The Job Search

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Nathalie stared at the blinking cursor in the reply email. The text below read "Congratulations! We are pleased to offer you an American History Teaching position at Achievement Success Leadership (ASL) Charter School, Oakland." She remembered feeling elated after receiving it four days ago—her first teaching job offer! Someone believed she could actually do it! Again and again she mentally revised her lesson plans for her first year—getting to know her students' stories so that she could design curriculum relevant to them; imparting to them that U.S. history was not just white dudes doing seemingly impressive things on hard-to-remember dates; guiding them in researching groups of people who fought for the ideals that were articulated but never really enacted at the country's founding. She pictured her students learning the history of oppressive systems, writing papers analyzing power in their community, designing projects to enact real, grassroots change, and leaving the classroom empowered, knowing that they too could transform American society. She was ready—and now a school believed her to be as well!

But once the feeling of flattery and images of teacher grandeur had subsided, doubt kicked in. Was this the path that she was going to take? Another well-intentioned white lady, going into a low-income community of color, perpetuating the same systems that she hoped to teach students to dismantle?

"This job search is going to kill me," she said aloud to her "Critical Race Theory" project group.

"Tell me about it. What's getting at you?" Luis asked, leaning across the small conference table in a Harvard Graduate School of Education study room.

"I got a job offer and I'm not sure if I should take it."

"But that's amazing! Congratulations!!" chimed in Olivia. "Which school?"

"ASL Oakland."

"What makes you unsure about accepting it?" Isaac questioned.

"Well, I guess my teaching philosophy is that we, as teachers, must use education as a tool to dismantle systems of oppression, which necessitates teaching in under-resourced communities. Especially in this political climate, when we're moving backwards, not forwards, on racial and socio-economic inequity."

She paused. "But?" said Luis.

Nathalie was wary of vocalizing her anxieties when two of her group members, Olivia and Luis, were students of color. Considering the white-dominated racial demographics of HGSE, she could imagine this wasn't the first time they had listened to white teacher woes, willingly or unwillingly. "I fear this is about to get into the territory of 'white girl problems'," she stated, looking particularly at Olivia and Luis. "Are you sure you want to hear me out here?"

Both Olivia and Luis shrugged. “I appreciate you asking, but give it a shot,” Luis replied. Isaac, the other white group member, smiled. “I’m of course all ears.”

Nathalie exhaled, “another white teacher in a low-income community of color? I feel stuck in the cliché. Besides, I didn’t grow up in Oakland, or California for that matter. I’m from a blue-collar town in Pennsylvania. What do I know about those students’ lived experiences? Won’t I just be replicating all the pathologies we’ve been critiquing in class?”

In her research for Critical Race Theory, Nathalie had been appalled by the demographic mismatch between teachers and K-12 students. Although barely half of all public school students were white—and the percentages were dropping fast—over three quarters of public school teachers were white and middle class, further distancing them from the majority of their students growing up in poverty.[1] In California, Nathalie had discovered, 65% of public school teachers were white in 2015, teaching a student population that was 76% children of color.[2]

“I want to go where I’m needed most,” Nathalie concluded, “but I don’t want to be the dreaded ‘white savior.’”

Olivia looked at her with a slight smile. “You are aware that not all ‘under-resourced communities’ are communities of color, right? The two are not synonymous—there are plenty of rural white communities that are way more desperate for teachers than most urban schools are. If you’re really dedicated to dismantling systems of oppression and teaching in an under-resourced community, why not go to Appalachia? There, you wouldn’t be a white savior. And, if this past election proves anything, it’s that rural white America is in dire need of some critical race theory.”

“Besides,” Luis added, “what makes you think that Oakland is under-resourced?”

Nathalie had forgotten that Luis was from Oakland originally. She paused, realizing that Olivia and Luis were right—because Oakland was historically a low-income community of color, she had just assumed it was “under-resourced.”

Luis continued. “We might be historically cash poor, but that doesn’t mean we’re poor in ideas. Many outsiders come into Oakland thinking they have the fix, as if we are the ones with the problem. Especially charter school networks, who take money away from public education and import teachers with fancy degrees rather than develop local teachers. Sure, a teacher graduating from Cal State East Bay might not have the same access to powerful institutions as one from Harvard, but they have the power of local, grassroots knowledge about their students and community.”

“So you’re looking for teaching positions in Oakland too, I’m assuming?” Isaac asked.

“Of course—those people are my people. Oakland Schools are around 40% Latinx, I believe—”

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[1] “Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2025”, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_203.50.asp.

[2] “EdData—State Profile—California Public Schools”, http://www.ed-data.org/state/CA.

"45%—I just looked that up," [3] Nathalie said somewhat despondently.

"—45%, and as a Latino immigrant myself, I can relate to those students far more than—sorry, Nathalie—any of my white teachers could. I feel like I've got that obligation, to go back to my community and work with those students, you know? I share their struggle."

"But," Olivia chimed in, "Nathalie *not* taking that job isn't going to solve ASL's teacher importation problem. Believe me, I've worked in charter schools for ten years—ASL is probably not going to run to Cal State East Bay to find a replacement if Nathalie turns down the job. I agree that you might be a better fit for ASL Oakland, Luis—but let's be real. ASL will most likely hire another white lady from an elite institution who's not from the community—"

My identity in a nutshell, Nathalie thought to herself, sinking a bit lower in her chair.

"—but one who's probably not thought as much about transformative education and grappled with power and oppression and her identity and what not," Olivia added exasperatedly, seeing Nathalie deflate. "Declining the job might make you feel better, Nathalie, but your absence will not necessarily make ASL any better at dismantling systems of oppression. Being initially complicit with a system can allow you to change it later."

"Sure, Nathalie might be 'more woke' than ASL's hypothetical second pick, but I don't think that we should choose jobs by making assumptions about the waiting list," Isaac cautioned. He draped his elbow over the back of his chair, unconsciously playing with the gauge in his left ear. "It assumes a level of superiority in our own awareness and intellect that might not be true."

"Fair enough," granted Olivia.

"Besides, Nathalie might be better able to dismantle systems of oppression in a school environment other than ASL," Isaac continued. "I'm with Luis—I think educators, particularly white teachers, need to teach in our own communities to dismantle systems of oppression there."

Watching Isaac play with his earring, Nathalie remembered being surprised when Isaac told her he had spent five years in a history PhD. Program. Perhaps it was because of the gauge, or how much he criticized institutions like Harvard, but it was hard to picture him spending half a decade in the Ivory Tower. A life of scholarship hadn't seemed to sit well with Isaac, either; he had eventually scrapped his dissertation on white allyship in the student protests for Ethnic Studies at SFSU, and decided to teach "privileged kids about privilege," as he termed it, instead.

"So…where are you going to teach, Isaac?" Nathalie asked.

"St. Phillip's."

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[3] "District Enrollment by Ethnicity 0161259—Oakland Unified", http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/Enrollment/EthnicEnr.aspx?cChoice=DistEnrEth&cYear=2016-17&cSelect=0161259--Oakland+Unified&TheCounty=&cLevel=District&cTopic=Enrollment&myTimeFrame=S&cType=ALL&cGender=B.

“Wait, *your* old high school?” Luis exclaimed in disbelief. “The prep school you always talk about in class with all of the one-percenters? The one that started admitting more ambassadors’ sons to make their “diversity” statistics look better?”

“Look,” Isaac said defensively, “someone’s gotta teach there. The boys at St. Phillips need to learn about critical race theory just as much as students in Appalachia, if not more so. After all, they’re the ones with the social, cultural, and financial capital to throw around. Teachers at St. Phillips don’t teach students to be critical of oppressive systems—the administration doesn’t seem to consider those topics important, and the parents certainly aren’t asking for it.”

“You really think they’ll be open to criticizing those systems, when, as you’ve said yourself, that place thrives off of them? I—I have trouble seeing that as the most direct, or at least effective, way to dismantle systems of oppression. If a student is benefitting from those systems, I think they’re far less likely to try to change them than those who are not, even if they get a good dose of critical race theory at a young age.” Luis interjected.

“What’s the alternative: leave those in power totally unaware of their privilege? If I can introduce these young men to learning about systems of oppression through a critical lens, then hopefully they’ll be inspired to challenge those systems and work with, not for, less privileged communities in the future. Otherwise, the burden of changing these systems continues to fall on those oppressed by them, and that doesn’t seem right.”

Nathalie cringed at the thought of teaching at her old high school. “I guess I see what you’re saying, Isaac. I have to be honest, though, teaching at St. Phillips sounds like a nightmare. I can’t imagine going back to my old high school. Let’s just say that few of my classmates or teachers were sympathetic to my passion for angry poetry and Goth clothing. Graduation day—I don’t think I’ve ever felt so liberated.”

“I know what you mean, Nat,” chuckled Olivia. “I practically grabbed that diploma and ran, I was so happy. I was a Metco student, bused from the city to the suburbs; there were only three other brown kids in my entire graduating class. I can’t tell you how ready I was to go to Howard. You know how people talk about the dreaded Black History Month conversation when the teacher calls on the one black kid to talk about her ‘experience as a black person’? That definitely happened to me. There were very few teachers who I can actually say I liked in high school.”

“You know, same here,” Nathalie added, “although for very different reasons. To be honest, I disliked most of the teachers who were from my town—they seemed so unimaginative. It seemed like all they could think of doing with their lives was staying in their comfort zone. My favorite teacher was Ms. Yu. She had studied literature at Oberlin and done the Peace Corps—she made me realize I had more choices post-graduation than Penn State or waitressing.”

“We’re glad she did,” Isaac grinned.

“Thanks, Isaac,” Nathalie laughed. “Really though, Ms. Yu showed me that I didn’t necessarily need loads of money to pursue higher education and my interest in poetry. Not to mention, she broke all stereotypes I had about Chinese-Americans. You’re right, Isaac, I can’t relate to experiencing systemic or interpersonal racism; but I don’t know if all of us will be more effective at dismantling systems of oppression only if we go back to the community where we grew up or teach students of the same race as us. Out of everyone in my life, I feel like I relate to my high school peers the least.”

“I agree; I think it’s dangerous to assume that shared ‘lived experience’ with students is a pre-requisite for effective teaching,” Olivia added. “Isaac, there must be at least some kids on financial aid at St. Phillips, right? And Luis, 45% is not 100%—what about the other students who aren’t Latinx?”

“I hear that,” Luis acknowledged.

“To be honest, I think you guys are reducing your and your students’ identities to purely race and class,” Olivia added. “If we want to dismantle systems of oppression through teaching, we’ve got to embrace the complexity and intersectionality of our students’ identities and our own. We cannot assume that our students are similar to us because they might look the same or be from the same place or of the same SES status as us; our teaching has got to reflect that.”

“So then, which teachers should return to their communities, and which should not? And if they shouldn’t teach in their own community, where should they teach?” Nathalie asked.

“Well…” Luis trailed off. “Perhaps I initially came across as too didactic. Isaac, if you think you will be most effective at St. Phillips, then I guess that’s where you should teach. Nathalie, I don’t think you *shouldn’t* teach in Oakland. I just think you should get to know the community first, maybe for a year or so, before you start. Go to PTA meetings, join grassroots campaigns, form relationships with locals. Then, teach at a public school and align yourself with people from the place, not outsiders thinking they can fix us.”

“I don’t know, Luis,” Olivia demurred. “Sometimes those outsiders know how to teach, even if they don’t always fully understand the community. The charter school where I worked is in Baltimore. I may be brown like all of my students, but I’m not from Baltimore, and I did not go to charter school. However, that network gave me the training and mentorship to be a successful teacher then principal.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice if all the big charter networks provided that kind of real support,” Luis added.

“True,” Olivia agreed. “Nathalie, if I were you, I would work at ASL if it seems like they’ll provide you with opportunities for training and professional development. You have, what, two years of assistant teaching experience? Knowing the community is important, like Luis said. But you also need to have good classroom management, organizational, and curriculum planning skills at the very least. Having these will allow you to teach critical pedagogy and work towards dismantling systems of oppression. A place like ASL will teach you those basic skills; a public school might not.”

“Basic skills according to whom, Olivia?” Isaac interjected. “I think that assumes teaching is monolithic—it ignores a classroom’s context and students’ individuality, something you reminded us to not forget. Would working at ASL really prepare Nathalie to teach in Appalachia, where you initially proposed she work?”

Olivia huffily reshuffled the papers in front of her. “I guess whatever makes the most sense for Nathalie.”

The group sat silently. Nathalie couldn’t help but feel more frustrated about her decision than before. Nothing seemed to “make the most sense for her.” While the conversation had centered on teaching to dismantle systems of oppression, the group had not agreed on what this looked like—she wasn’t even

sure if any one of them had a clear sense of what this looked like for themselves. If dismantling oppressive systems was her goal, how was she going to define it and put it into practice? Where should she teach, and why?

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