Mya Wilcox

The Opportunity to Learn

Some names and details have been altered to protect the identities of individuals mentioned in this narrative.

Week 1

It is week 1 of summer school for Richmond Public Schools and, quite simply, I am in completely over my head. Whereas my weeks before the program's start had been filled with denim shorts and tank tops, sun-baked beach reading, and sweet conversations over various combinations of iced lattes and lemony ice cream, this week I am shivering in the air conditioning of an elementary school building, walkie-talkie clipped to my khaki shorts and a soggy turkey sandwich sitting in my ancient lunchbox. The students I have been assigned to assist in their studies are all over the place academically and socially—joining together across five different public schools would be a huge undertaking in any circumstance, but it's exacerbated by the fact that no one has had the opportunity to return to a physical classroom since March of 2020. Although they're only 8 hours, my workdays feel heartrendingly long; my nights, heartrendingly short. I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting when I accepted the job, but it certainly wasn't this. *Wait—why did I want to do this with my summer?*

Whenever I had been asked to explain my upcoming role as a 3rd-5th grade teacher's assistant in Richmond Public Schools' summer school program, I usually supplemented my job description (serving as a classroom assistant for an RPS teacher and tutoring students in both academic and elective classes) with some haphazard combination of the following reasons for taking the position:

1. I was looking for a new summer job experience after working with the same youth development nonprofit for the past two years and was excited to gain experience working for a larger community-based nonprofit.

2. I was enthusiastic about partnering with the Greater Richmond YMCA (one of the sponsors of the program) to help them further their goals of youth development, healthy lifestyles, and community growth, among others (YMCA 2021).
3. As a Public Policy and Administration major hoping to pursue education policy, I was eager to gain more insight into the inner workings of a public school system.
4. I just loved working with kids.

All these reasons are valid and well-intentioned and worthy of leaning on for motivation, and yet by the end of my first full day any grasp on a source of inspiration had already begun to fade. My calves were tight from walking briskly from one location to the next, the backs of my ears aching and sore from the tight loops on my face mask. This exhaustion certainly wasn't what I had envisioned when I made that initial drive down to the school for the first time—the new morning light illuminating brightly-colored murals of Black excellence every other block, neon orange traffic cones highlighting preexisting potholes and future construction sites, established barber shops and corner stores mixing with brand-new coffee companies and restaurant storefronts. It wasn't even what I had envisioned when I first set foot in the school building itself—each door giving way to rows of desks still anchored in pre-pandemic reality, each turn leading deeper into the matrix of classrooms, each hallway's floor a different color.

Each teacher, each staff member, each administrator, each student—a different color.

Upon starting the job, I quickly realized that contrary to some of my previous experiences, I was stepping into an educational setting that encompassed a rich spectrum of skin tones across classes and grade levels. But what I also tended to notice (somewhat self-centeredly) is that most of those present at the school were different colors than *me.*

I remember walking into my first summer school staff meeting and realizing that not only was I one of the only staff new to the YMCA and Richmond Public Schools, but I was also one

of the only white people in the room. In situations where I have assumed the role of an outsider, it's sometimes been tempting to let this observation drive my experience—to view myself as a "minority" once upon a time. And although I would not want to attempt to compare my time at a five-week program to a someone's entire lived experience in any way, here is what *is* true—as a young, white private school grad with only a year of college classes under her belt, I was entering into the summer with a very different experience than that of the veteran faculty and staff who had been unceasingly serving their students before and during the pandemic. This realization presented an opportunity to isolate, to back into a corner based on perceived difference. However, I was determined not to let this happen—partially out of a fear of loneliness, yes, but also because I have realized over time that it is through sharing and understanding diverse and nuanced experiences that I am given the opportunity to grow beyond my own understanding and capabilities.

I made the conscious decision to try and start conversations, to smile big, to be open to sharing not only a workspace but also slices of life. Whether it was with Ms. Andrews, the RPS teacher I was assigned to assist, with my supervisor—himself a college senior at an HBCU—between cardboard boxes of applesauce and granola bars, or perhaps perched on the cafeteria benches with sweet Ms. Sally (another teacher's assistant old enough to be my grandmother) I found myself thriving, enjoying the formation of relationships that would boost my spirits during some of the hardest days. However, it was within these casual conversations that I was again asked that loaded question.

"So, why are you here?"

This was and is, of course, a reasonable question, especially given the fact that I never even attended a class at a public school until my freshman year at James Madison University. In fact, it's one I ask myself often regardless of circumstance. I like to find and promote purpose

within the present, within my *presence*—to understand the reasoning and intentionality behind the decisions I and others make to form a community and work together towards a common goal. However, once I actually started the job and more fully realized the physical and mental costs, the displacement I felt, and the never-ending avalanche of social and academic challenges that awaited, the answer to this question reliably confused me. *What are you doing here? Out of everything you could have done this summer, why* this *job? What's driving your service?*

"This is—listen UP, everyone—this is Miss Mya, and she will be assisting me and helping you all with your work this summer." Ms. Andrews' strong, piercing voice cuts through the unceasing din of 5th grade students already chattering over her brief introductions. Sitting in the back of the classroom at my makeshift table (actually just three empty desks pushed together), I smile brightly and wave. At Ms. Andrews' remarks, one student whips his head around and stares at me quizzically, his eyebrows heightened in a way that communicates comedic prowess. Glancing at my roster (only about half of the students are present today, a trend that will continue into the rest of the summer) I catch his name again—Tyler. Tyler is tall for his age, with a flat top of orange-tipped curly hair and a Fortnite mask stretched across his face. Based off his exaggerated reaction, I think I already have an idea of the kind of "humorous" impact he's hoping to have on his classmates. *This is going to be harder than I thought.*

Week 2

It is week 2 of summer school, and everyone in the program is slowly finding their way. With the arrival of our curriculum materials, Ms. Andrews finally has the capability to separate students into smaller reading and math groups for more personalized instruction. This morning, she's assigned me to lead a group in a read-aloud about baseball legend Jackie Robinson, living in the countryside after his athletic career with his family and helping his children learn to ice skate.

"Here." Ms. Andrews thrusts the curriculum notebook into my unprepared hands. "This is the lesson for today, this is the vocabulary—you can do this activity with them or have them write a paragraph about the topic that's listed." I'm a little nervous—I've never led this kind of a lesson before, but Ms. Andrews doesn't have the time or the energy to explain it to me further.

I quickly discover that a bigger challenge to our lesson, however, is not necessarily my lack of experience—although my particular group is only about six students, we've only been given three copies of the book for the entire class to use. Is this due to a communication breakdown? A lack of funds? I'm not sure, but it would be easier (and more conducive to these students' learning) if there were more. As I spread the copies around the table, my students crowd into each other's personal space as they more closely examine the beautifully illustrated pictures, pages instantly wrinkling under fifth-grade fingers and face masks slipping down to their chins.

"Masks over our noses, please," I say, tapping the bridge of my own nose as a guide. It's not the first time I've done this today, and I can already feel the spot on my nose I've been hitting. Students groan to themselves, roll their eyes, but each begrudgingly yank their masks up one by one. While everyone relaxes for now, I know it'll only be a matter of minutes before I need to remind them again.

Although the students I worked with lived and learned in a pandemic for an entire school year and then some, this learning never took place in a physical classroom (it makes sense, then, that the mask requirement was often a source of confusion and frustration.) From March 2020 to May 2021, Richmond Public Schools did not hold in-person instruction, instead opting to offer the entire 2020-2021 school year online. Gathering from the experiences of my students, if you were enrolled as an RPS student last year, your participation would likely resemble one of the three following possibilities:

1. As a student, you have access to a WiFi connection and an appropriate electronic device and can access and engage with the online RPS content that is provided.
2. As a student, you have access to a WiFi connection and an appropriate electronic device, but you are not receiving the available content. This could be because you don't know how to access it, or because you don't have a parent or guardian with the time and availability to sit down with you and hold you accountable for fully participating in what is assigned (Zoom meetings, fillable worksheets, etc.)
3. As a student, you are lacking access to some combination of a WiFi connection and/or an appropriate electronic device, and so you cannot access the available online content even if you wanted to.

Although online learning was provided, there was no true guarantee that it was received. And perhaps even more importantly, learning is not just the consumption of academic knowledge—it is deeply and firmly grounded in the formation of relationship and community. Some of these students sitting in the classroom around me, currently breaking down massive picture book paragraphs into easily digestible sentences and words, went without any of this for *over a year.*

As I continue to consider these truths, I think back to my high school graduation and birthday two summers ago, when I received a brand-new laptop from my grandparents for my freshman year college courses–all of which were online in some capacity. I think of my two younger siblings, still attending the private school I graduated from in masks, in student cohorts, and physically distanced, but *in person*—laughing, processing, and sharing in educational community in ways that promote a love of learning beyond the classroom lectures. What allowed the three of us to receive educational opportunities that the students sitting around the table with me did not? Was it a result of our tax bracket? Our school choice? I recognize the fact that my

family even had a choice of where to attend school represents a level of privilege in itself. *How does this reckoning with privilege intersect with my service? How does it affect my intentions? Am I serving out of a place of guilt or a desire to truly make things better?* Although I hope my students can't see it behind my mask, as we continue to read my mind is on edge (just like Jackie Robinson appeared to be in our book when he stepped out on the ice.)

Week 3

It is week 3 of summer school, and I am exhausted—my feet are throbbing within my purple running shoes (the ones I tried to pick out because of their good arch support.) At this point, all I'd like to do is sit down—or rather, *lie* down. On Monday, I am assigned to take my students to the gym for an indoor recess activity—the late summer rain has ruined our outdoor plans. The noise is absolutely deafening—children screaming at a variety of pitches, jump ropes rhythmically smacking the ground, referee whistles piercing the air. The harsh lighting and brightly colored rubber balls bouncing in all directions combine to create a general feeling of disorientation. Although they have been given specific directions beforehand, the second we step through the doors my students drop their bags on the floor and run to join the variety of games taking place, shrieking with joy and reckless abandon.

"Y–M–!" I yell out over and over again, the beginning of a supposedly refocusing call and response. At this point, however, it's largely ineffective—my face mask stifles any hope of projection. I can feel my voice straining as I repeat myself, and I know I'll probably end up hoarse sooner than later. *How anyone can do this for an entire school year—let alone multiple—baffles me. I know it's cliché, but teachers* are *superheroes.*

Tyler is chief among his friends as he ignores the given instructions. This is the week that he told me he was trying to get suspended from school because he didn't want to do his work anymore.

"I don't like Ms. Andrews," he had said to me in a moment of seriousness. "She's too strict." It had been a difficult week for Tyler—multiple trips to see the head administrator, struggling on assignments, and constantly being both frustrated by and frustrating towards his classmates.

"Tyler!" was an exclamation that came out of my mouth all too frequently, and for a variety of reasons—joy, exasperation, panic. Just as he seemed to reach a high point in his academic achievement, in the next moment he was throwing pencils across the room. He needed so desperately to learn and progress, yet it sometimes felt as if he was destroying his own chances at success because he just didn't feel like writing a paragraph. I was frustrated too—not at him, but *for* him.

This attitude of "I don't want to be here" seemed to be collective. While I'd be insane to think that a fifth-grader's first choice would be to go to school in the middle of summer, there was part of me that hoped students might be excited to be back in the classroom—to learn and engage with their classmates and teachers, to cover new material in exciting ways. Instead, the number of students—specifically third through fifth grade students—who indicated to me and to others that they wanted to give up on their studies (even within the bounds of a five-week program) was astounding. Their discouragement was palpable—they went from not wanting to do an assignment to wanting to drop out of school altogether in a heartbeat.

Third graders. Fourth graders. Fifth graders.

What implications did this have on their future? On their understanding of their own academic potential? Even though I sometimes joked about dropping out in high school during times of stress, it was never something I seriously considered—I knew that education could both lead to greater opportunities and also grow me in valuable and necessary and enjoyable ways. However, a lot of this enjoyment was supplemented by the materials and opportunities with

which I was provided—the books I was given *to keep,* the classical music instruction and the choir concerts, the innovative ways of working out a math problem. Because of the opportunities I was privileged to receive, I was able to cultivate not just a deep sense of purpose for my future, but a genuine love for my educational experience and a desire to keep growing.

Meanwhile, my students came every day to a school that didn't even have the capability to provide them with enough reading materials and notebooks to share easily. Even the simplest things (such as pencils and glue sticks) had to be provided by Ms. Andrews herself. I remember running out of lined paper one day and having to run to the teacher workroom, grabbing two wide-ruled notebooks that I could tear individual sheets out of because *there were no more packages of lined paper*. It makes sense, then, that my students were so easily discouraged. How could they value their educational experience when they themselves were not able to feel valued as students? The worth of these students may be preached (and is both honestly believed and rightly encouraged by many), but what is there to tangibly show for it? Weighing these two very different experiences, I felt complicit, guilty for enjoying the benefits of a system of education that privileges those who have resources and disparages those who do not. There is not just a lack of equity—there is injustice taking place within the American public school system. *Again––how does my privilege intersect with my service, and what should I do in response to what I know?*

Week 4

It is week 4 of summer school, and yet I am as caught off guard as in the moment that I first set foot in the elementary school doors. I've only missed one day of work after losing my voice developed into a full-blown cold, and yet when I get back Ms. Andrews is gone. Yellow Post-it Notes are painstakingly placed on different worksheets at her desk, indicating what material is to be used when. While our relationship throughout the summer has been mainly

professional, I'm still surprised and sad to realize that she won't be here. I scan the room and exterior hallway with a panicked intensity—does anyone else know about this? All I know is that my students are set to arrive in 20 minutes and there is no lead teacher in sight. I'm lost.

Thankfully, Ms. Harrison, the substitute, arrives just before the fifth graders. She is thoughtful, kind, and wastes no time getting us right back to work. Our reading group this week, according to the curriculum, is an easy chapter book about the Trail of Tears. Instantly, I'm conscious of the fact that I am navigating curriculum about a particularly ugly component of white supremacy with a group of children of color. Am I equipped to answer tough questions, to have difficult conversations? These are not toddlers I'm talking to. These are rising fifth graders––tweens, almost teens, who are well aware that the world is bigger than their individual experience. I have an innate responsibility to treat them as such.

As we make our way through the brief chapters, each giving just a summary of the immense tragedy that occurred, I try and take time to pause.

"Do you realize what the government did?" I ask. A few students nod their heads; others are already zoned out. "It was wrong of them to tell the Native Americans to leave their homes when they had been living there for a very long time. They did not deserve to be treated that way." I wonder if I'll receive a response, but my students are currently in a variety of headspaces—some are snickering to each other about someone else's pronunciation of a word, some have their head on the table, some are silently arguing over fidget toys and hoping I don't notice. They either didn't hear what I said, or they just might not want to. Either way, it's not wise to continue the discussion further—I leave it be and move on to our math lesson. All the same, my head is pounding.

In some of my high school classes, we didn't talk about the effects of racial injustice within historical events. Now that I've had the opportunity to look back and realize the faults of

this approach, it makes sense that my reaction in other educational situations would be to ask questions, possibly to push on towards a greater realization of systemic injustice and a call to action. But this group of fifth graders, who all have a different racial background, is not the same as my high school class of majority white students. I'm uncomfortable with my own choices in this moment, but I'm not sure what I should have done instead. Again, I'm lost. *Did I need to say that? Did I just try to explain racism? Is that my place? I'm pretty sure some of these fifth graders understand its effects better than I do. But I also don't want to* not *address it. Again– how does my privilege intersect with my service?*

Tyler continues down the same path he has been for the past four weeks–achieving exciting highs one day and falling to destructive lows the next. One day, he eagerly raises his hand in the middle of a writing assignment.

"Miss Mya! Miss Mya, Miss Mya—" I walk over briskly, trying to gauge whether he needs my help.

"Yes, Tyler?"

"I'm going on vacation next week. I won't be here at all." I smile back at him.

"Well, Tyler, I'm glad you're getting to go on vacation, but I'll miss you! Do you need help with your paragraph?" Tyler shakes his head emphatically.

"No, I'm good." Just like that, it hits me. He's leaving. He's going to be gone, and what will he take away from four weeks of struggle? Will he feel prepared for the next school year, or will he try his best to put everything he learned this summer behind him?

Week 5

It is week 5 of summer school, and I am weary. I'm heading back to college at the end of this week, and it's difficult to fully have your heart and head in wrapping up a job when you're simultaneously trying to pack for your new living situation and say goodbye to your family for

the time being. *Oh, adulting.* As the final week of the program, this is supposed to be the week where I make space for reflection, where I think back on everything that transpired over just over a month of service—what I liked, what I didn't, what I learned, what I will take with me. Except…I don't quite have the capacity for that at this point. I don't really take time and enjoy the last four days, I survive them.

Tyler's absence this week creates a noticeable calmness in the class dynamic–there's a little less visible conflict, a little more focus. I feel conflicted—I'm grateful to have the ability to channel my focus towards the other students without being interrupted by someone scribbling on his desk, but at the same time I can't help thinking that I could have better assisted Tyler. What is he going to take away from this summer? A true learning experience where he was excited to be back in the classroom? Or an understanding that school was slow and monotonous and boring? How did his access to opportunity, his access to resources, affect his desire to learn? What capacity for change did I (or anyone, really) have access to within this system? Ultimately, without seeing him again, I won't have answers to this. There's not much time for closure–almost as soon as I am finished with one school, I'm back at another–this time, my own.

Just like the question above, I'm grateful for the space this narrative has given me to look back and reflect on the hard, the messy, the vulnerable questions—ones that I still don't quite have all the answers to. Privilege, to put it bluntly, is a complicated thing. It allows one access to opportunities that are not available otherwise, yet often they are no more deserving of them than anyone else. This should (and does) make me continuously uncomfortable. And service is not a means of erasing this discomfort–no matter how much I attempt to help, my privilege will still be existent.

There's a very strong chance (albeit one that is discouraging to realize) that my work this summer didn't do much, if anything, to affect the systems of inequality in place within the

Richmond Public School system. I wish so strongly that it did—while some aspects of this desire might be rooted in a misguided intention to rid myself of some of the discomfort I feel, I also truly wanted (and still want) the best possible outcome for every student I interacted with this summer. Many of the students who came in discouraged likely left the same way, and it's doubtful that I was able to change that outlook dramatically. As a teacher's assistant, I was ultimately a cog in the wheel, a piece within a massive trial run for the fall—in a very small way, helping Richmond Public Schools to figure out their mode of operation in the midst of a raging pandemic. There's not a vast amount of room to work outside of the system, and as someone who's still in school herself, I recognize that it also wasn't necessarily my job or place to do so.

So what then? Discomfort and frustration and reckoning with privilege is a starting point, but in no ways is it a finish line. And while my ultimate goal is to work in education policy—to have a say in the decisions that are made for youth in schools and to advocate for policies that equitably distribute resources and promote the wellbeing of students of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, the truth is that I'm still a few years and degrees away from achieving that.

However, five weeks working for the YMCA and Richmond Public Schools *did* give me a solid foundation—a foundation that will prepare me to pursue meaningful action. In as much as the students enrolled in summer school came to learn and prepare for their future, I did as well without even realizing it. The experience I had in Richmond Public Schools this summer not only allowed me to deeper recognize the extent of my own privilege, but it gave me ideas about what I should advocate for and how I should advocate for it that I know will have rippling effects on my future work as a helping professional. These are ideas that I formed in the midst of my hands-on experience—the silent reflection standing in the hallway waiting for my students to wash their hands, the joy over a study group successfully finishing a math worksheet, the

uncontrollable laughter when a student reached 100 double-dutch jumps in the gym. Yes, there may have been moments this summer where I may not have felt ready to teach, but I know wholeheartedly now that through making the choice to engage in new experiences that challenge my understanding, I will be putting myself in a healthy place—a place where I will be taught.

Work Cited

"Mission and Vision | YMCA RICHMOND." Last modified 2021. Accessed December 15, 2021. https://www.ymcarichmond.org/about/mission-vision.