, Connecticut, I work at an after-school program with students Kindergarten through fourth grade. I went to this elementary school and am a part of its community. I know all of the teachers and many of the students because of substitute teaching, the after-school program, and summer camp. In contrast, working within Worcester Public Schools, I am an outsider coming into their space and their community. I have had the opportunities to work at Woodland Academy and Claremont Academy and look at how different my educational experience growing up is to the experiences of Worcester youth at these two schools. I have lived a privileged life because of the community I grew up in. I have been able to have access to many extra resources that have helped me grow as an individual and feel supported by my school system, family, and community.

Working with youth in Worcester, I have been able to see how easy it is for a system or institution to work against those it is supposed to be supporting. It is incredibly easy for individuals to slip through the cracks of public education, especially those placed into "English language learning" classes as emerging multilingual students. As I work in these spaces, I must recognize my positionality as a privileged, white, middle-class person and then navigate how I can best enter these spaces without overstepping my bounds, without speaking for those within the community, and taking into consideration the implications and limits to what I can do. Something that I have been actively analyzing and re-evaluating as I have been working in Worcester the past few years is how my positionality plays a huge part in what I do and how I

enter a space that is not my own. I have been reassessing my values and ideals working with community members and listening to their experiences as I attempt at uplifting their voices.

Theory of Inequality

My philosophy on social inequality and making "sense of the world" comes from my personal experiences and problems I have seen others face. Every person perceives social issues in slightly different ways based on their personal experiences and biases, and hence, we act on that bias. There are multiple ways that we attempt to make sense of our world as human beings. These inequalities can exist in a myriad of circumstances whether it be socio-economic status, class, access and representation, language differences, educational inequality, gender inequality, and racial inequality. In general, I believe that when it comes to social inequality the most important thing that we have to recognize is the difference between what we think is effective help and change compared to what people experiencing this oppression actually need and want. People tend to "help" based on their biases and opinions on what they think is going to be effective help. There are many things that can be done to seemingly improve things, but I think that it is difficult to theorize change and impact without the firsthand experiences or the input of those effected the most. There are systematic issues and problems that can be recognized as dilemmas, but we do not necessarily have the ability to solve them singlehandedly without major deconstruction and reform. Most importantly, however, I believe that as "change-makers" it is our responsibility to uplift the voices and give agency to the members of the community by which we are intervening and work with them in order to make the positive changes that they see are necessary due to their experiences.

Theory of Social Change

Overall, my experiences have helped to cognitively urge me to look at the bigger picture when it comes to positive, effective, and impactful change. It has also forced me to begin looking deeply and critically at my positionality in the organizations I work at. There are many complexities and tensions associated with any type of social change, and I realize that the change that I want for my students may not necessarily be what they really need. It is now clearer to me through analyzing my positionality how I am best situated to promote and enact social change, and I believe that this change should be rooted in supporting emerging young leaders in organizations to uplift their voices and help them become agents of change in their own lives.

Because of this I have been trying to think about what students need the most support in the organizations I work at and what I want to instill in their minds about themselves. I really enjoy participatory action research with youth because of the fact that it allows students to become active participants of change-making process and allows them to do research on topics that are important to them. Self-advocacy and personal agency is one of the most important things an educator or youth worker can give to a student and by using yPAR methods, students are able to become partners in research. Authentically representing the voices of the students that I am advocating for and uplifting their opinions and ideas is extremely important to me and something that I will continue to strive to practice. As a student, I was always supported by my school system and given opportunities to be an active member of my community. I always had positive role models around me encouraging me to be a responsible and self-confident in my decisions. Above all, I want the youth I work with the believe that their opinions have value and that they have important ideas that are worth exploring.