

Maya Martin Cadogan

Power Autobiography

The first time that I learned the meaning of power, I was eight years old. My parents had separated and with the end of their marriage came a new neighborhood and school. I really liked the students at my school; the teacher and I, however, did not hit it off. She generally looked scared of us and she never seemed prepared for what she was teaching. A month or so into the school year, instead of teaching us reading, math, science, or social studies, she started to teach us “fun” stuff - how to sing a song, tell a joke, do a dance. My classmates were enthralled. I was not. So, I disengaged from the group and while they laughed and played, I sat at my desk reading. She let me do this for quite a while and then, one day, she called on me in front of the whole class:

Teacher: “Maya, why don’t you come join us?”

Me: “I’m ok. I’m reading my book.”

Teacher: “Yes, we all know. But we’re learning how to do cartwheels! Put your book down and come join us. Don’t you ever want to have fun?!”

Me: “When you start teaching something important like reading or math, I’ll put my book down. But right now, I’m going to read.”

I could tell she was mad. She didn’t say anything in that moment but the next day when we came in, I learned that she had demoted my reading group. I had been in the advanced group where we read chapter books. Now, I was told to go and join a new group. I hadn’t noticed before that most of the kids in this group were black and Latino. The advanced group was all white and Asian and...me. I remember that being the first time that something seemed off to me about the way people were treated based on race. I was also surprised that this group wasn’t reading chapter books. I was pretty ready to give her another piece of my mind but I held my tongue. Instead, I stormed home after school and unleashed this story of injustice to my mother:

Me (at the end of my story): “So, Mom, what are you going to do about it?”

Mom: “What am I going to do about it? What are YOU going to do about it, Maya?”

Me: “Me? I’m eight!”

Mom: “No matter how old you are you’re going to have to learn how to stand up for yourself. I’m not always going to be here to help you. If you don’t like the teacher, and think she’s not doing what’s right then you need to say something.”

Me: “I guess I can talk to Dr. Adams [the principal]?”

Mom: “I think that’s right. You should go and talk to her.”

Me: “Ok, I will!”

I went to Dr. Adams’ secretary and asked to get an appointment with her. When I was called in, I sat in Dr. Adams’ guest chair, legs barely reaching the floor, and said, “Dr. Adams, I have a



problem and I need your help.” What I remember most from that conversation is that Dr. Adams listened to me, intently. I finished with my call to her, “You need to come in there and see her for yourself! She doesn’t know what she’s doing!”

The next day, Dr. Adams was there, sitting in the back of the classroom with pen and paper as we all filed in. Over the next couple months, she came in regularly. Sometimes Dr. Adams led the class. The teacher got a bit better but it was never great. We left for winter break and when we came back, we learned we had a new teacher - Ms. White. I will never know what happened to the other teacher. I honestly can’t remember her name. But what I always remember from that situation and what that situation taught me for life is that I have power. And because I felt the power to advocate, my whole class got Ms. White.

Ms. White was an amazing teacher and she always got everyone interested in learning. She stayed with our class from the second half of third grade through the fifth grade when we graduated. Everyone loved her. When she started, I remember her asking me, “Maya, what do you think of what we’re doing in class?” I told her that I really liked the way she taught but that I thought the reading groups were unfair. She asked me why. I responded that the teacher had taken me out of the advanced reading group and that it seemed unfair that the advanced group had the better books and there were no black or Latino kids in it. She paused looked frustrated. I was worried that I’d offended her. But instead, she retested the whole class and reordered all of the reading groups. I was moved back to the advanced reading group but so were a few of the other black and Latino students - all of the groups had been rearranged.

My first experience with power at such a young age set the stage for me. That teacher wasn’t the first or last person in power that I called out. But I never battled just for myself. Talk to the students in a school and they can ALL tell you which teachers aren’t invested in their students and why they don’t like a certain class. But they don’t get to tell it to the people that matter.

I have often been struck by how many black people my age say neither they nor their parents felt power in their education. I had to look critically at my background to figure out why my experience has been so different since we share a racial identity. In part, it was the way I was raised. I grew up poor and watched my family torn apart by the crack epidemic in the 80’s and 90’s. But my parents were college educated and they always taught me to advocate for myself. That is my privilege in who raised me because my parents knew how to navigate the systems to which they exposed me. They come from families that while discriminated against, had for generations felt the power to navigate through an unjust system and had found some success in spite of prejudice. Every day, I work to try to figure out how to transfer some of that power to the children and families that I serve in DC, the city that raised my family for five generations. Because it shouldn’t just be those of us that are lucky enough to grow up with power given to and expected of us that know how to use the voice and power that we all have within.

