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Identity in the Classroom: How Opening the Classroom Door Opened My Eyes to Keeping Humanity in Education

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IDENTITY IN THE CLASSROOM: HOW *OPENING THE CLASSROOM DOOR*
OPENED MY EYES TO KEEPING HUMANITY IN EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Education can be a dehumanizing experience for both students and teachers. Teachers hold a great responsibility to ensure that student identities are validated in school and to this end, must create a safe and welcoming learning environment. This thesis analyzes common dehumanizing practices in schools and ways in which teachers may unconsciously invalidate their students or be invalidated themselves. In a personal reflective manner, this thesis focuses especially on the text *Opening the Classroom Door* (Chapter 1 of *Teaching Towards Democracy*) by Ayers et. al (2017) as I evaluate my experiences in the classroom both as a student and teacher, and reflecting on my changing knowledge and understanding of others through three different lenses: race, identity, and online learning.

DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to my wonderful committee, who stuck by my side with this ambitious and last-minute project. Without the encouragement and support of Dominick, Mimi, Franzi, and Rebecca, I wouldn't have written a thesis at all. Secondly, I'd like to thank my parents, Brenda Hall and Bret Overturf, for their support and dedication over the last four years of college. Lastly, I'd like to thank my closest friends Aubrey Duplissie, Llewellyn Searing, and Olivia Johnson for the hours of work done together at the kitchen table and my partner William Milne for the ceaseless support through the difficult writing process.

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INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice is the key to improving as a teacher and ensuring that your classroom is a space where students feel welcomed and validated. By looking back on your experiences in the classroom and analyzing what worked, what didn't, and what the student response was, teachers become more self-aware and adapt their instruction to improve each time they reflect.

As a rising professional in the world of education, I deeply believe in the power of reflection. This thesis is itself the product of reflective practice. Going into the writing process, I knew that I wanted to examine three different aspects of dehumanization in schools: race, identity, and the effects of the sudden shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach in this thesis involves a literature review, three separate chapters, and a conclusion. The literature review provides an overview on research surrounding dehumanizing practices within each of the three aspects listed above. The thesis is then split up into three separate journalistic chapters, each of which covers a different aspect of dehumanization in schools. Finally, the conclusion addresses research about ways to combat dehumanizing practices.

Chapter One explores my experiences with race in school both as a student and as a teacher. It features an analysis of the argument in *Opening the Classroom Door* on creating a welcoming classroom environment, my personal experience of growing up in Maine and having a limited exposure to diversity as a child, and my observations of my mentor teachers' handling of the topic of race in the classroom. I then go on to reflect upon how I have addressed race in the classroom and identify my goals for improvement as a future teacher.

Chapter Two contains an exploration of my own identity, an analysis of my observations of violations of teacher identities, a discussion of Ayers and colleagues' (2017) explanation of the importance of seeing and recognizing the humanity in students, and finally an analysis of a situation during which I experienced a student's identity being disrespected and my feelings about the situation.

Chapter three includes an analysis of my experiences as a student and teacher during the shift to online learning, an exploration of the effects of different teaching styles during online learning, and my observations of student social skills and development at my current student teaching placement.

Finally, the conclusion synthesizes research about bringing humanity into the classroom with my experiences to highlight what my goals are as a future teacher after completing the in-depth reflections in this thesis work. This maybe shows that reflective practice does work, and it has helped me in two ways: (1) identifying specific areas where I can grow and (2) setting goals for my future as a teacher.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dehumanizing Practices in the Classroom

Dehumanization is the process by which a person is deprived of qualities that make them human, including autonomy, belonging, and dignity. When a person becomes dehumanized (no matter the process), they become excluded from their community and everything that it offers -- in essence, their identity is violated. In the American education system, dehumanization occurs daily (Domina, et al., 2017). This paper covers three main areas of dehumanization in schools: racial bias, identity, and issues arising from the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are four major pathways of dehumanization in the classroom relating to race: color blindness, deficit mentalities, lack of meaningful content, and inequitable behavioral expectations (Culp, 2021). These practices are often done unconsciously by teachers, but they have major effects on their students. These pathways are based on a set of ideas that are long outdated, such as the idea that the topic of race doesn't belong in the classroom, that students of color are less capable than their white peers, and that students of color cause more behavioral disruption during school than their white peers.

Color blindness refers to the practice of treating everyone the same, ignoring the color of their skin. According to Mudd, et al., (2021), a person who is "color blind" chooses to ignore the racial and cultural differences between others. Dent (2009) argues that this is often done with the best of intentions, but in reality, those who don't recognize and honor racial and cultural differences aren't seeing and accepting the person as they are and are therefore invalidating the identities of others.

According to Dent (2009), being “color blind” is a way that white people “avoid situations that make them feel uncomfortable” (p.20). By ignoring race, white teachers don’t have to deal with the uncomfortable situation of addressing differences in the classroom. However, choosing not to recognize a student’s color in school is equivalent to there being a “negative association with black and an unconscious view that to notice a person’s blackness...is therefore impolite and offensive” (Dent, 2009, p.20). This reinforces the underlying message that teachers who are “color blind” give: that the topic of race isn’t something that belongs in the classroom. As Dent (2009) elaborates, race in reality is often “an important and fundamental part of [someone’s] identity” (p.20). Choosing to ignore the differences of students of color is equivalent to choosing to ignore a part of them.

Another dehumanizing practice that some white teachers use is the lack of learning meaningful content for students of color. Because of the so-called “achievement gap”, or the evidence that black students are academically being outperformed by their white peers (Kuhfeld, et al., 2018), teachers lower their expectations for students of color and don’t give them assignments that are as rigorous as they should be (Mudd, et al., 2021). In reality, this so-called achievement gap is due to external impacts, such as “low socioeconomic status, family cultural resources, school quality and racial composition, and bias and prejudice in schools” (Merolla & Jackson, 2019, p.1).

According to Mudd et al., (2021), people aren’t born with the effects of the achievement gap. Rather, external factors contribute to it over time. The act of assigning less rigorous work to students of color is strongly linked to the idea of deficit mentalities as well as the achievement gap. Having a deficit mentality means that a person believes

that students of color are fundamentally less able to learn than their counterparts. Two common beliefs that make up deficit mentalities about African American students are as follows: (1) That African American students are less academically capable and (2) that they are often seen as “angry or aggressive” because teachers don’t understand their background and life stories (Lambooy, et al., 2020). Each of these mentalities take agency away from students of color and prevent them from living up to their full potential when acted upon.

The perpetuation of these deficit mentalities stems from things such as implicit bias as well as “achievement gap” statistics that don’t take elements outside the classroom into account, such as poverty and lack of access. Stinson (2006) writes, “African American children, specifically African American male students, are often characterized as incapable of measuring up to the schools’ predetermined goals and objectives and lacking the behavioral and social skills and life experiences to be academically successful” (p. 485). These views contribute to students’ loss of agency both academically and socially in the classroom, effectively dehumanizing them.

Finally, white teachers often demonstrate inequitable behavioral expectations for their students of color. For example, African American girls are disproportionately punished for behaviors in the classroom compared to white students. According to Lambooy, et al., (2020), “Black girls exist at an intersection of identities (i.e., race and gender), which finds them six times more likely to be suspended from school than their White girl counterparts” (p. 61). The disproportionate singling out of African American students separates them from the classroom community and makes them more outcast and also creates a rift in teacher-student relationships. According to the definition of

dehumanization, separation from a person's community dehumanizes them. Teachers who have inequitable behavioral expectations often don't know this, and thus the cycle continues year after year.

While much of the research on dehumanization in schools is focused on race, it's important to recognize identity outside of this topic as well. For students, identity may mean gender, appearance, or hobbies outside of school. Gender, in particular, is becoming more important than ever for teachers to recognize as an important conversation topic to have with students. According to Dunkerly-Bean and Ross (2018), "75 percent of the more than 150,000 transgender students in middle school and high school in the United States felt unsafe because of their gender expression" (p. 95). When transgender or nonbinary students feel unsafe at school, their identities are invalidated, and they are thus dehumanized.

Teachers must also be recognized as victims of dehumanization in schools. As previously stated, the process of dehumanization involves a loss of identity and diminished self-perception. An important aspect of dehumanization that teachers especially have to be aware of is burnout. According to the Learning Policy Institute, within the first five years of teaching, 19-30% of new teachers leave the profession (Sutcher, et al., 2016, p. 42). This is leading to a crisis in schools because of a lack of employees. Burnout can be devastating in the workplace. According to Evers, et al., (2004), "burned out people suffer from emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment" (p.132). A teacher suffering from burnout is not able to reach their full potential to function as an effective teacher.

According to Deswal, et al., (2015), some key reasons for burnout include student apathy, poor administration, lack of respect, and changes in student behavior.

Alternatively, Evers and colleagues (2004) suggest that poor pay, lack of supplies, overcrowded classrooms, unsafe building conditions, climate of high-stakes standards and accountability, and lack of autonomy regarding curriculum development and decision-making all contribute to teacher burnout. Both of these sources examine different aspects of contributing factors for the dehumanization of teachers. There are many ways that a teacher's identity can be lost or muted in the world of education.

Lastly, dehumanization doesn't stop at the classroom doors. This can be evidenced by the shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who have a lack of access or have experienced differently paced learning were put at a disadvantage to their peers during the pandemic. It has been shown that non-standardized instructional adaptation puts certain students at a disadvantage because some teachers are more effective via online or hybrid methods than others (Darling-Aduana, et al., 2019). This may make students feel less capable and diminish their self-perception when comparing themselves to peers.

Students returning in person from online schooling may also face challenges in "the remediation of inquiry skills, material, and self-regulated learning skills" (Schaefer, 2021, p.3). Returning to in-person learning after a traumatic experience such as the COVID-19 pandemic requires a major social and emotional adjustment. K-12 students haven't been able to socialize regularly for almost two years, and these impacts can be seen through their behaviors in school. Socialization, especially for younger students, "may encourage the development of positive social behaviors" (Selerni, et al., 2022, p.

7). Without this socialization, students aren't given the same opportunities to develop as before, and this again may lead to diminished self-perception over time.

One of the biggest challenges for online learning is to foster a learning community from afar. Remote learning effectively closes students off from the school environment, which separates students from their community. Successful online learning requires students to be able to have or accomplish certain things. According to Reinprecht, et al., (2021), students must

“ [have] access to devices that enable them to study online (ideally a laptop/desktop or tablet)... [be able to] source reliable Internet connectivity and speed, and [have] enough available study time. [Furthermore], they must have the capacity for, and an interest in, further education, sufficient digital literacy to study via digital means and access to subjects that spark their interest”. (p. 3198)

Students who weren't able to access these necessary things may have felt isolated and less capable, although lack of access does not define a student's ability.

The identities of both students and teachers are important for schools to keep in mind when considering dehumanizing practices. Race, gender, professionalism, and mental health all combine to define a person's identity along with much more. Ultimately, the invalidating dehumanizing practices in schools have a significant effect on individuals.

CHAPTER I

RACE AND RACISM IN SCHOOLS: A CLOSER LOOK

One of the most impactful books that I have read during my time pursuing my undergraduate degree has been *Teaching Toward Democracy* by Ayers, et al., (2017). The first chapter in particular, entitled “Opening the Classroom Door”, has stuck with me through the years. The chapter discusses the ideal democratic classroom environment and how teachers can go about creating it. It also explores what it really means to be a teacher, including the major responsibilities of beginning teachers when creating an egalitarian classroom environment.

Whenever I consider what it means to be a teacher, I think about the fact that teachers are there to guide the next generation to become kind, successful, and responsible citizens. In doing so, instruction on how to treat others with kindness and equality is paramount. The creation of a classroom environment in which these traits are encouraged is the ultimate goal and challenge for teachers. As “Opening the Classroom Door” suggests,

“[teachers must] strive consciously to learn and practice a commitment to... care for other people, to accept wild and vast diversity as the norm; to acknowledge that the full development of each is the condition for the full development of all; and to honor and welcome participation, free thought and speech, civil liberties, human rights, and social equality” (Ayers et al. 2017, p. 34).

Acceptance of diversity as the norm in particular is a trait that successful teachers in today’s society should have. But what happens when teachers fail to create an accepting

and supportive classroom culture surrounding diversity, particularly if they have students of color in their classroom?

Teachers are human and of course they aren't perfect. Mistakes can be made, often subconsciously. When it comes to the topic of race in the classroom, these mistakes are generally due to a lack of knowledge about how to address racial and cultural differences in the classroom (Mudd et al., 2021). These moments when teachers mishandle situations with students of different ethnic backgrounds are important to recognize because they can invalidate student identities and effectively dehumanize them.

According to research, there are four main ways that students of color are dehumanized in school: color blindness, deficit mentalities, lack of meaningful content, and inequitable behavior expectations (Mudd et al., 2021). I will be focusing mainly on the practice of "color blindness" in this chapter. It can be said that Maine lacks diversity as a state. According to the most recent U.S. Census in 2021, 94.4% of Mainers identify themselves as white only (*U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts:Maine* 2021). Thus, teachers in this state, especially in rural areas, may be less prepared to address race in school due to lack of experience with teaching students of color.

I grew up in a very small Maine town that was seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Due to this, my experience with people of color was limited in my formative years. Growing up, probably 99% of the people that I met were white. Because of this, I am still working on becoming better at embracing race and culture in the classroom through my student teaching experience. From this perspective, it makes sense that there may be other teachers in this area with experiences (or lack thereof) similar to mine.

Based on this thought, I proposed that a close observation of different Maine classes in action would bring to light some of the dehumanizing behaviors relating to race. The perfect opportunity to do so presented itself when I became a student teacher in a rural Maine town. I was situated to observe and teach four grades and each of the eight classes with which I worked had at least one student who was not white. The goal of my research, observation, and reflection in this case was to determine if any of the dehumanizing practices discussed in research pertaining to race were present in my local area and to determine what I could learn from these situations.

Through my observations during student teaching, it became clear to me that the teachers that I work with demonstrate a deep knowledge and understanding of the topic of race in the classroom. In each of the science classrooms, posters are hung around the room that reflect student identities and these teachers provide a multitude of books in their classroom libraries that have characters of many different racial identities. This shows that the teachers want their students to see themselves reflected as a member of the classroom community.

One particular incident with two seventh grade students solidified my conclusion that one of my mentor teachers was very effective and comfortable with discussing the topic of race in school. One student (let's call him Michael) overheard another student (let's call her Marie) talking about how she was adopted and part Cuban. Michael then proceeded to tell several jokes about Marie being put in a Cuban orphanage and disparaged Cuba in general. Upon hearing this, my mentor teacher corrected him in front of the class to make it clear that racist comments are unacceptable in her classroom. She

then took Michael out into the hallway and had a serious conversation with him. He was sent down to talk with the school counselor more and served a detention that day.

The handling of this situation shows that my mentor teacher wasn't afraid to have difficult conversations surrounding race. She made it clear that she had a no tolerance policy and followed through with a consequence for the student. Upon questioning both of my mentor teachers as to how they became so confident with the topic of race, I discovered that they have had a large amount of professional development training around diversity. They also mentioned the importance of recognizing and working through implicit biases. According to them, self-awareness and reflection are key to improving.

The teachers' creation of an inclusive classroom environment demonstrates the claim in "Opening the Classroom Door" that "[i]f you decide to embrace... diversity (as opposed to spending gobs and stacks of energy denying and suppressing it), your classroom will of necessity become a work of progress as well, unfinished, ever changing, and contingent" (Ayers, et al., 2017). My mentors were constantly reflecting, changing, and working on themselves and their classroom environment to make school a place where everyone felt welcomed.

This understanding of multicultural education is something that I haven't experienced in a public school classroom setting before. Students of color, few and far between when I was a student, always had speculation around them. I remember that many of my friends believed that a particular student of color who moved to my school had to have been adopted, because according to them, there was no way that a minority parent could have decided to live in our town on purpose. The student wasn't disliked,

but small microaggressions such as these should have been addressed, especially since teachers heard these conversations. That student may have felt ostracized by their peers and invalidated when the teachers did nothing to address this.

Another instance of a lack of knowledge around multicultural education that I experienced as a student was the habit of my middle school teachers to ask students of color to speak for their entire culture or race. One student in particular was often asked to speak on the “African American perspective” on certain topics. While teachers may think that this is a good idea for including a multicultural perspective, it puts students in an uncomfortable position. Imagine if the teacher asked the same question but to a white student. If this seems as ridiculous to you as it does to me, then it isn’t a good practice. This student told me that they often felt annoyed that the teacher thought that one person (particularly a child) could speak for the collective thoughts and experiences of millions of others. Students are not automatically experts because of the color of their skin.

Now that I am on my way to becoming a teacher, I have a broader experience and education around the importance of multicultural education and talking about race in the classroom, and I am working to improve my comfort level around the subject. Student teaching has provided me with many opportunities to practice implementing multicultural education and to discuss the subject of race with my students.

For example, there was a Filipino student in one of my seventh grade classes. He takes a lot of pride in where he’s from and often talks about life back home. I made it a point during our down time to talk to him and learn about his culture from the stories that he told me about his family. This improved our relationship greatly, and I feel that I have a much better understanding of the student through these conversations. If I had ignored

his differences, I feel like I would have been cutting off a major part of his identity and aspects of his life that bring him joy.

Another way that I have been using multicultural education in the science classroom has been through ensuring that students feel represented by the media that I show. For every short video clip that I show with a white person, I ensure that the next one features a person of color. While this may seem small, I believe that it's important that the students see themselves as scientists. Anyone can be a scientist, and this is one way to show them that this is true.

I know that I have a long way to go to achieve the level of comfort and ease with which my mentor teachers address race in the classroom. My past experiences as a student may have set me back, but I am going forward with dedication towards implementing multicultural education because I truly believe that every student deserves to see themselves as an equal member of the classroom community. As a white person, I acknowledge that I am writing this paper from a privileged perspective. I have never personally experienced racism or felt uncomfortable in a room full of people who were all different than me. I have never experienced the struggles that people of color in America face every day.

My aim in writing this paper is to raise awareness to the importance of bringing the discussion of race into the classroom and to identify and evaluate ways that this may have been mishandled by teachers and administration in my experience. I find that I firmly stand by the opinion in "Opening the Classroom Door" that embracing rather than ignoring diversity is a necessity in order to create a learning environment in which all students feel welcomed and valued. Based on this reflection, my future goals for

embracing diversity in the classroom include getting more practice working with students of all different backgrounds and having a continued dedication to professional development and improvement so that I can be the best teacher possible for all of my future students.

CHAPTER II

THE IMPORTANCE OF HONORING IDENTITY

A person's identity is what makes them unique. I take pride in my identity as a successful college student, on the precipice of graduation. I see myself as a future teacher, coach, and mentor. I identify as the "mom friend" of my house and always make sure that everyone has what they need. My identity as all of these things and more has been formed through my relationships to others, my experiences, my morals and values, and my emotions. I am proud of who I am, and my actions and appearance reflect this.

I display my identity through what I wear, which often is composed of bright, cheerful colors and Converse sneakers when appropriate. One of my favorite things to wear to school has been these sneakers because they are comfortable and they help me to express myself as a member of a younger generation. Many of the older teachers will wear regular running shoes on appropriate days but only the younger ones in the school wear Converse sneakers. While I am a peer of teachers of all ages, I like to demonstrate my identity as an upcoming teacher from a new generation.

When a person's identity is undermined by others, it results in dehumanization. In essence, the person loses agency over themselves and feels invalidated. If someone were to tell me that I would never be a teacher or that teaching is just "glorified babysitting," I would feel small, and I would begin to see myself as less capable over time. If the school that I worked at had a strict dress code that prohibited teachers from wearing bright colors or converse sneakers, I would feel less like myself. My clothing gives me

confidence, and when I feel that I am dressed in something that shows who I am, I feel more capable as a teacher.

While negative discourse and dress codes aren't the biggest struggles that teachers face, my experiences as a beginning teacher show that identity plays a major role in a teacher's self-perceived ability to teach. Being supported and encouraged to be yourself, follow your passions, and make teaching a lifelong career makes all the difference. When a teacher is underappreciated, underpaid, and treated unprofessionally, their identity is violated. Over time, the frustration from these experiences builds up and can lead to burnout.

According to research, the teaching occupation experiences one of the highest rates of burnout in the country (Evers, et al., 2004). Things like low pay, lack of respect, student apathy, and even unsafe or unsanitary conditions in schools contribute to this crisis (Carter Andrews, et al., 2016). In my experience as a student teacher, I have witnessed teachers face these conditions every day. There have been two major issues that have been causing teacher frustration over the course of the school year that have invalidated the teachers that I work with. Both of these areas of frustration center around a lack of professionalism in the workplace and added responsibility for teachers.

The first issue has to do with teacher salaries. The administration of the school that I student teach at made a mistake with the pay scale in the past year. This prevented some of the teachers from gaining their agreed-upon salary increase with the number of years they worked at the school. Teachers felt that the administration didn't care about their hard work and professionalism, inciting anger and frustration. My mentor teachers both talked with me about the importance of reading your contract very closely each year

and ensuring that what you are being paid is consistent with it. They expressed that they should not have to do this, and the school administration should be competent enough to find and fix these mistakes, but from their experience at this school, it's an added responsibility for them.

The other major issue at the school has been maintenance. Many of the teachers agree that the school isn't being properly cleaned, evidenced by trash that stays on the floors in the hallways for weeks, dirt on the floors and carpets, and dirty bathrooms. It's gotten to the point where many teachers upstairs have begun sweeping the hallway and classroom floors themselves. Teachers deserve to work in a clean environment, and the added work of ensuring that the school is sanitary should not be falling on their shoulders. It adds an extra burden to their already full plate, but a clean learning environment is necessary and should be expected.

Both of these issues at my school demonstrate a lack of professionalism in schools. Teachers aren't treated as the professionals they are and that takes a toll on them. My mentor teacher often discusses how difficult this profession has become in the last few years and that she is planning on changing her certification towards Physical Education in order to have a more "relaxing job". This is an example of burnout- my teacher loves her job of teaching science but feels mentally incapable of continuing what she is doing due to circumstances that are out of her control.

Likewise, students often feel the effects of violation of identity in the classroom. According to Ayers, et al., (2017), teachers have a responsibility to recognize the humanity in their students and honor their identities: "A first and fundamental challenge is to see your students--beyond the blizzard of labels based on deficits--as three-

dimensional creatures, people of heart, mind, and spirit *just like yourself*" (p. 32). While the goal is to honor and accept students for who they are and how they choose to present themselves at school, teachers can unknowingly undermine student identities by not recognizing their humanity.

Some of the practices that invalidate student identities may be attributed to the topic of race discussed above, while other reasons may relate to topics such as gender, religion, dress code, and unwelcoming classroom environments. During my student teaching experience, I unfortunately encountered one such situation where a transgender student's identity was invalidated by my mentor teacher.

One of my eighth grade students is a female to male transgender person. He prefers He/Him pronouns and sees himself as male although he sometimes wears traditional female clothing. My mentor teacher is not fully supportive and embracing of this student's decision to transition. She told me how she often gets in trouble with administration for accidentally misgendering the student. She attributes her misgendering to the fact that he wears female clothes once in a while and that it trips her up. While it can be difficult to remember to use the correct pronouns on the fly, it is important to practice and to correct mistakes you make. My mentor teacher doesn't correct her mistakes during class and does not discuss gender identity with this student. Since the student chooses to talk to the administration when he feels invalidated instead of the teacher herself, it's obvious that the student doesn't feel that the classroom is a safe space to discuss this invalidation.

I infer that the student may not feel welcomed or wholly accepted in the classroom and is therefore dehumanized. Since this discovery, I ensure that when I am

teaching, I address the student using the correct pronouns and immediately correct myself and apologize when I make a mistake to normalize this for my mentor teacher.

Constant invalidation shows a lack of respect towards students, which could lead to a decline in their mental health. Teachers should understand that their students are people too, with problems and lives of their own. It's important to remember, as Ayers, et al., (2017) put it, that "looking at our students draws us deeper into the contexts and circumstances of their lives- family, community, culture..." (p. 32). Learning about their background and stories is the only way to gain a deeper insight into their identity and to learn how to honor it. In general, it's the teacher's responsibility to learn about their students and to create a classroom culture and environment in which it's encouraged for students to discuss things such as mental health and violations of identity.

As a future teacher, this reflection has taught me that there is much more to a person's identity than meets the eye. Analyzing my own identity has helped me to recognize how I would feel if I were invalidated, and I believe that I understand the importance of honoring identities more than before. I've also found that I should take the time to form close relationships with my students and to foster a classroom environment that makes it a safe space to discuss mental health and feelings of invalidation.

CHAPTER III

IMPACTS OF THE SHIFT TO ONLINE LEARNING DUE TO COVID-19

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020, K-12 education has been turned on its head. Teachers learned how to use new technologies, engage students at home (who suddenly had a whole new host of distractions available), how to enforce sanitation and safety measures, and how to multitask with hybrid learning (Schaefer, 2021). It can be said that because of these new responsibilities, teachers' jobs became increasingly difficult over the past two years.

I believe that students and teachers underwent a traumatic experience due to the sudden transition to isolated learning. It's important to reflect back on how this transition was handled by schools in a way that demonstrates an understanding of humanity (or not) so that if we ever experience a similar situation, the best course of action is taken to ensure that students are not dehumanized in their education.

As a college student at the time of the nationwide lockdown, all of my classes were shifted to an online modality, some synchronous and some asynchronous. The biggest issue that I encountered at first was that I didn't have my own quiet place to work or connect to Zoom calls because the WiFi in my parents' house didn't extend to my bedroom. I did all of my classes in the living room or at the kitchen table, where my family would be going about their day in the background. This was distracting to me at times. Luckily, my parents were able to purchase a WiFi extender, and I was then able to do my schoolwork in a private location. I can imagine that younger students with the same lack of a study space would be distracted as well, and that this could be reflected in

the amount and/or quality of work that they would submit and potentially causing diminished self-perception if students felt that they weren't living up to expectations.

In my experience, the students that I teach are very sensitive to their self-perception and often compare themselves to others. Quality of instruction during the shift to online learning may have contributed to diminished self-perception in students. The differences between instruction and curriculum covered among different teachers during the pandemic caused inequality in student knowledge and ability (Darling-Aduana, et al., 2019). Because each teacher had different methods and speeds of teaching their students after the shift to online learning, students of the same age in some classrooms may not have been at the same academic level as those in other classrooms.

I have noticed this phenomenon in the school that I was placed in for student teaching. One class of eighth graders is much more independent when doing assignments than another class. Upon further investigation, I learned that the class that is currently less independent had done all of their difficult assignments together as a group during remote learning, while the more independent class had done difficult assignments on their own more often and problem-solved instead of asking for help. Some students in the less independent group often seem embarrassed to ask for help and put themselves down by saying things like "I know this is a stupid question...". This shows that they may be comparing themselves to others in their grade and feeling less capable due to the fact that they have had less of an opportunity to practice difficult independent work.

A large part of student identities is rooted in their social lives and self-perception. Their place in the classroom and among their peers is paramount to them during their development. The shift to online learning isolated students from their school community

and contributed to a diminished self-perception, thus dehumanizing them. While this could not have been helped due to the importance of safety during the pandemic, it still had some major effects on mental health and social development. Because of this, effective teachers should take the time to “validate students as persons...[and] work extra hard to become sensitive to how they see themselves, who they are, and what they are becoming” in order to show that they care and value students (Ayers, et al., 2017).

In situations such as these where students have much bigger problems on their minds than what homework they have due that night, teachers need to recognize the importance of mental health over schoolwork. Teachers who expected their students to continue as if nothing happened invalidated the experiences of students who were really struggling with such a colossal shift in their lives.

In the fall of 2020, I was placed in a virtual 100-hour observation at a local middle school in Maine. I assisted students who were attending class online while the teacher taught the rest of her students in person. I could see that teaching both online and in person was complicated and difficult for teachers and that many students did not complete work or submit it on time. After a conversation with my mentor teacher at the time, I learned that the school wasn't putting a large amount of stress on student work completion at the time because of the epidemic of mental health issues that many of the students faced. Students were graded mostly on class participation and attendance for months.

This shows a deep understanding of supporting students through mental health crises and reflects humanity in the classroom by showing an understanding of the fact that students are “three-dimensional creature[s] much like yourself; [people] with hopes,

dreams, skills, and experiences; each with a body, a mind, and a spirit that must somehow be valued, respected, and represented in your classroom and somehow taken into account in your teaching” (Ayers, et al., 2017 p. 19).

The teacher in this placement cared more about her students willingness to show up and be a part of the class community online than the work that they were getting done. This shows that she valued the students as individuals and cared about them, not just their academics. Recognizing student feelings and emotions validates them and shows students that their feelings are important. “Opening the Classroom Door” says that “if a child is hurt or angry, thrilled or overjoyed, bored or distracted, recognition of those feelings is supporting the child’s integrity” (Ayers, et al., 2017, p.32). This validation opposes dehumanization, instilling a feeling of worthiness to students. In a time when students were so isolated, this validation was a very useful tool to keep humanity in the classroom.

Another effect of the shift to online learning that may have led to dehumanization was the loss of the opportunity for social development. A great deal of social development occurs when students are in school. Peer interactions build social skills and communication. It could be suggested that young students missed out on developing those skills early on and are now having to catch up in person, creating a dramatic shift from at-home learning to in-person learning.

While middle school students have had the chance to develop vital social skills in their earlier years, they have returned to school after a long period of interruption, and this gap is obvious from their behavior. One of my first conversations with my mentor teacher in January of 2022 was learning about how the fifth-grade students this year were behaving as if they were much younger. Other teachers agreed and attributed this to the

fact that the students' last real year of school was when they were in third grade, and they hadn't had the chance to develop and reinforce social skills since then due to isolation. The isolation and subsequent dehumanization that students experienced in the past two years have had greater effects than I had expected before reflecting on these situations. I plan to model what many teachers did at the time of the pandemic by placing value on a classroom community and showing students that I care and am always happy to see them in the classroom.

The impacts of the shift to online learning haven't been fully uncovered yet, but it is clear that it had dehumanizing effects for some K-12 students. Lack of access, diminished self-perception and isolation all seem to have led to dehumanization for students. In the future, the way that schools handled online learning will be assessed on a deeper level, and teachers will be able to learn from this pandemic experience and reconsider some of their practices if a similar event ever should occur again.

CONCLUSION

METHODS OF KEEPING HUMANITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Upon close examination of each of the practices of dehumanization in schools, it is now time to turn towards solutions. Each lens that this thesis has examined-- race, identity, and online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic-- has demonstrated that schools often dehumanize students and teachers. In order to move forward towards creating safe, welcoming school and class environments and cultures, several steps must take place.

Ayers, et al., (2017) says that “the classroom will reflect [the teacher’s] humanity, but because the classroom belongs to the students as well, it will reflect or diminish the humanity of each of them, too” (p.22). The teacher has a responsibility to make their students feel like a part of the classroom community through the physical environment of the classroom as well as the atmosphere, whether the “classroom” is in person or online.

Although it addresses the physical education classroom specifically, Culp (2021) proposes the implementation of five actions, namely “recognizing language, introducing a pedagogy of somebodiness, democratizing the classroom, using restorative practices, and learning about others” in order to combat dehumanizing practices in schools (p.22).

Recognizing language, according to Brown (2017), is the first part of recognizing the progression of dehumanization. Brown goes on to suggest that individuals should reflect on the terminology that we use (i.e., person-first language). Person-first language refers to the practice of referring to the person before their descriptors. For example, saying “a person who has dyslexia” rather than “a dyslexic person” shows that the

speaker sees the entire person, not just their perceived “deficiency”. This gives a tone of “impartiality without bias and judgment”, according to Culp (2017, p.22).

White and Cones (1999), as cited in Johnson (2016), describe the next humanizing practice on the list: introducing a pedagogy of somebodiness. They propose that somebodiness is equivalent to “self-determination, self-definition, self-acceptance, and self-love” and that it is deeply rooted in African American culture. Culp (2017) describes that, in essence, somebodiness means that “dignity is inherent to human beings and a value to be fought for” (p.22). Teachers can display a pedagogy of somebodiness by giving students “verbal, written, and visible affirmations, emphasizing the positive, and acknowledging the diverse cultural lives of students” (Culp 2017, p.22). Giving students these affirmations and reaffirming that they matter creates a welcoming and safe classroom environment for everyone who walks through the door.

Democratizing the classroom brings student voice into decision-making. Ayers, et al., (2017) especially support democratic learning and teaching. This gives students more agency over their behavior and learning. Butler (2016), as cited in Culp (2017), says that “students who put democracy in action, along with discussing situational ethics and inventing games...are prepared to work with a diverse range of people when they leave our classes” (p.22). Giving students voice encourages students to explore their limits and learn who they are and ensures that they always have some form of agency in the classroom and thus democracy in the classroom is humanizing.

Practices such as restorative circle meetings help to “build community and encourage student voice” (Culp, 2017 p. 22). As dehumanization isolates students from a community and takes agency away from them, humanization practices such as this do the

opposite. These practices are a part of democratizing the classroom because everyone in restorative circles is on equal ground, and everyone has the chance to speak. Conflict resolution between students using restorative practices offers logical consequences and contributes to the development of Social Emotional Learning.

Lastly, learning about others is the final way that Culp (2017) suggests teachers humanize the classroom. This involves a “lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique where the individual learns about another’s culture and examines her or his own beliefs and cultural identities” (Cervantes and Clark, 2020, Culp, 2013, as cited in Culp, 2017, p. 22). This process can be done through professional development and experience that helps one uncover and work through any possible implicit bias. Teachers must also research and learn about their students’ culture in order to form better relationships with them and validate their identities.

Each of these practices and many others are avenues through which teachers can restore humanity in their classrooms. I hope that anyone who reads this takes away at least one thing: that a good teacher should always be reflecting on their practices and aware of ways that they may be dehumanizing their students. This may require journaling, student feedback, or observation from peers or coworkers. For me, it was writing a thesis about my experiences and observations. Overall, reflective practice is the key to improving as a teacher to bringing humanity back into the classroom.

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