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Understanding Urban Education

Emily Watkins

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Understanding Urban Education

by

Emily Watkins

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. Susan Weinstein

Department of English

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Personal Statement: *The Beginning of Dreams*

I knew as huge tears ran down his face and frustration welled in his eyes, “Z” was not going to learn how to read before he had to leave the pink tutoring center on Scott Street and walk back to his grandma’s house at five o’clock. A nine-year-old second grader stumbling over the “and”s and “will”s of a Preschool flipbook, Zion Williams* obviously had attempted to read few times outside of school. Every Thursday afternoon, we struggled to finish his comprehension questions, subtraction equations, and sight spelling words, and I began to grasp the extreme differences in our educational backgrounds and how such inequities have driven me to dream across neighborhoods and beyond socioeconomic lines.

A dramatic five-year-old instructing my class full of well-dressed dolls on an overhead with laminated worksheets, I aspired to teach prim little boys and girls for as far back as my memory takes me. My idealistic view of such a perfect, plastic classroom was shaped by my hometown’s flagship elementary, middle, and high schools. I grew up with kids just like myself, middle-class children who essentially had everything they ever needed. My parents provided my sister, my brother, and me every opportunity to be our best selves: reading *Go Dog Go* before bed each night, carting us to countless baseball practices and basketball games throughout the week, helping with homework, and making sure we could one day go to college (that they of course would pay for), turning my doll dreams into realities.

After exposure to impoverished students like Z and the rest of the Lighthouse Program, it did not take long for my dream classroom to take on a new look. Students earning an inner-city education five miles from my house did not have the same opportunities as I had by attending the public school right up the road, simply because they did not always have the means to buy a clean school shirt, much less *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The more I was exposed to lower income

*All names in this paper are pseudonyms

schools, the more I saw the importance of equality and education beyond fancy clothes and teaching gadgets. Volunteering weekly with thirty-five black children who ate reduced-price lunches and saw homework as an opportunity to be noticed and disciplined, I had no doubts in my mind, and especially in my heart, that I found my dream career.

Fifteen years after playing with properly dressed dolls and four years past tutoring poorly clothed children, the harsh reality of education inequities guides my studies at Louisiana State University. With statistics showing that by the end of third grade only 58% of students in low-income communities can solve simple multiplication and division problems compared to 84% in higher-income communities, my college years have been shaped by my interest in and the promise of education reform. The Humanities and Social Sciences College at LSU provides me, as an English major, the means to study literature, to learn rhetorical strategies, to think and to write critically, as well as to teach the next generation of students that language and literacy have the potential to lower socioeconomic gaps.

By exposing me to poverty, Z showed me more about my passions in those nine short months than twelve years of grade school ever taught me. Much like the little boy who needed as much love as edification, Kalondra, the six-year-old daughter of a heroin addict I tutored my first year at LSU, continued to deepen my compassion for poverty in education. With chocolate stuck in her teeth, she looked up at me one day, as I put away Monopoly Junior and reached for another *Pup and Pop* book, and said, “Bring me home with you.” These five trusting words breathed life into every doll I wished to teach, every class in which I enrolled, and every barrier I sought to break. I was not a phenomenal mentor; I never taught Lakeitha how to count without her fingers before she moved to yet another elementary school. Even today Terry, one of my Reading Friends I visit each week, cannot sound out the simplest of words even though he is a

repeat 1st grader. But as Kalondra and I painted pumpkins then and as Terry and I play hide-and-seek on the playground now, the imaginations of these under-resourced children expand a little, giving them hope for both today and tomorrow.

Realizing my heart belongs with children who never before used a graphing calculator or passed a level-appropriate AR test, I long to help solve poverty-propelled education inequities in the classroom. I believe that the Zs and Kalondras not only have potential to be the first in their family to graduate high school but also to go to college. Such students do not need to *pass* through grades in order to be the same age as their peers, but they need to realize that education can be bigger than the neighborhood in which one is born. I also believe in the power of literacy. Through my studies of English education, I seek to make sense of the discourses people are involved in, push students to think critically about themselves and the world, as well as find meaningful literature and effective classroom pedagogy in order to make education relevant and useful for every student of every race, income, level, background, and situation.

So as I end my final courses at LSU and look forward to student teaching next semester, I think about achieving the dreams of my naïve five-year-old self. But instead of instructing a bedroom full of bears and rabbits, this time I will look out into my classroom full of Zs, Kalondras, and Terrys and remember that education is not about making uniform learners who all behave and think in the same manner. My teaching must empower each of my students to embrace where they come from, make sense of the current world in which they live, and seek to challenge and improve societal views and institutions.

Thesis

In order to best empower each of my children to accomplish their goals and dreams in life despite their socioeconomic class, I must research the purpose of education and how it is structured. I must first define education, its potentials, and its roles in students' lives both in the classroom as well as outside school walls. When defining education, it is important to note that education yields different things for different sects of people. My paper will discuss the difference race, class, and the interworkings of the two make in education as well as the implications that stem from race and socioeconomic inequalities. After looking at education at the national level, I will zoom into the schools and evaluate mentorship within the walls of the classroom. Understanding the unique roles race and class play as a teacher in urban schools helps such educators better equip students with the necessary tools to become effective. Lastly, realizing the impact pedagogy and relevant teaching approaches can have on students makes all the difference in both a child's academic and life successes. This paper focuses on the proven strategies for engaging and supporting students in urban schools.

Defining Education

As a future teacher, I find it of utmost importance to define education and learning in order to understand my job and its purpose. Being a middle-class white student, a product of Louisiana's public education system, and currently a student at the state's flagship university, I always thought of education as the means to attain knowledge in order to succeed in the world. Like the Oxford English Dictionary, I defined education as "the process of bringing up a child, with reference to forming character, shaping manners and behaviour, etc." (OED). For me, schooling was always a sixteen-year journey to my lifetime career.

Beyond knowledge attainment, education is society's way of molding young minds, teaching children valuable life lessons (such as how to collaborate and work with others), pushing students to form their own opinions about themselves and the world, and enforcing particular behaviors and rules. The national government asserts that the purpose of schooling is to make students college or career ready, thus "standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers" (*Common Core State Standards*). Schools nationwide are expected to prepare students as young as the first grade to excel in life after graduation, just as OED defines education.

However, the more I study education during my undergraduate years at LSU, the more complicated my definition of education becomes. The more research and readings I am exposed to, the more I realize how complex the state of education really is. I have come to understand that education is not simply *the process of bringing up a child* or *the preparation for college and careers*, but instead it is a system in which certain classes of people succeed more easily than others. According to the National Center of Education Statistics report of 2010, black eighth grade students scored 26 points lower in reading and 31 points lower than white students in math on the NAEP tests (Koebler). On average, black students do not perform on the same level in math and English as their white peers. The achievement gap between races is undeniable and has dire implications.

When black students fall behind they are more apt to devalue school and are more motivated to quit school altogether. Before children even enter school, their performance on the most basic skill sets vastly affects the outcome of their education. According to the Black Star Program, by fourth grade 16% of black students read at or above proficient reading levels, and

“unfortunately, Black students throughout the rest of the country do not fare much better” (“No Future Exists”). Knowing that a child’s third grade reading level is the biggest indicator of dropout possibilities (“Campaign Overview”), these staggering gaps in reading levels prove even more devastating. When children cannot read proficiently on level by the later years of elementary school, they are at high risk of dropping out of school.

Year after year test scores and grade-level data paint the same sad reality: race impacts educational performance. Statistics showing that only 52% of black males graduate high school whereas 78% of their white male counterparts complete 12th grade indicate that education does not breed the same results for all people (“Black Male Rates”). Not only are black males more likely to drop out than white males, but they are also more likely to end up in jail after quitting school. Once they drop out of school, one white male out of ten ends up incarcerated whereas one of every four black male dropouts ends up in jail (“Black Male Rates”). If students’ 3rd grade reading level best indicates dropout rates and statistically black students do read as well as white students, black students are at a higher risk of drop out. And if black male dropout rates indicate a higher chance of imprisonment, then a black student’s 3rd grade reading points to the potential of his imprisonment. Thus, teaching students of color how to read means more than improving test scores; reading is about improving life chances.

Despite the given statistics, racial gaps in school performance point to a much deeper problem than the color of one’s skin. Research has yet to support that intelligence and IQ relate to directly to one’s race, but instead supports the notion that intelligence stems from genetics, socioeconomic status, and the environment in which one is born (Fulwood). This paper acknowledges that education gaps do not exist solely between blacks and whites but rather they exist amongst all races and because of many factors, such as socioeconomic status. Thus, it is not

an exhaustive survey of every gap, context, and inequality in education but rather a consideration of the existing black-white gaps commonly found within urban-suburban contexts.

Defining Urban Education

In order to fully define and understand the meaning of *urban education*, it is important to consider both the explicit as well as the implicit nature of the term. According to the OED definitions of *urban* and *education*, the term *urban education* literally means education (“the process of bringing up a child, with reference to forming character, shaping manners and behaviour, etc”) in urban areas (“relating to, situated or occurring in, or characteristic of, a town or city, esp. as opposed to the countryside”) (OED). Opposed to suburban and rural education, which is the formation of knowledge and behavior in residential areas surrounding a city, urban education is the schooling of students who live within the city. Explicitly, suburban and urban educations do not seem to differ much from one another: one educates students who live in the suburbs of a city while the other educates students who live in the city. Implicitly, however, these two means of education could not be more different from one another.

Before further consideration of urban education, it is beneficial to analyze its counterpart: suburban education. Studying the coded language teachers use to discuss race without using race words, Dyan Watson claims that race is the major dividing factor of suburban and urban education. “In my study, each teacher used middle-class whites, encapsulated in the term, suburban, as the normative reference group” (*Norming Suburban*, 1987). The researched group of teachers substitutes the word ‘suburban’ for white middle-class students. Watson explains how educators view suburban children as the “normal group” who “serve as the marker of perceived correct beliefs, values, and behaviors” (1987). Essentially the way teachers talk about children and school implies that the values of white middle-class students (labeled as *suburban*) are the

standard to which schools are held. Suburban culture establishes the norm that all educational systems refer to as well as the standards the rest of students are compared to.

Norming suburban education according to the values of the middle class not only situates suburban schools and the value of suburban culture as the “normal,” but it also asserts that suburban schools are different than urban schools in regards to race. Watson goes on to explain how the teachers he interviewed do not explicitly talk about race, but instead use code words: “norming suburban involves talking about race without using race labels” (988). The implications of Watson’s study prove that suburban and urban, which inherently are not defined by a particular race, become code words for discussing race in education. Educators associate suburban education with strictly white, middle class children whose skin color affords them the cultural capital to set the norms of school; contrastively, urban students are non-white children who are not necessarily raised with the same beliefs, culture, and values as their suburban peers.

Across America suburban schools indicate white neighborhood schools whereas urban schools refer to minority-populated inner city settings. In another one of his articles, Dyan Watson asks and seeks to answer an important question: if urban schools are just city schools “why do people use the term “urban” when what they really mean are schools with majority black and Latina/o populations?” (“What do you mean”, 48). In order to answer this question and better understand the differences in urban and suburban education, Watson interviews a group of seventeen teachers, asking them to define *urban education*. One teacher’s answer, which was not an atypical response, stated, “urban students come from an environment where they can’t see the value of education. They can’t see why it matters, because everyone that they know, everything that they do, has nothing to do with having an education” (49). To this teacher urban education is

the education of children who do not care about education because things learned in school are worthless in urban children's day-to-day life.

Scholars such as Gloria Ladson Billings and Chance Lewis would argue against the notion that urban students come from an environment where education is not valued; maybe all students want to value education but education is not valuable to all students. If education cannot seem to assist or at least acknowledge all students upbringing, the problem of failing school turns away from the student and onto the school. Urban schools differ from suburban schools in many ways beyond student race; they are "characterized by student discipline problems, poor student health, and limited access to supplemental learning resources" (Lewis, 131). By and large urban students come from under-resourced families and attend under-resourced institutions that inadequately provide and reflect their student populations. Historically, school culture and values have been based off society's dominant middle-class suburban culture; those students outside such cultures tend to struggle in school.

Since suburban cultures are the sect of people who set the standard for schooling, urban students fall behind when they do not perform in accordance to suburban standards. Teachers, who operate under the normed suburban labeling, form hierarchies that situate suburban students over urban students. Decoded, this means white upper- and middle-class students trump nonwhite students according to the norm. Lisa Delpit, a key urban education researcher and writer, explains how the white middle-class shapes the entire value system of education: "Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power" (Delpit, 283). Educational systems (all systems for that matter) that lean

heavily on the values and culture of one sect of people form a hierarchy impossible for the minority to overcome.

If the norm within education systems is based upon suburban, white middle-class values, then it is hard for non-white students raised with different beliefs, practices, and experiences to succeed within that system. For example, white children raised with the value of individualism are more likely to succeed in a nationalized school system that tests students based on individual performance and achievement on standardized tests than a black child who is raised to value the community as a whole and collaborative efforts over the individual self. Instead of valuing the individual, black culture values community as a whole.

The structures of white and black communities date as far back as slavery. The plantation system gave one white man and his family the power over hundreds of black people. Slaves, often separated from their own families, quickly bonded with the other black slaves, building their own community for kinship and survival. The same constructs are seen today. Whites who make up the majority of American culture are not ostracized within American society so there is less of a need to band together and create common ground with one another. The white man has the privilege of operating as an individual; a black man cannot easily operate as an individual outside of his identity as a minority member. America's marginalized black race is identified within society by their importance as a whole; as such, black culture values community.

Communal aspects of black culture create certain norms that are specific to its members. Oftentimes black people call their friends and even people they have never met before aunty, grandma, cousin, and brother regardless of their blood relation. The black community uniquely links large groups of people together who are not necessarily blood related. When all these *family* members get together in the grocery store, church, middle of the street, or even hallways

of school, there is immediate recognition, greeting, and conversation. White teachers who are not used to such an interconnected culture can easily mistake these fabricated relations as purposeful deceit. School does not advocate this idea of complete community where the hallways look like a family reunion.

White teachers also mistake black students' loud voices and communication patterns as disrespectful and unruly. Schools misinterpret many intrinsic black behaviors as wrong. In fact, Dania Francis' article "Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice?" finds that teachers perceive black girls as behavior problems. Teachers more often label black girls as the most disruptive and least attentive race of students (Francis). These teachers who overwhelmingly label black girls as disruptive judge student behavior based on white culture behavior and norms. Unlike white culture, black culture communicates in rather disorderly and unruly patterns. This key difference between white and black cultures can be seen in their neighborhoods. Drive through a white community and chances are few people will be outside and even less will be outside talking to their neighbors. Drive through a black neighborhood and more than likely people will be outside talking loudly to one another, children playing and screaming, adults yelling friendly things across the street (citation). Black cultures, neighborhoods, and households are inherently louder than white communities. Teachers often mistake black girls' learned behaviors as troublesome.

These children who operate outside of America's normed white culture are every much a part of a viable cultures as white students, it just happens that their home culture is not the dominant culture that set the standards within education. In America, "the student population is growing more racially and ethnically diverse (rising from 22% in the 1970s to 39% in 2003, with 64% in urban schools)" ("Urban, But Not Too Urban," 23). As urban schools grow more diverse, the potential success of their students molding to the standard of suburban cultures decreases.

Students raised in minority communities have difficulties assimilating to mainstream culture. These students enter school with certain beliefs and behaviors that are different from school norms and are labeled as behavior and academic problems. The more number of races introduced to urban contexts, the less white and middle-class these school become, widening the gap between suburban homogeneity and urban diversity.

Another major aspect of suburban education that is deemed the norm of all educational, as well as societal, systems is white middle-class dialect. Called everything from Standard English to Proper English to Mainstream American English, the tongue of white upper- and middle-class societies sets the linguistic norm for American society. Educationally speaking, Standard English (SE) is the dialect taught in American schools. Students are expected to read, write, and speak Standard English in order to do well in school. Suburban children who grow up in households that speak Standard English have no problem functioning within this dialect. Children who are raised in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and other dialect-speaking households start kindergarten without the rules of SE internalized. AAVE and other minority dialects are not better or worse than SE dialects, they are just not the normed tongue of American society. The more diverse a community of students is linguistically, the harder it will be for the group of students to learn the language that the educational system as a whole values.

Another important aspect in which urban schools typically differ from suburban school is the average income of their students. In Watson's study of race words used by teachers, he states, "for the participants in this study, urban teaching primarily means teaching poor students of color" (1990). The word urban brings financial connotations as well as racial ones. Statistically, "the number of poor students is concentrated in the nation's largest urban schools, with more than 56% of students in those schools on free and reduced-price lunch" (Watson, 23). There are

so many implications of students' wealth/poverty on the culture of a school and its performance overall, but for the sake of urban vs. suburban definitions, the more impoverished student populations are, the less likely the school culture will operate in the same way middle-class cultured schools operate. Lacking financial resources, urban schools typically do not have as many funds to support teachers and students in the same way more wealthy suburban schools do.

Teacher: Mentorship

American public education hopes to provide every student, whether she attends an urban school or he attends a suburban school, the same rights to an education regardless of his or her race, socioeconomic class, beliefs, values, or academic knowledge. Despite the system's failure to adequately provide each child with the same education, all hope is not lost. If education seeks to prepare every child for college or career while building fundamental social and relational skills regardless of the child's background, the classroom teacher must be a starting point. It is impossible to fund all schools across America equally or to ensure all parents are involved in their children's education; the educational system cannot not guarantee that each child will be fed at night or clothed in the morning. Although schools have little to no control over students' lives before and after the bell rings, schools can monitor and control what learning takes place inside the classroom. Thus the teacher is arguably every child's greatest hope to a meaningful education.

Although teachers do hold potential to fairly educate all students who step into their classrooms, there are many uncontrollable factors teachers must face. Many children enroll in public schools in order to graduate, but more than a diploma, many students most need positive role models. "Aside from academic knowledge," Mrs. Jennings, a 5th grade Baton Rouge public

school black teacher, explains, “these students need life skills. So I don’t just end up having to teach these students how to read and write, but I also have to teach my students basic skills of interaction, communication, and education.” Having taught since 2005, Mrs. Jennings has seen far more than her fair share of student emotional needs stemming from lack of parental involvement. “These parents do not have the time nor resources to help with their children’s homework when they are working night shifts and they themselves can not read past a middle school level.” Mrs. Jennings understands that her classroom parents do not always have the time, resources, or knowledge to assist their children with homework, projects, and extracurricular activities. After years of teaching, she now knows that her classroom must be as much about supporting her students as grading her students. Effective teachers must learn which tools certain students are missing and how they can meet both the academic and elementary the needs of all students.

Teachers like Mrs. Jennings who think education is helping students build foundational skills in order to become working members of society fear standardized assessments and scores. Teachers find themselves spending less time providing life tools for students and more time teaching mandated standards and curriculums. Research suggests that culturally relevant teaching that leads to student self worth and knowledge must not take away instruction time to be effective. Gloria Ladson-Billings’ *The Dream Keeper* observes the effect culturally relevant text and diverse curriculum has on students of all backgrounds. But in order for teachers to successfully utilize racially diverse curriculum and texts, they must understand their leading role in the classroom. Teachers must engage in a struggle against status quo and be “cognizant of themselves as political beings” (Billings, 128). Billings explains how effective teachers of multicultural children must not ignore the cultural, economic, and racial structures of power that

take place in society. Teachers must instead openly talk about, wrestle with, and fight against these harsh realities.

As the person of power in urban classrooms, the teacher must facilitate discussions in which the students take realities of racial inequalities presented in novels, nonfiction works, the news, students' lives and discuss why society works the way it does. At the same time, successful teachers of students of colors do not approach cultural texts through the lens of cultural deficiency and helplessness. Teachers must be honest without making excuses for students; teachers must push students to rise above their circumstances, refusing to accept the status quo. Effective urban teachers, particularly white teachers, cannot have these racially filled conversations about power without first building trust and rapport amongst minority students.

Despite the ever-growing diversity of public school children, public school teachers lack diversity. The ethnicities of adults within school systems across America fail to represent the ethnic makeup of the children attending schools. Teachers are overwhelmingly a homogenous group of white middle class women ("Silenced Dialogue"). White teachers in urban schools face many challenges, such as trust, when trying to best relate and affect students of color. The most passionate white middle-class teacher who yearns to teach all children of color lacks shared experiences with her students. Common experiences (struggles, beliefs, cultures, dialects, etc.) would bring about trust, familiarity, and connections. John, a white male in LSU's English pre-service teaching program comments on how as a teacher of black students, he lacks a sense of cultural relation to his students:

Lately I've been thinking about race in the classroom. I've been placed at my old middle school this semester and there is a majority of black students. My mentor teacher is black too. Her students seem to have a lot of respect for her. She has a really good rapport with

them and they seem to enjoy learning from her. One thing that I've noticed, though is that she can relate to them and their own experiences in ways that I can't. Yesterday she was giving a mini lesson on mood and tone and she was explaining how they can be seen in church when the praise... something song is sung and how it differs from when the solo is sung later and old people start crying and falling out.

John questions his ability to fully relate to his black students in ways that make education real, relevant, and meaningful as a white male who holds all cultural and social capital because of the skin he wears. The overwhelmingly white demographic of teachers presents a challenge in connecting student learning with real life experiences.

The racial makeup of school staff not only leaves white teachers to question their abilities, but it makes black students do the same. Students growing up in schools where all teachers and administrators are white but cafeteria workers and custodians are black begin to question structures and purposes. As much as school encourages them to rise above their circumstances and skin color, students are plagued with the same reality: the people of power in social institutions are disproportionately white. Minority students are also poorly represented in higher-level classes and greatly represented in lower-level classes, which is somewhat more discouraging than the minority representation within school staffs. When schools track classes, the majority of AP, honors, and higher-level classes consist of mostly white students and a few minorities. The majority of lower-level or “regular” classes, however, contain a disproportionately large number of minorities. Again, students of color are left to question their ability to rise above status quo when they are surrounded by a misrepresented educational system.

Is there hope? Although some argue that only black teachers most effectively teach black students and although there are undoubtedly advantages blacks teaching blacks (i.e. John's example), plenty of research supports the notion that all races of teachers can teach any and all races of students. A teacher must not change his skin color to be affective. Billings explains how teachers can teach in diverse communities: "Teachers with culturally relevant practices see themselves as part of the community, see teaching as giving back to the community, and encourage their students to do the same" (41). Compassionate teachers who want to be culturally relevant and effective must begin to see themselves as part of the urban community where they teach. White teachers can begin to build trust amongst black students when they refuse to see themselves as a superior or outcast and begin to position themselves within the students' community. Teachers become culturally relevant when they value the culture of their students, give back to the culture's community, and teach their students to do the same thing. In order for white teachers to attain cultural relevance, they must not ignore the racial and cultural powers at play but must accept, respect, and admire the culture in which they teach.

Teachers, especially white teachers in urban areas, must use their power inside the classroom for good. The power struggles that exist in society also can also exist inside the classroom ("Silenced Dialogue"). To combat and prevent power dominations teachers alongside students should question why society works the way it does. Ineffective teachers often imply, "*I am the teacher and you are the student; I am white and you are not; do what I say; I am right and you are wrong.*" Mrs. Coldwell, a white teacher in Baton Rouge urban schools as well as a facilitator of Dialogue on Race, often thinks of her role as a white person and what it means. "As a white teacher, there are racially charged things that go on in my classroom that I do not even understand sometimes." She speaks of instances when there are disconnects between her as the

white teacher and her students as the black students. Mrs. Coldwell explains, “So on the first day of school I open the gates with the *‘I’m white and the majority of you aren’t’* discussion. From that point on, my class is established as a safe space to talk about race and its workings.”

Acknowledging the racial workings of a classroom helps build community and communication. When students are given power on the very first day of school to establish who they are as a learner both because of and despite of their race, they will begin to understand the power they hold inside the classroom. Conversations as the one Mrs. Coldwell describe do not immediately instill student power and illuminate student/teacher prejudices, but such dialogues do help to break down walls and build up trust. White teachers undeniably have power not only in society, but also in the classroom. If used correctly, the power can be used to promote change instead of continue the status quo.

Potential of Relevant Education: Pedagogical Practices

Alongside building trusting relationships with students, teachers in urban settings (as well as teachers in *every* setting) must be aware of the pedagogical choices they make in order to engage students in beneficial pedagogy. As important as teacher-student relationships are, if teachers do not present student with meaningful instruction, their role in the classroom becomes nothing more than a positive role model. Although teaching *is* often times role modeling, teachers must also take seriously their responsibility to educate. Performance gaps within urban contexts clearly indicate that education cannot be a one-size-fits-all. Instruction that values the culture of middle-class America seems to work suburban schools with white populations, but the same instruction is not yielding the same results in an urban school with majority black student population. First and foremost, teachers must establish a classroom culture that recognizes the

race, cultures, and backgrounds of all of its students. Curriculum in urban settings must become culturally congruent to its students and their lives making school a needed and applicable entity.

Some argue the performance discrepancies of urban and suburban schools lie within the cultural congruence of the school curriculum. Billings states that this “notion of cultural congruence is meant to signify the ways in which the teachers altered their speech patterns, communication styles, and participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students’ own culture” (Ladson-Billings, 18). Middle class children who grow up speaking Standard English (SE) and go to the suburban school down the road from their neighborhood enter these schools that prize their home dialect, values, and beliefs; school is culturally congruent to suburban home life. Students whose home lives do not reflect middle-class America see very little connection between school and their upbringing; school is oftentimes not congruent to the urban culture in which they were raised.

Students outside the culture of power enter school and are told their speech is not correct, the way they behave themselves is not appropriate, and their interactions with each other and adults are not acceptable. Ladson-Billings notes that dialects, such as African-American English (AAE), are blatantly not valued in schools: “even white scholars who have looked carefully at language communities suggest that schools place little value on what is termed the “nonstandard English” that African American children bring to school even though the language is rich, diverse, and useful in both community and work setting” (Ladson-Billings, 19). School devalues such dialects by teaching and testing only SE as well as correcting students when they use dialects other than SE. To deny students’ cultures in the classroom is to say, “Where you come from is not correct and has nothing to do with education. Your life outside of school should not be brought into the building.”

The problem with cultural congruency within education, however, lies beneath the problem of cultural congruence in the workplace. The school culture that values SE as the *correct* dialect mirrors American society that also promotes SE as the language of success. In order to get into college, get a good job, and have a stable career (the goals of education, remember), one must be able to speak and write using Standard English. So naturally in order for education to prove meaningful, it too must value the culture of power. So how can school rightfully value the cultures and backgrounds of all students while giving them every opportunity to get a useful education?

The lack of cultural representation in schools must be combatted with culturally congruent instruction. In order for instruction to be beneficial for all students, it must equip all students with the tools to succeed within the culture of power all the while diversely representing all students. In his memoir about being a white middle class teacher in Chicago's urban schools, Gregory Michie asks himself if his classroom encompasses the diverse cultures of his students: "Can students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, on the bookshelves, on the walls? Are connections being made between lessons in school and the world outside it?" (Michie, 198). Culturally congruent classrooms must not deny SE in order to become effective, they simply must reflect its students and their life experiences.

Reading novels about white characters that face middle-class struggles written by dead white guys will more than likely lose the interest of a class full of black middle and high school students. Novels, such as Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, that more closely reflect urban students' culture through their characters, themes, authors, and settings teach students how to think critically, write analytically, and master the same standards the same way Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* can. When students begin to see their lives in the *official* curriculum, their

“real-life experiences are legitimized” (Ladson-Billings, 127). If textbooks only display the lives of particular cultures, especially the cultures of power, students internalize ostracism in such a way that makes school seem irrelevant.

School becomes more relevant to urban students when urban life becomes a part of the curriculum. Having students read books such as Candi Dawson Boyd’s *Charlie Pippin* about an eleven-year old African American girl, Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Harper Lee’s *How to Kill a Mockingbird*, as well as poetry selections from Langston Hughes and Rita Dove, gives teachers the opportunities to explore different cultures and ask questions about race in society. Teachers can successfully help students question appropriate behaviors and beliefs through text and curriculum. If the CCSS expects students to “cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” by the 9th grade, then 9th grade teachers could ask students to discuss the effects race has on character development found in racially relevant books. When students find no relationship between school pedagogy and their lives, they begin to believe that school has no real benefit to their lives. Being able to talk about and relate to real-life issues sparks student interests as they begin to feel valued and understood and are more likely to take interest in school and less likely to drop out of school that does not value them.

Culturally relevant reading lists are obviously not the fix-all of education achievement gaps, but they are the beginning of culturally relevant curriculums. Teachers must not only teach relevant texts, but they must also give up power within their classroom, allowing students’ voices to be heard. Students are used to transmit instruction where the teacher holds all knowledge and simply transmits it to students. Although teachers do and should hold skills that students do not yet have (if this was not the case, what is the point of teaching?), they are not the only experts

inside the classroom. Successful teachers of African American students (and really successful teachers of *all* students), should “rely heavily on student interpretation of these text to come to meaning” (Ladson-Billings, 132). Minority students are used to being told what is right and wrong and are hardly used to holding the power of a classroom. Teachers must be willing to prod analytical thinking and interpretations that position the students as experts.

When teachers educate themselves on the local cultures of the students they are teaching, it becomes easier for teachers to understand students’ strengths, giving them more power. Oftentimes students are not given power in the classroom, because they are not seen as experts. Teachers who understand each individual student understand that they are not the only powerful and knowledgeable person in the classroom. Understanding student’s unique culture, knowledge, strengths, and expertise he/she brings to the classroom makes student-led instruction enjoyable and beneficial. Smagorinsky’s *Teaching English By Design*, details many student-led activities that allow students to control their own learning and teachers to guide students learning. Student authority can be as simple as appointing students to take attendance, to care for housekeeping, pass out materials. The more authority students have in the classroom, the more they take ownership of their education.

When students who have never before seen their cultures represented in school not only start to relate to the curriculum but are also ask to interpret such texts, they are given power in the classroom that they have never before held. Through her many years of teaching students of different races than herself, Mrs. Coldwell understands the effects power plays within a classroom and learned to play around with power, handing it to her students. “My students are not used to a white woman asking their opinion. They expect me as the white teacher to tell them

the right answers.” To combat such thinking, Mrs. Coldwell often makes pedagogical choices that reverse the power roles of her classroom.

Teaching is not telling, but instead, it is probing student thought and analysis. All too often students are told their opinion does not matter, especially students who come from neighborhoods that are constantly told they do not matter or have no chance to succeed. Again, Mrs. Coldwell understands the role race plays in the world, and openly addresses such issues from the very first day of school. “My personality allows me to be quite blunt,” Mrs. Coldwell explains, “I stand in front of my students and talk about how I am white but that does not mean I have all the answers nor do I have all the experiences that allow me to understand where my students are coming from.” Being so open and honest with her students from the beginning, Mrs. Coldwell makes her room a safe space to dialogue openly about race and its effects. Successful teachers must be willing to talk about important classroom dynamics, such as race, background, and beliefs, and allow students to shape pedagogy in such a way that teachers and students are learning from one another.

Instead of teaching her English IV students what a ballad is by showing them an actual ballad written by another DWG (dead white guy), she introduces the term *ballad*, presents her students with 2Pac’s “Dear Momma,” and asks them to become the experts. “Is this a ballad?” she asks, “Why or why not? Y’all tell me.” As simple as this instructional choice seems, switching the power roles in the classroom changes how students view themselves and their education. Again, this is as easy scaffolding student questions with more questions, forcing them to think for themselves, realizing the majority of the time they can answer their own questions. Ladson-Billings observes that when teachers recycle questions (answering student questions with more questions), students then figure out they are “knowledgeable and capable of answering

their own questions as well as their classmates” (Ladson-Billings, 130). Students, especially students that have little power in society, are not asked to think critically about things enough. When students become informed, thinking citizens of society, they begin to question why society is structured the way it is.

Teachers must also build their curriculum to not only allow students to be the experts, but also shape their class in such that allows student voices to be heard. Again reflecting on his experiences as a white teacher in urban schools, Michie states, “We really have to understand these kids as human people who have basic needs that are not being answered” (Michie, 150). One of the hardest parts of teaching is being able to take a class full of students with different learning levels, figure out where each student stands (not only academically but also emotionally) as well as where each student needs to be by the end of the year, and working to get each student to that desired place. Pedagogy within a classroom must reflect the different learning styles and basic needs of each student. If education really is the upbringing of students, pedagogy must stretch far beyond basic book knowledge. Classroom curriculum must contextualize skills within the meaningful contexts.

Lastly, and somewhat most importantly, for classroom pedagogy to be effective in urban schools teachers *must* challenge students. From the moment a student walks through the door teachers must set a high level of learning and achievement. Students all too often perform at low standards because they are held at too low standards. Urban students spend the majority of their education career hearing that black students do not perform as well as white students, black students are more likely to drop out than white students, black students do not value education like white students do. Over time the statements and statistics take a toll; students begin to believe that they cannot perform. Teachers oftentimes lower their standards for black students,

also believing that they do not have the capability to perform like other students. To combat and dismiss such thinking, teachers must create rigorous, culturally relevant curriculum that forces all students to work (not just busywork, but meaningful oftentimes-infuriating *work*).

All too often education stands as a one-size-fits-all structure. The system of education remains the same regardless of the students it is trying to educate. All students are not the same and certainly do not all have the same needs. When schools across America are uniformed to look and perform in the same manner regardless of the culture, socioeconomic status, language, race, and abilities of their students, education fails to meet the needs of its students; education fails to bring up all students. Instead, when schools and teachers begin to understand students, where they are, where they need to be, and how to get them there, real learning takes place. Understanding cultures and sects of people - whether mainstream, middleclass, urban, rural, or suburban – leads to deeper knowledge, growth, and change. All students do not have the same resources, skills, and needs and therefore should not be taught in the same way. The combination of effective teachers and relevant pedagogy, however, has the potential to bring up *all* children.

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