

Devin Moss

May 2025 and May 2026

Critical Theories of Understanding

Social Inequality

Social inequality is not a natural occurrence; it is the product of systems and processes we have created. But why were these systems created? Initially, I defined social inequality as “the way we all move through the world differently.” While this may be true, it’s not a sufficient explanation, because difference itself is not inherently unequal. Inequality is not just about difference; it’s about how those differences are valued and the power dynamics that come with them.

Taking Race and Urban Space (GEOG 140) with Prof. Asha Best during my sophomore year, I learned how to critically examine the systems and structures around us. From what I learned in that class, I now believe that white supremacy and racial capitalism are the root causes of social inequality. These roots are anything but accidental. The structure of racial capitalism has been deliberately constructed and adapted over time to perpetuate inequality.

I define social inequality as the unequal distribution of power, resources, and privileges among different people and groups. Curious about others' perspectives, I asked a few friends where they thought social inequality stems from. Many, including a 16-year-old, pointed to racism as a root cause. I was a bit shocked by one friend’s suggestion that it’s “human instinct” to take advantage of those less fortunate for personal gain. To me, this explanation is not useful, and potentially harmful, as it is not

generative of a strategy to dismantle systems of inequality. The idea that we are competitive by nature may be appealing because it marks people as “good” and “bad,” but that over simplifies the way inequality is actually experienced, and often appears invisible.

I am compelled by Payne’s theory that inequality is rationalized, meaning the structures become embedded in our lives. As Payne puts it, “The de-dramatization of inequality hastens its depoliticization.”¹ By downplaying or oversimplifying the issue of inequality, we risk detaching it from its political and historical roots, making it harder to address and rectify. This outcome isn’t accidental. Through processes of rationalization, instances of inequality are made to appear increasingly impersonal which makes them less likely to generate destabilizing discontent. Payne also explains rationalization manifests in the focus on those experiencing inequality, rather than those enacting and upholding it.

When attempting to understand the root causes of inequality, it’s easy to blame individual actors. However, it’s crucial to situate these actions within a longer history of systemic inequality. Individual actions are important, but they are part of a much larger historical and structural context. Power and privilege manifest [clearly] in who gets to tell their own story. Who maintains the dominant narrative? Whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced? Which stories become part of our collective memory/oral history, and which are forgotten?

¹ Payne, Charles. "Black Bastards and White Millionaires." *Getting What We Ask For: The Ambiguity of Success and Failure in Urban Education* (1984).

Addendum 2026

I have now taken several classes towards my masters degree in education and so I think about inequality mainly in the context of school and schooling. Inequality is a defining feature of all schools, those with more resources and those with less. Inequality can also show up within a classroom community in terms of access and engagement across diverse student experiences and needs. This invites us to think about the distinction between difference and inequality. Is inequality just the manifestation of difference, or is it possible for difference to exist without inequality? I choose to believe the latter.

Theory of Positionality

I attended Bronx Community Charter School from kindergarten through 8th grade just across the reservoir from my house. All of us lived in the Bronx, some of us even shared a pediatrician. Our families got to know one another at performances, field trips, the annual international celebration, and at birthday parties. The 50 of us moved from grade to grade each year in different combinations of 25. Dancing together, coding together, collaborating on projects together, building models together, as a grade we all got very close in the way that you do when you've known someone since they were 5. But the connections we built were unique because our school focused on the arts and inquiry based learning through which we developed ways of thinking that were critical of the status quo.

We learned real history about the world and the neighborhoods around us. Art was part of our schedules every single day from dance, to African drumming, to visual art. In our interdisciplinary academic classes we were encouraged to use art as a tool to demonstrate and share our learning with others.

We worked on real projects with our classmates, practicing collaboration and conflict-resolution, setting the foundation for strong relationships to be formed. The relationships I built with my classmates over nine years of dancing, coding, and collaborating together stick with me in the relationships I continue to build.

As early as Kindergarten I remember receiving different instruction than my peers for class work, receiving higher level assignments. As we moved through the grades, I was often trusted by teachers to set an example for other students, and even assist them in their work when I had finished early. I might not have been aware of it then, but reflecting on my school experience, I am curious to understand how the way

that teachers treated me in contrast with other students impacted mine and my peers' understanding of our own positionality and value as students and young people.

My perceived “advanced”-ness was not the only thing that separated me from my classmates. In kindergarten I was one of four white students in my class of 50, and by middle school I was one of two.

One day after school my mom and I were sitting at the dining room table, more than likely sharing about our days. At some point I brought up a question about racism, looking to find out what my mom’s thoughts were, ready to accept them as my own. I recall her mentioning the sit-ins and bus boycotts of the Civil Rights Movement.

I listened and then I said, “but now, it kind of feels like it’s the other way around, no?” I clearly remember her face of surprise that her daughter would say something like that. But in her teacherly ways, she calmly went on to explain how the history of systemic racism meant that it could never be “the other way around.”

The reason I felt that way was because I was getting bullied in school. Not seriously and not in a way that necessarily screwed with my self-confidence that much - but I was made fun of. When my white friend and I were bullied in school by our Black and Hispanic classmates I thought we were getting bullied because we were white. I was getting bullied because I was different and I was different because I was white but I wasn’t being bullied because I was white.

Growing up in the Bronx, I learned quickly I would have to defend my borough. My mom who was also born and raised in the Bronx raised me to be proud of where I was from and gave me the vocabulary to rebut when people called it “dirty” or “ghetto.”

I quickly realized another layer of complexity that would arise in these conversations. As a white girl, telling people I was from the Bronx was often met with

confused looks or questions like “do you hear gunshots all the time?” and “but do you live in the white part?” My identity existed in contradiction with what most people expected of someone from the Bronx.

Addendum 2026

Reading this back now after doing much more theorizing about my own positionality within a specific context, I am realizing that while I successfully outlined the salient pieces of my identity and experiences which inform the way I move through the world, I neglected to take the next step to analyze what it means for my own positionality. I mention a contradiction surfaced by my identity as a white Bronxite, but don't delve into how this informs my positionality. Reflecting on this now, I can make sense of living in this contradiction as informing the way I show up in spaces that might similarly be misrepresented. For example, during my time in Worcester, the parallels between here and The Bronx are clear and deeply inform the way that I speak about this city and engage others in discussion of it.

Theory of Social Change

I believe meaningful social change begins with a collective reimagining of what could be. Our ability to imagine—and to do so in collaboration—depends on the dominant narratives that shape our collective memory. When histories are hidden or erased, it becomes harder to dream beyond the world we’ve inherited. Framed by my understanding of inequality, I see social change as possible when people are equipped with the tools to envision the world they want to live in and empowered to author their own narratives. I believe theater is one such tool: a space where imagination, memory, and agency intersect to make new futures feel possible.

Framed by my belief that young people have an intelligence and ability to critically understand the world around them that is systematically diminished, I hope to affect social change by working with youth, centering their knowledge and experiences. There are countless examples of young people leading social change, even in the face of strong opposition and systemic barriers to organizing. As Terry Eagleton writes in *The Significance of Theory*, “Children make the best theorists, [...] Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently.”² The systems which diminish the contributions and perspectives of young people are actually preventing creative and comprehensive social change.

I want to support young people in understanding how to harness their power and intelligence collectively. If students in elementary school can understand that our freedom and well-being is intertwined, we will have more just societies with more engaged citizens. I often run into tension when I think about how I’m best positioned to

² Eagleton, Terry & Payne, Michael (1991). *The Significance of Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell.

promote social change. Do I want to work within the systems I'm critical of, or work against them to reduce the harm they cause? My experiences—especially during my time at Clark—have shown me that both approaches are necessary. One can't exist without the other. Leaning into this tension, I see theater as a medium that moves us beyond reform and resistance, opening space to reimagine our world.

Paulo Freire writes, “Education does not transform the world. Education changes people. People change the world.”³ I believe that if we focus on nourishing and supporting the education of young people and promote their ability to think critically, we will have a more just world that is more capable of collaborative reflection and change. Freire expands on this theory of education describing the students and the teachers as collaborators participating in shared learning. When students and teachers have transformative rather than transactional relationships positive social change can come from transformative classroom environments.

(Positive) social change occurs when the status quo is challenged by people who come together equipped with the tools to imagine a better world and an understanding that their liberation is intertwined. We are best suited to make change by building power from the ground up, where the “ground” is society’s young people. By re-entering the school system as a classroom teacher, I hope to give kids the trust and opportunity to develop their critical consciousness. Productive social change can happen when decisions are made by all relevant stakeholders. No one is more relevant than the young people of our societies.

³ Freire, Paulo. "Pedagogy of the oppressed." In *Toward a sociology of education*, pp. 374-386. Routledge, 2020.

Addendum 2026

I am struck by the emphasis on imagination and collective reimagining in this paper. While I do also touch on the relational capacity that is intrinsic to social change, I would now add further emphasis on this relational element. I believe that we can become a more just society when we develop strong and authentic relationships in community with others. This original paper does touch on the crucial relational component by emphasizing that we must imagine a better future collectively and one that works for all. However, after analyzing the findings that have emerged from my research, I would argue that the main catalyst of social change is the relationships we develop with one another. I think there are many unique ways to do that and I look forward to exploring my role as an elementary school teacher in facilitating and nourishing these capacities.