CULTURAL AND RACIAL RESPONSIVENESS: INCREASING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION IN MINORITIZED YOUTH

Regardless of where they teach, educators need to be equipped with the skills necessary to engage students of all levels. As Milner (2011) states, teachers will encounter "students who bring an enormous range of diversity into the learning environment" (p. 67), each one with her/his distinct capacity and needs. Because of this, they must be mindful not only of the processes and pedagogical strategies that contribute to successful teaching and learning, but also of those that have the ability to further alienate the youth in our classrooms who are already marginalized, minoritized, and under resourced.

This paper will look at what research suggests about the needs of students of color to feel known and understood on racial, ethnic, and cultural levels by their teachers. In addition, it will look at the idea of cultural relevance, how teachers can utilize this in their classrooms, and its implications on students of color. It will further address how relational factors in schools can work to optimize achievement motivation and school engagement in learners and will provide information on teacher practices that can facilitate this kind of relationship with the student.

What is it mean to be known?

In order to look at a student's need to be known culturally and racially, we must first address what it means for students to be known and understood in general by adults in the school setting. Youths' educational experiences are highly dependent on their ability to develop personally meaningful relationships with the teachers they encounter. Their "need to belong," write Chhuon and Wallace (2014), "represents a fundamental, and importantly, individual need that is fulfilled via interpersonal structures" (p. 3) that are built with teachers. Furthermore, engagement in the classroom and a desire to learn stem from an adolescent's need for this connectedness within the school environment. This is because learning development is an

inherently relational process (Chhuon &Wallace, 2014, p. 3). This means that in order for students to develop positive associations with their education, adult relationships and connectedness with those adults are crucial.

For these connections to be possible, Chhuon and Wallace (2014) further claim that teachers need to go far beyond a "just teach" attitude and seek to know their students. Adolescents thrive on these relationships and are motivated to learn the material if they trust that teachers show an interest in them. If educators fail to know students on a deeper level, they turn teaching into a mere depersonalized act that does not meet students where they are developmentally and emotionally. This need for a more personal form of teaching is magnified when discussing students who are racially, ethnically, and culturally minoritized and marginalized. The authors cite numerous interviews in which students lamented the fact that some of their teachers only seemed to care about the information being taught, as if that was the educator's only job in school (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014).

My experience working in a diverse, urban high school has led me to believe that students want to be known. They need to have experiences with teachers who want to know about them on a level that goes beyond the classroom; even if they will no longer be a teacher's student at the end of the semester or year, they have to know that the adult would still interact with them and have a desire to know them. Though this doesn't necessarily mean students will always want to learn what is being taught, this visible desire to learn more about the student will give them the ability to respect their teacher. This respect, in turn, will greatly influence their academic engagement and will allow them to put forth the effort needed to succeed in the classroom. This is building what Milner (2011) calls "sustainable relationships" with students. Additionally, these "positive adult-youth relationships may serve as powerful catalysts that move

beyond the dyadic relationship to cultivate feelings of confidence and connectedness," especially for those students who are at risk of academic failure (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 2). This confidence in their ability as learners is so valuable in students because it helps them build a concept of self-efficacy that will permeate into other areas of their lives and education.

Culture, Race, and Ethnicity in Our Classrooms

Culture, race, and ethnicity are three large factors that shape the experience of youth as they grow up. Moreover, teachers cannot presume to believe that their classrooms are culture-less spaces or that the classes can resist their effects. Even if one chooses to ignore the role of racial and ethnic culture in her/his life, they cannot get past the fact that students in urban settings confront these issues on a daily basis. Goldenberg (2014) claims that it is crucial, then, to understand "how students of color are typically not members of the 'dominant culture'" (p. 112) because it can help show why these students are much less likely to display academic motivation or engagement compared to their peers. He goes on to say that successful White educators teaching in non-White classrooms must recognize and learn about this culture so that they may "engage with it pedagogically" (Goldenberg, 2014, p. 113). In the everyday practice of teaching, educators must not fail to recognize that a student's cultural identity manifests itself in the class. As a result, how the students view themselves as racial and ethnic beings and how this effects the way they engage in school must be taken into account. According to T.C. Howard (2010), there are tremendous consequences for being able to understand how aspects of culture play crucial roles in forming students' behaviors and attitudes (p. 52).

A teacher's comprehension of the ways that racial and ethnic culture affects students of color is essential if teachers are to work against the societal factors that have led to the marginalization of so many students. After all, if White teachers are ignorant of the cultural

barriers that prevent these students from responding to the "traditional" methods of instruction, how are these teachers supposed to ensure student success (Goldenberg, 2014, p. 126)? Though it is true that a teacher's lack of cultural competency is not the only thing preventing learners from achieving what they are capable of, this issue of culture continues to be a large reason why many students are not motivated in and disengage themselves from school (Goldenberg, 2014). As Suárez-Orozco, Qin, and Amthor (2008) suggest, it is necessary for teachers to adopt a pedagogy that recognizes their learners' distinct cultural backgrounds and needs in order to "enhance their cognitive and behavioral engagement" (p. 64). This way of teaching not only develops a student's connectedness within the school environment by feeling known and accepted, but it also demonstrates respect for the various cultural heritages found in the classroom. As mentioned above, it also gives students the tools they need to succeed academically.

To show some of the effects that a teacher's limited racial understanding has on students, Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) tell the story of Antwon, a young African American student who is struggling to stay engaged in Ms. Peterson's world literature class. Though Antwon takes interest in the class material, the almost-hostile relationship between him and his teacher clearly affects his ability to stay focused and succeed in class. As a result, Ms. Peterson is tempted "to write [him] off as another one of her students who is choosing to fail and [she] begins to construct an explanation for his increasingly lackluster performance that hinges on Antwon's apparent preference for misbehavior" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, pp. 1-3). It is tempting in any such interaction to quickly view the student and their actions as misbehavior or resistance. However, the authors later reveal Antwon's inner struggle of how to understand himself racially, a conflict that manifests itself in class disruptions and in his interpretations of Ms. Peterson's actions

toward him. In the case of cultural conflicts between students and teachers, Milner (2010) posits that the inconsistencies and incongruences created by these encounters make both teaching and learning difficult (p. 14). He then says that teachers allow opportunity gaps for students of color to continue if educators allow their “cultural ways of knowing, which are often grounded in Eurocentric cultural notions and ideologies,” to dominate in a multicultural and multiracial classroom (Milner, 2010, p. 14). What if this teacher were to continue to act on her supposition that the student is at fault for his lack of engagement and motivation rather than to assess her own cultural responsiveness? How many students do we have the potential to alienate and further push out of our educational system with this sort of mindset? It is far too easy for teachers to position themselves in a place where they can blame students for their limited success in the classroom (I am reminded of the oft-spoken fallacy, “they just don't want to learn”) rather than to critically evaluate their own pedagogy. In addition, a lack of cultural competence, especially in urban classrooms, may force students of color to be held accountable for knowing “a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them” (Delpit, 1988, p. 287). This means that before teachers can hope to engage students on an academic level, they must first have an understanding of how students like Antwon view themselves racially. Using the idea of “the culture of power,” Delpit (1988) expresses that a middle-class White teacher's limited knowledge of the role of power in dominant and non-dominant culture directly affects the quality of education given to students who are a part of the non-dominant culture. Being able to acknowledge the racial, cultural, or ethnic differences (e.g. privilege and power) in the classroom contributes to teachers' cultural responsiveness and allows them to address the needs and concerns of the students. Without this, teachers risk alienating and further marginalizing students of color. To this, Goldenberg (2014) adds that students are not provided the opportunities to

succeed if their teachers do not emphasize and recognize their cultural capital in the classrooms (p. 131).

It is clear to see that if racial and ethnic culture play huge parts in who these students are and how they identify themselves, then it is crucial for educators to not only know them on level that recognizes these things, but also to teach in such a way that respects and reaffirms the ways that students of color understand themselves to be. This has monumental effects on how much these learners are engaged and motivated to learn in the classroom. The amount of achievement that can be gained as a result of a heightened cultural awareness in teachers is without question.

Cultural Relevance

It should be quite obvious to any educator that developing into a culturally responsive (or sustaining) professional is a lifelong process. Becoming this type of teacher is important because according to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992), culturally-responsive teachers help create meaning and understanding in a classroom by using the students' culture as a starting point (as cited in Milner, 2011). “Thus,” she writes, “not only academic success, but also social and cultural success is emphasized” (p. 68). Effective teachers should not be focused on just teaching students the course content, whether it is math, English, Social Studies, or Science. Instead, teachers can utilize this non-dominant cultural capital that students carry with them every day to empower the whole child on an intellectual, social, emotional, and political level (Goldenberg, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This, in effect, serves to greatly enhance student learning and to promote student voice in the classroom.

Becoming culturally relevant in the class must start with the educator engaging in deep and reflective conversations about the role that race plays in instruction and in student learning (Milner, 2010). Knowing the self is a forerunner to understanding where the students come from

and what they deal with on a daily basis. This self-reflection further allows teachers who are a part of the dominant cultural group to see the problematic role that race plays in adult-youth relationships and in the institution as a whole (Goldenberg, 2014, p. 132). Without a critical and self-reflective attitude, teachers can only engage their students from a position that ignores the reality of cultural privilege in society, which ultimately leaves educators unable to truly relate to and understand the students. Beyond this, critically-minded teachers must make the decision to recognize their own and students' own multiple and varied identities. They must refuse to adopt a "color-blind" approach to the practice of teaching because it does nothing to recognize and comprehend the students' realities. This refusal gives teachers the strength to confront issues of race when they arise (Milner, 2011, p. 87). Milner (2011) further states that a teacher is able to build her/his cultural competence in the ways they listen to their students because this allows them to respond to learners' educational and relational needs more profoundly.

Though it is true that knowing someone culturally and racially means getting to know them on a deeper level, the relationship must begin in such a way that the adult is not prying too deep, too quickly. It must be natural. Because a student's cultural and racial history might be sensitive issues for them, teachers must tread softly and work to build their trust. As with any friendship, this interaction must be genuine. Schools that enact strategies of teacher personalism must be wary of the problems associated with these "mandated relationships." Phillippo (2012) spoke with many students who felt pressure from adult relationships that did not seem authentic (p. 456). Though the benefits of these connections with teachers is often cited, students will not respond if adults force their way into their lives. Teachers must build a rapport with students and exhibit non-judgmental attitudes toward them before students can feel comfortable opening up to them.

It is important to understand that teachers must practice culturally relevant pedagogy because it works to support students on a more real level and allows them to develop personal connections to what they are learning. This will affect the way that students engage with the curriculum and it will build in them a greater motivation for achievement. Teachers must "believe in it, and they [must] believe it is the right practice to foster, support, create, and enable students' learning opportunities" (Milner, 2011, p. 68).

Practices That Foster Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Support For Students

Being culturally responsive means being aware of the power differential present in the classroom, as Delpit (1988) notes, and knowing who the students are. These factors will play huge roles in how students are taught. Teachers need to respect them, learn from them, live life with them, engage them beyond the content, and find out who they are so that they may be prepared to develop instructional strategies and course material based on students' backgrounds. Educators cannot help students see that math is an important part of their lives if they don't know what their lives look like! The relationships developed with students help to create classroom environments that expect teachers to learn alongside students. As a result, teachers who are culturally conscious "actually use students' culture in their curriculum planning and implementation" (Milner, 2011, p. 69).

As stated above, because schools are not "culture-less" places, teachers cannot resign themselves to "color-blind" teaching practices. Rather, they must be explicit in their acknowledgment of race and racism in the school setting and be prepared to discuss it with supervisors, colleagues, students, etc. (Howard, 2010). This collaboration prepares school officials to intervene in situations where race or culture are involved. This, in turn, will show students that a teacher notices them. But, they must notice their whole being—not simply what's

obvious—and see that students carry with them a set of cultural beliefs that profoundly affect them. If teachers don't see them in the social, political, racial, ethnic, and cultural contexts in which they live, they will fail to provide students with the necessary tools to succeed (Rodríguez, 2008, p. 450). By noticing and recognizing students in context, Chhuon and Wallace (2014) assert that teachers have the opportunity to give students the benefit of the doubt, even when the relationships are not fully established. They must give youth the benefit of the doubt because it allows educators to look for the "positive qualities and possibilities" in their students (p. 15).

Furthermore, in all circumstances, especially when conflicts arise and interactions become uncomfortable or appear threatening, teachers must work to safeguard a student's success. This means being open to criticism and being aware of the myriad ways that race and culture impact our students. It means listening to them on a deeper level. Students, as Milner (2011) writes, are not always willing to learn from or listen to a teacher they do not know, one they feel disconnected to (p. 81). Incorporating time and space for personal narratives in classes is one way to mitigate this sense of disconnection from teachers and other students. Though they may seem out of place, personal narratives give teachers the opportunity to let students into their lives. As much as teachers are willing to share themselves with youth in their classrooms, students, consequently, will likely open themselves up to their teachers, allowing educators to build cultural knowledge of their students. "Story can be a compelling scaffolding tool in the classroom" (Milner, 2010, p. 68) and it helps teachers to develop the connections to students that are necessary to ensure their success.

Conclusion

Teachers must take the responsibility to teach their students. They must challenge students by helping them to "see their culture in [the] curriculum" (Milner, 2011, p. 69) and by

empowering them to see how they fit within the larger construct of society. Students' own cultural values are important in classrooms because these are the settings in which they are most frequently displayed and expressed. Because of this, teachers must recognize outbursts not necessarily as displays of resistance, but as ways of expressing students' own cultural identities and values. This is crucial to educators developing their own cultural awareness and to validating and affirming the cultural capital in others. By helping a student to feel known racially, ethnically, and culturally, teachers can help them overcome many of the anti-academic tendencies seen in students of color (Noguera, 2008). He continues by saying:

> When you talk to students who have been successful, they speak over and over again about the role that significant adults have played at various points in their lives. They talk about how these adults helped them recognize their own potential, and how they opened doors that the students previously did not know existed. (p. 33)

The relationships described cannot be undervalued. They help build self-confidence and self-efficacy in students and are not possible if teachers do not recognize the racial and cultural factors that affect them. Recognizing the non-dominant cultural capital these students have is pivotal if teachers are to create safer learning environments and better connect with learners (Goldenberg, 2014, p. 125). Without building deeper connections with students of color that can only come by engaging them racially, ethnically, and culturally, teachers will fail to help them achieve to the level they are capable and risk further marginalizing an already under resourced and minoritized population of youth.

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