Bridging the Cultural Divide: Minority Student Identification with School Culture

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Historically, minority groups have dealt with injustices which have included the denial of the right to vote, to own property, and to pursue an education. Many of these rights were restored through landmark cases such as Brown v. Board of Education and the passage of the Civil Rights Act. However, there remains a residual effect of these injustices which can be seen in the education arena as it manifests itself in issues of achievement, discipline practices, over-representation in categories such as special education, and under-representation in areas such as gifted and talented for minority student groups.

Research suggests that limited teacher understanding of cultures outside of their own and unexamined prejudices about people from other ethnic groups are areas that must be addressed in order to implement culturally-responsive classroom environments (Chubbuck, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Garibaldi, 1992; Gay, 2000; Howard, 1999; Monroe, 2005; Ogbu, 1990). The issue is further complicated by the Euro-American influences found and provided for teachers in the school curriculum, methods, and materials that tend to ignore the background and experiences of others in the presentation of information.

Teachers play a pivotal role in reversing the negative academic and social behaviors of students of color, but they, too, are predisposed to internalizing and projecting the negative stereotypes and myths that are unfairly used to describe these students as hopeless and unsuccessful (Garibaldi, 1992). Teachers, who ascribe to these beliefs, must change their subjective attitudes about the success of minority students to be effective. Their encouragement can greatly enhance the beliefs of all students the importance and value of education for long-term success but, especially for minority youths (Garibaldi, 1992). "Knowledge about culture is but one tool that educators may make use of when devising solutions for a school's difficulty in educating diverse children" (Delpit, 1995, p. 167). A "culturally responsive classroom specifically acknowledges the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and tasks they are asked to perform" (Montgomery, 2001, p.4). Teachers recognize diverse learning styles of their students and develop instructional approaches to accommodate these styles. In making "connections with students' backgrounds, interests, and experiences to teach the standards based curriculum "a win-win learning atmosphere is created in the classroom (p. 1).

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the disparity between the cultures of minority students and their school community and the impact that this phenomena produces when addressing issues around achievement and discipline gaps. A definition of culture is explored and followed by a discussion of the clash between the culture of minority students and school culture. The concept of identification is looked at as a possible factor in the disconnect between the two cultures and a major influence in the disparity seen in the areas of achievement and discipline in the school setting as they relate to minority students. Finally, implications for research and practice are considered.

Culture

Culture shapes individual views, beliefs, perspectives, and ideals, and it colors the manner that people interpret life experiences. Franz Boas' definition of culture at the turn of the twentieth century asserted that "culture embrace[s] all the manifestations of social behavior of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the

product of human activities as determined by these habits" (Monaghan & Just, 2000, p. 2). This view of culture contrasted Edward B. Tylor's Victorian perspective that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.1). Boasian theories embraced that the world was "full of distinct cultures, rather than societies whose evolution could be measured by how much or how little 'civilization' they had. Culture, like a set of glasses, focuses our experience of the world" (Schein, 1997, p. 3).

Schein (1997), defined culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 2). Culture, defined by Gay (2000), is "what one thinks is important (values); what one thinks is true (beliefs); and how one perceives how things are done (norms)" (p.8).

An organization's culture consists of a pattern of beliefs, practices, values, and artifacts that defines its members and explains the process of how the organization operates (Bolman & Deal, 2003). According to Bolman and Deal, an organization's culture is taught to new members incrementally, one element at a time, to ensure mastery. Culture is manifested in organizations through elements that include: symbols, myths, vision, values, heroes, heroines, stories, fairytales, ritual, ceremony, metaphor, humor, and play. The role of each of these elements is to individually and collectively impact and shape the beliefs and views of those associated with the organization. Through symbols, an organization's cultural beliefs are revealed and communicated to members and patrons of the organization. Myths, vision, and values add to the cultural backbone of an organization by providing explanation, expression, solidarity, cohesion, and the communication of unspoken wishes and conflicts to its constituents. It is through the stories and fairytales that members of

an organization entertain each other and continue to give life to the heroes and heroines of the organization. The stories that are commonly told and retold at organizational functions and gatherings continue to breathe life into the beliefs, values, and vision that make up the cultural fabric of an organization.

Rituals and ceremonies are used to add structure and form to the culture of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Individuals turn to ritual and ceremony in the face of disaster and grief in an effort to make sense of the devastation; and in happiness and pleasure in an effort to celebrate and commemorate joyous occasions. It is through the humor and play that members of an organization relate the cultural norms. If an organization is very rigid in their protocol and operations, there will be limited, if any, humor and play during meetings and functions when the members of the organization gather. "Metaphors, humor, and play offer escape from the tyranny of facts and logic; they stimulate creative alternatives to old choices" (p. 269).

Student Culture vs. School Culture

Culture is a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others (Gay, 2000). The culture found in school systems is based on the shared beliefs of administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the school's surrounding community. This "cultural fabric," primarily of European and middle-class origins, is so deeply ingrained in the structures, ethos, programs, and etiquette of today's schools that it is considered simply the "normal" and "right" thing to do; and often the "cultural fabric" of schools does not entwine the threads of diversity and ethnicity (p.9).

Monroe (2005) stated that low-income African American students seldom receive instruction from teachers who share their cultural framework, creating an increase in cultural misunderstandings based on race, ethnicity and social class. Delpit (1995) explained that many of the difficulties encountered by teachers who are

instructing students from a different background than their own may be related to underlying attitudinal differences in the explicitness of directions and personal power in the classroom. Many Native American communities prohibit speaking for someone else, thus making it very difficult for these students to summarize the ideas of others because they had been taught to always speak for themselves. This cultural interactional pattern is often at odds with the school's cultural framework creating a cultural dichotomy for these minority students. For example in the Latino community, girls may find it difficult to speak out or show prowess academically in a mixed gender setting. However, if teachers are unaware of these cultural norms, they insist that all groups be gender-mixed thus depressing Latino girls' ability to show their academic ability.

Ogbu (1990) and McWhorter (2001) hypothesized that anti-intellectualism and oppositional identities are elements found in African-American cultural identity; and that Blacks bear responsibility for their failure in schools due to their personal choices, their collective culture, and overall failure to value traditional avenues of success.

These theories are problematic because the variations within Black culture and community are not taken into consideration, a lack of credit for the consistency of African American success in education prior to desegregation (Irvine & Foster, 1996; Siddle Walker, 1996), and negligence in citing the similar findings regarding academic failure among low-income Caucasians and those students of mixed race heritage (MacLeod, 1995). However, "the systematic nature of Black student failure appears to reside, in part, with cultural incongruities between students and teachers" (Monroe, 2005, p. 319).

Demographic data from the U.S. Department of Education (2002) confirmed that by the year 2010, the minority populations will have become the majority populations. In addition, by the year 2020, forty percent of the school-age population will be students of color (Schmidt, 2005); while currently eighty percent of the teacher

work force is White (Irvine, Armento, Causey, Jones, Frasher, & Weinburgh, 2001). African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and poor and working class White students, have a distinctive set of cultural values, beliefs, and norms about school, that are incongruous with many middle class White cultural norms and behaviors about schools (Irvine et al., 2001, p. 7). When a student's culture is rejected and/or not recognized, this creates a myriad of negative experiences and perceptions that can include suffering from psychological discomfort, low academic achievement, miscommunication, confrontations between students, teachers and home; hostility and alienation, diminished self-esteem and eventually school failure. Chubbuck (2004) posited that there is the "possibility that White teacher's dispositions toward race may create internal obstacles to implementation of effective pedagogy, curriculum and a transformative response to inequitable policies" (p. 302). The issue is further complicated by the Euro-American or Caucasian influence found and provided for teachers in the school curriculum, methods, and materials that tend to ignore the background and experiences of others in the presentation of information (Schmidt, 2005; Delpit, 1995).

Identity

One's culture plays an integral role in an individual's identity. An individual's identity is shaped by individual characteristics which include historical factors, family dynamics and social and political contexts (Tatum, 1997). Self creation of one's identity takes place during the adolescence period of one's life and continues for a lifetime. Tatum noted that the process involves an individual seeking to answer questions such as:

"Who does the world say I am? Who do my parents say that I am?
What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, neighbors, and community members such as store clerks? What do I learn about myself in the media? How am I represented in cultural images around me? Am I missing altogether?" (p. 20)

Seven distinct identifiers referred to as "categories of otherness" are used to define or identify people (Tatum, 1997, p.22). These categories include gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, age, socioeconomic status, and physical and mental abilities. Each of these categories has a form of oppression associated with it: sexism, racism, religious oppression, ageism, classism and ableism. These oppressive categories consist of two groups; a dominant group and a subordinate group (Tatum, 1997; Howard, 1999; Chubbuck, 2004). The dominant group is defined as the group which possesses the power and authority to set the parameters for which the subordinate group operates (Tatum, 1997; Howard, 1999). In America, the dominant group is described as a white, male, land owner which is embedded in the Constitution" (Howard, 1999, p. 51).

The dominant group is seen as the norm creating a level of privilege which creates a "sense of rightness and singularity of truth" (p.50). Howard noted that the dominant group claims truth as their private domain; the "dominant group doesn't hold perspectives, they hold the truth" (p. 50). Chubbuck (2004) referred to this phenomenon as the theory of Whiteness which comprises ideologies, attitudes, and actions of racism in practice. This theory is directly connected to institutionalized power and privileges that benefit White Americans.

In order to gain a better understanding of the impact of the theory of Whiteness as it relates to the concept of culture and more specifically issues around minorities identifying with the culture of an organization such as a school, one must understand the definition of racism as presented in this paper. Racism as defined by Tatum (1997) is "a system of advantage based solely on race intentionally or unintentionally" (p.10). This reiterates what Howard (1999) referred to as the legacy of privilege. Privilege is based solely on the color of one's skin and is unearned. Howard acknowledged that the privileges for the dominant group are many but keys in on the concepts of social and psychological insulation and voice in order to bring understanding to how dominance works in an effort to bring about social transformation and healing.

Social and psychological insulation refers to how privilege allows the dominant group "not to see, not to know, and not to act" (p. 61). Voice equates to the inferred power of the dominant group to control public discourse which is seen in our country's official written history, owned media, directed flow of funding, disproportionately influenced political climate, occupied seats of power in most social institutions, and established systems of education. "The dominance of voice works to silence or interpret other people's voices and cultures" (p. 61).

The challenge in building bridges that facilitate social transformation and healing lie in our ability to dismantle the deep nature of racism and dominance (Howard, 1999; Tatum, 1997; Chubbuck, 2004). The difficulty is exacerbated by "the unacknowledged belief of White superiority which remains intact and shapes the institutionalized structures that reproduce race based privileges and discriminatory outcomes" (Chubbuck, 2004, p. 302).

Discipline Gap

The National Center for Education Statistics (1997, 2001) cited that although youths of color account for 68% of the student population in 100 of the nation's largest school districts, approximately 87% of all teachers are White. The majority of educators identify with the middle class socioeconomically which starkly contrasts with the socioeconomic norms of many poverty entrenched urban students (Monroe, 2005).

The cultural clash that exists between students' culture and the schools culture often colors teachers' perspectives; and they can easily misread students' aptitudes, intent, or abilities due to differences in language use and interactional patterns (Delpit, 1995). The discipline gap and diminished achievement levels that exist for minority students is often impacted by a cultural clash between the students' culture and the school culture. "When such cultural differences exist, teachers may utilize styles of instruction and/or discipline that are at odds with the students' community norms" (p.167).

Many K-12 institutions tend to be Eurocentric as a result of the overwhelmingly large White presence in teaching; and the norms presented are reflective of the majority student populations (Monroe, 2005). "Educators often view parenting practices in low-income Black communities as pejoratively different from trends found among middle-class Whites…creating such alternative views and situations for differential student treatment that systematically marginalizes non-mainstream students" (p. 318).

Classrooms that do not allow for movement and interaction may unduly penalize African American male students because their learning and social styles have not been accommodated for in regular classrooms (Delpit, 1995). "The discipline gap, or tendency for African American students to be sanctioned more frequently and severely than their peers, is present in virtually every major school system throughout the United States" (Monroe, 2005, p.317). Monroe also noted that these inequities are pronounced among low socioeconomic and male students, even when other youths are engaged in identical misbehavior, according to qualitative studies. Multicultural education scholars tend to believe that cultural constructs play a significant role among low-income students of color (Banks & Banks, 1995).

Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is often defined as the disparity that exists between achievement levels in minority students such as African Americans and Hispanics compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Student achievement is significantly impacted by teacher expectations. These expectations held by teachers greatly affect many minority and at-risk students who may even regard their teacher's perception more than their own (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). "Low teacher expectations of minority students results in a self-fulfilling prophecy, contributing to significant achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students" (p. 3).

Congruent alignment between a child's home and school culture is a good predictor of their academic achievement. Students are more successful when their home and school cultures are similar; they tend to be less successful when the two cultures collide or are incongruent. There may be a disconnection for many minority and low-income students due to the movement from the familiar environment of the home to the unfamiliar environment of the school. This disconnection may be minimized or eliminated when schools work with students and their families in adapting to the school culture (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Trueba, 1988; Wells, 1990).

The concept of identification with academics has emerged as a contributing factor to the achievement gap (Osborne, 1999). Osborne posited that the concept of identification is rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective of self-esteem. The perspective of self-esteem states that individuals seek and receive feedback from their environment which is perceived. The individual then determines whether or not the perception is valid. If the perception is deemed valid, the individual incorporates the perceived feedback into their self-concept. If the perception is not seen as valuable or important, it will have little effect on the individual's self-esteem.

Steele (1997) identified the Stereotype Threat as a possible culprit in the academic underperformance of students of color. Steele noted that minority student groups experience higher levels of anxiety in school situations which cause them to be in a position to be seen as foolish such as giving a wrong answer. "Rumors of inferiority" represents another example of how anxiety is increased for minority students. Steele noted that this can be seen in situations where Black students' abilities are highlighted in the national media and debates. This national attention can be deemed as intimidating for minority students and contribute to low self-efficacy, demotivation and underperformance in school. The increased anxiety along with negative cultural stereotypes creates an aversive reaction which often results in minority students reducing their identification with academics.

Ogbu's (1990) Cultural Ecological Perspective suggested that minority groups are further divided into those who voluntarily reside in America and those who involuntarily became citizens. The voluntary group includes Latino and Asian Americans who are referred to as immigrants. This group views education as the path to success and a brighter future. They also appear to have an easier time integrating into academics into their self-concept which is reflected in their ability to excel at school. The involuntary group includes African and Native Americans. Individuals in this group interpret school as a displacement process which is detrimental to individuals' social identity, sense of security and self-worth. Members of the involuntary group may express this response due to the observation that even those among them who succeed are not fully accepted or rewarded the same way as whites and face cultural opposition for "acting white" (p. 48).

The Cool Pose theory as described by Majors and Billson (1992) provides yet another explanation for how identification is impacted for minority student groups. The authors address how African American males develop a hardcore façade to mask the pain of damaged pride, and poor self-confidence. The Cool Pose Theory suggests African American males become victims of their own coping strategies through displays of "flamboyant and nonconformist behaviors" that frequently result in punishment in school settings (p. 56). This occurs because their behaviors are said to be "incompatible with the popular perception of the "good student" as a hard driving, disciplined, highly motivated individual" (p. 56).

Implications for Practice and Research

Teacher education programs focus on the deficits of students by perpetuating attitudes that poor students and students of color should be expected to achieve less than their mainstream counterparts (Delpit, 1995). The educational system links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households; making it difficult to look past the deficits to identify a student's strengths. "Not knowing students' strengths leads to our 'teaching down' to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers in the school" (p. 167).

Although educators continue to identify contributors to the gaps that exist between minority and non-minority students in discipline and achievement, there needs to be an increased emphasis on implementation of strategies and practices to address these issues that plague our schools. The following strategies have been suggested to build a culturally competent school environment (Delpit, 1995; Howard,1999; Gay (2000); Monroe, 2005):

- Diversifying school faculty and staff
- Immersion into student culture by creating connections between schools, families, and community
- Suggesting that school faculty attend community functions to gain cultural knowledge
- Facilitating discussions that address issues such as racism and prejudice and incorporate activities such as privilege walk and silent introductions
- Limiting the negative images and data that pre-service teachers are exposed to such as: descriptors of failures, stereotypical labels - "disadvantaged" and "at-risk"
- Exposing pre-service teachers to minority student success stories:
  - –Nairobi Day School in East Palo CA taught poor African American students who ultimately scored three grade levels above the national average
  - - Marva Collins schools educate African American students who were considered uneducable by public schools, but are able to excel academically at her schools
  - -Jamie Escalante successfully taught hundreds Latino high school students from the poorest barrios of East LA who tested their way into AP Calculus

- Developing a multicultural curriculum
- Continuing to add to the body of research on cultural competence education- need to add other evidence/support

Conclusion

"Racism needs to be unveiled and dismantled if students of color are to gain parity in academic achievement" (Tatum, 1997, p. 14). Teachers must become knowledgeable about the cultural diversity embodied in the students that they instruct. Research has shown the implications on academic achievement and disciplinary actions when students feel their individual culture clashes with the school culture that they are forced to function within.

This cultural divide will continue to broaden over time if teachers and administrators do not make modifications or efforts to make the academic environment more culturally competent. It is encumbent that meeting the academic needs of all students return to the forefront of schools' vision and mission for operation. "We can whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d., p. 2).

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