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The Cultural Symphony in Schools: Effectively Teaching African American and Latino High School Students

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Abstract

This mixed methods case study examines the perceptions that 24 African American and Latino students at one North Carolina high school have of effective classroom instruction in their favorite teacher's class. Six teachers were also interviewed and asked to reflect on student feedback and 1,003 anonymous students were surveyed (secondary data source). Critical Race Theory (CRT) was utilized to examine the racial context of this high school, students' counter stories, the existence of deficit thinking, and the presence of bias (Marshall, C. 2010; and Yosso, T. 2006). The data from this study indicate that effective teachers of African American and Latino students create a cultural symphony in their classrooms as they lead discussions about race, racism and/or positive contributions of African American and Latino people, are dedicated to the success of students, break it down to the ground by simplifying instruction, call on everyone, are passionate about their subject matter and maintain highly structured classroom environments. Cultural Symphony is a term that emanated from this research and is introduced and defined by this researcher.

Introduction

It was a rare pleasure attending the Boston Symphony on a fall evening. What I remember is the precise manner in which the stage was set. The location of the first and second violins, the clarinets, French horns and cellos was certainly not arbitrary. Though each section had a specific function, each retained its uniqueness which enhanced the musical experience. The conductor, Seiji Ozawa, at the time, was fully aware of the power possessed by each instrument and at the appropriate time, moved from a silent, morose tempo to a crescendo that brought deafening applause at its conclusion. Ozawa created the mood with his direction, his reliance on composers like Austrian, Gustav Mahler, and French composer, Berlioz; and engaged the audience with the complexity of instrumentation and synchronization. There is a certain air of snobbery and class consciousness at the Symphony. Even following the movements requires an appreciation for other languages and cultures, a measure of background knowledge about composers and why they chose to create a certain work as well as a degree of familiarity with the social and historical context of a piece of music. There is also acceptable and unacceptable attire for the Symphony. Unlike the Boston Pops Orchestra that customarily plays outdoors on Independence Day to Boston enthusiasts clad in shorts and tank tops, the Symphony is a decidedly formal affair. It is therefore quite interesting to lend a comparison between a musical symphony that takes place on a stage and a cultural symphony that takes place in the classroom. The description of a cultural symphony evolved as part of the research of this study and is defined by this researcher as it relates to creating effective environments for African American and Latino students.

On several indicators, including Advanced Placement scores, college participation rates, and NAEP Math and Reading scores, African American and Latino students are not as successful as White students (NCES, 2009; Wainer 2004; AP Report to the Nation, 2009). For many

African American and Latino students, schools have become places where they are marginalized and disengaged.

The overall purpose of this study was to learn from African American and Latino high school students about how their perceptions and experiences can inform classroom instruction by pointing towards practices and beliefs which in their eyes account for their success in school.

Theoretical Framework

This study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to determine how students of color interpret their school experiences. Ladson-Billings and Tate's (2006) tenets of Critical Race Theory include:

- Racism as Endemic and Ingrained in American life
- Understanding Race and Property
- A Reinterpretation of Ineffective Civil Rights Law
- Challenging Claims of Neutrality, Objectivity, Colorblindness and Meritocracy

The study focused on interrogating racism and dominant racial ideology that promotes deficit thinking, bias and colorblind thinking (challenging claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy). Though not included in this paper, deficit thinking and bias were important themes raised by students. This researcher anticipated that the majority of students would share that they were not treated differently than White students in their favorite teachers' classes.

This paper focuses more specifically on one area of CRT analysis:

- Centering the experiences of African American and Latino high school students in order to learn about their experiences with race and using their counter stories to challenge the stories of the dominant group.

Methodology

This study was designed as a mixed methods case study of one high school in the Southeast. Quantitative secondary student survey data were utilized. Student and teacher qualitative interviews were also conducted. Experts from the field and this researcher's university institute for research in Social Science provided consultation in the development of interview questions.

The sample size (n) used was 1,003 surveys that identified a favorite teacher. The sample size (n) for African Americans was 99 students (total 207), and for Latinos, the sample size (n) was 47 (total 122). Twenty four randomly selected African American and Latino students and six (favorite) teachers were interviewed during a class period. Students interviewed were stratified by grade, achievement and race. Pseudonyms instead of actual names for teachers and students were used.

Table 1.0 Recruitment Designation of High, Medium and Low level Achievement for African American and Latino High School Students

| | High | Average | Low |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Grades 10-12 | 3.4+ GPA (weighted) | 2.3-3.3 GPA (weighted) | Below 2.3 |
| Grade 9 | Level IV. EOG Reading and/or Math | Level III. EOG Reading and/or Math | Level I or II. EOG Reading and/or Math |

Results

Characteristics/Practices of Effective Teachers of African American and Latino Students

With the exception of the first theme which was a deductive theme based on Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive pedagogy, all of the other themes evolved from research at Coventry Midlands High School. During data analysis, the characteristics or practices of effective teachers that emerged were:

- Lead discussions about Race, Racism and/or Positive Contributions of African Americans and Latinos
- Dedicated to the Success of Students
- *Break it Down to the Ground*
- Passion about the Subject Matter
- Maintain Highly Structured Classroom Environments

Lead discussions about Race, Racism and/or Positive Contributions of African Americans and Latinos

In the context of this study, this theme refers to teachers being conscious of the diverse group of students they are teaching and intentionally incorporating the cultures of their students into their lessons. Mr. Gaston, B.S, Social Studies Teacher (four years) stated:

In African American Studies, we have an ongoing series of lessons about "good hair" and internalized racism within the African American community. It is easier. In Civics, I've had plenty of opportunities when students have said something that is racially tinged like asking the only African American student in class about a sport. That is not acceptable. Stereotypes. That leads to a greater discussion.

Ms. Terry, M.Ed., English teacher (33 years) looked for ways to relate her curriculum to all of her students she said, "I try to relate it to British Literature (curriculum for English IV). It is waspish. When we did Ballads, I did some research on the Ballad of Birmingham and a Ballad written by Langston Hughes."

Dedicated to the Success of Students

Elisa, a 10th grade Latina, 2.66 GPA shared, "A lot of teachers, I guess all they want to do is get the material across, but they don't dedicate themselves to the success of students as much." Mr. Willis, M.A.T, Biology teacher (23 years) added, "I try to make class as hands on and relevant as I can. I'm accessible before school, after school, during lunch." Teachers that were described as being dedicated to student success required students to complete work, utilized a variety of strategies to help students access the material, and demonstrated caring. Some of the

strategies teachers used included cause and effect charts, games, interactive assignments, and mnemonic devices. "I try to use a variety of teaching methods, a lot of direct instruction, partner work, and class discussion. I try to get to know all of them (my students) as individuals. I use a notebook strategy. The right side is the teacher side. I like them to respond in writing on their left first." Ms. Lumberton, M.A.T., Social Studies teacher (6 years) gave an example of some of the effective teaching strategies she uses.

India, 12th grade African American, 2.86 GPA stated "She cares about me personally. She always says, if there is a problem either inside or outside of class, feel free to talk to me." Ms. Terry, M.Ed., English teacher (33 years) shared, "One of the things I really want to get across is that I really care about them. I tell them personal stories about my own boys." Teachers who were described as dedicated to student success showed that they cared about students.

Break It Down to the Ground

A 9th grade African American female student described her favorite teacher, "*He breaks it down to the ground*". Gary, an 11th grade African American student, 2.0 GPA shared about his teacher's keen ability to explain, and simplify instruction. "*Cause he broke it down that helps me understand. Most teachers do it all in one day. He takes time with individual people, making sure they understand.*" Gary was explaining that other teachers explain a complex concept all at once rather than sharing a little at a time. Cathy, an 11th grade African American student, 3.55 GPA shared about her Science teacher. "*He relates to things that are current. He breaks it down for you.*" Dale, a 12th grade African American male, 1.86 GPA said, "*She'll break it down. She'll take it back. If you ask a question, she'll expand on the question you ask and give you more information.*"

Everyone Gets Called on

In classrooms where "everyone gets called on", teachers utilized a transparent process designed to intentionally include everyone not just the students who volunteer. Ms. Jensen, M.Ed., English teacher (4 years) said "*I popcorn around the class all the time. I call on my students that sit in the back first.*" Kenya, a 10th grade African American female, 3.28 GPA stated, "*Ms. Jensen is the type where you don't have to raise your hand in class to get called on. You might as well be ready to get called on.*" Mr. Monroe, M.Ed., Social Studies teacher (17 years) uses note cards with students' names on them so he can make sure that everyone has a chance to respond.

Passion about the Subject Matter

Ms. Jensen, M.Ed., English teacher (5 years) shared, "It's a good start for letting them know I am as passionate as I am about learning that hopefully they'll be interested in the book (we're reading)". Ms. Terry, M.Ed., English teacher expressed her level of energy even after 33 years in the classroom, "I'm enthusiastic about what I teach. This is what I want them to get from me." Lilly, a 10th grade Latina 4.14 GPA added, "Ms. Lumberton's attitude is cheerful and energetic. There is an upbeat vibe. Other subjects are monotonous." Teachers who were described as passionate were enthusiastic, and found creative ways to interest students in the subject matter.

Highly Structured Classroom Environments

April, 12th grade African American, 3.59 GPA shared an assessment of the structure and organization in Mr. Willis' Advanced Placement Biology class that helped to make her successful.

The structure. You know what will happen- lecture, then lab. You always know what is expected. He has high expectations of you. It motivates students to do their best in the class. I like to know what the teacher expects, what we're going to be doing in the class. He can be strict, but it is to help us do better. He first intimidates us on the first day, then he slows things down.

Robert, a 10th grade African American male 1.21 GPA described his favorite teacher's classroom, "Very organized and quiet at all times. In terms of side talking or (students being) off task, it doesn't happen. He lets you know he plays no games the first day." Highly structured classroom environments are led by teachers that are strict and very organized, maintain rigorous environments and have clear expectations.

Discussion of Findings

As African American and Latino students shared their experiences in their favorite teachers' classes, several commonalities became apparent. The characteristics or practices of effective teachers that emerged from the student interviews are described as a *cultural symphony*.

The Cultural Symphony in Schools

Creating a *cultural symphony* involves recognizing the uniqueness of each student in the classroom and intentionally utilizing their cultural heritage and strength. Each student's culture is not immaterial, rather it is intrinsic in order to produce a well-orchestrated lesson. Expectations are set for presentation, attitude and the mood with every lesson. Each gathering is a unique event that is highly structured and pre-planned. Before the public performance, the teacher takes complex material and simplifies it - *breaks it down to the ground* so that the critical knowledge that each student needs to demonstrate mastery becomes evident. The teacher is dedicated to the success of each student because without each student's optimal performance, elements of the classroom experience would be deficient. The classroom teacher is passionate and creates an energy that shapes the mood, making even trivial material seem exhilarating. In other words, creating a *cultural symphony* involves leading discussions about race, racism and the positive contributions of African Americans and Latinos; being dedicated to the success of students; *breaking it down to the ground*; calling on everyone; demonstrating passion about the subject matter and maintaining highly structured classroom environments.

Lead Discussions about Race, Racism and/or Positive Contributions of African Americans And Latinos

In classrooms where teachers create a *cultural symphony*, teachers understand the context in which students attend school and therefore find ways to include their students' voices, experiences and racial perspectives. Ms. Jensen, M.Ed., English teacher (5 years) shared that she has many opportunities to integrate world literature into her class. Ms. Lumberton, M.A.T., Social Studies teacher (6 years) shared how she integrates different cultures in her Social Studies classes. Gay (1999) stated that African American and Latino students will be successful in classrooms where teachers provide culturally relevant conceptual examples and deliver multicultural curricula.

Dedicated to the Success of Students

Teachers who were dedicated to the success of students were described as being less concerned with covering material and more concerned with making sure students were successful. Mr. Monroe, M.Ed., Social Studies teacher (17 years) shared his approach to student learning, *"It's an expectation. You can choose to take the class. You cannot walk out of here and not be successful."* Teachers dedicated to student success also demonstrated caring by being transparent with their students and showing they cared about their students as people.

Nieto (2005) affirmed that some of the characteristics of effective teachers include: connecting learning to students' lives, caring about, respecting, and loving their students. Noddings (2005) added that caring teachers make connections between school and real life as well as the student's needs and the lesson's objectives.

Breaks it down to the ground

Teachers that created a *cultural symphony* explained concepts in straightforward language that students could understand. Given the nature of this college preparatory high school, it is incumbent upon students to understand a great deal of material that very often needs to be learned in a short period of time. In Noguera's study (2007) of public schools, students communicated the importance of teachers exercising patience and providing them with careful explanations.

Everyone Gets Called On

Brenda, 9th grade African American female, Math EOG - 2, Reading- 2 said, *"He lets all of us take turns answering the question. He doesn't focus on one student."* Students shared that favorite teachers noticed when students had questions and whether they raised their hands or not. Ms. Jensen, M.Ed., English teacher (4 years) stated, *"Sometimes I may focus on a section of the room. As I'm going through the week making sure - have I heard the voice of every kid?"*

Gay (1999) asserted that teachers control the discourse in their classrooms. The degree to which culturally diverse learners participate in the classroom discourse will depend upon "turn-taking rules, attending and attention-getting behaviors, wait time for responses, length of speech exchanges, questioning strategies, and feedback mechanisms". These types of activities promote learning for African American students.

Passion about the Subject Matter

Dale, a 12th grade African American male, 1.86 GPA shared his insights about the role a passionate teacher, Ms. Lumberton played in setting the tone for his day. *"She always has a positive mindset. All the negativity she avoids. It was energetic even at the beginning of the day. Everybody wanted to be there even if it was a crazy topic. It was a positive environment. It started my day off so well every day."* The teachers that were able to build trusting relationships were able to engage students in what Noddings (2005) termed, "even trivial material" or in Ms. Lumberton's case, a "crazy topic". Teachers who were passionate were able to create an environment that caused students to want to be in their classes regardless of the topic. Nieto (2005) concluded that effective teachers were enthusiastic, lifelong learners who prioritized excellent education for all of their students and also valued excellence in themselves. The findings from this study are consistent with Nieto and Noddings' research.

Highly Structured Classroom Environments

Mr. Gaston, B.S. Social Studies teacher (4 years) shared how he organizes his classroom. I start with a very structured day with a plan in place that is well thought out. I start with a warm up to connect to students lives personally. Having a question or assignment that helps the students reflect on themselves then connect to the actual material. I have high expectations. If you are not working, why are you not working? Success is the only option in this classroom.

In the classrooms of effective teachers, the structure and expectations were clearly communicated. There were no students off task.

Implications for Teaching

Teachers can show dedication to student success by being available to help students outside of class. Caring cannot be mandated, but systems of care can be put in place to ensure that students complete assignments such as the CARE Team/Academic Plan structure in place at Coventry Midlands High School. As part of this structure, the CARE Team meets on a weekly basis with their assistant principal and counselor. Underperforming students are required to meet on a weekly basis with their teachers to get additional tutoring/homework support. Teachers can meet together during Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to develop ways to simplify instruction (*Break it down*). Teachers can also implement a systematic process designed to include everyone in the classroom discourse so that not just the students who raise their hands are called on. Teachers can also share best practices with one another for developing highly structured classroom environments.

Conclusions

A counterhegemonic school-community is called for that recognizes the context in which African American and Latino students attend school and that promotes effective teaching. We have much to learn from students as Noguera points out, "Students may very well have ideas and insights that adults are not privy to, and that could prove to be very helpful in improving schools if adults are willing to listen" (Noguera, 2007, p.209).

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