

Exploring Diversity Issues at Explore Charter School
What it Means to Be a White Teacher for Minority Children

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Background Overview

According to Edwards, “next to parents, teachers are the single most influential factor in the lives of children” (Edwards, 2011, p. 494). These individuals have the ability to shape both the mind and the spirit of young people and help them determine who they will become as they grow up. Due to this significant influence, it is critical that teachers understand their role and how what they do, how they teach, what they think, and how they treat others can either help or hinder the success of their students, both inside and outside of the classroom. As we examine the important role of a teacher, it is equally important to examine the role that race plays in the relationship between teacher and student. Many people in today’s society believe that race is obsolete and racism is dead, and therefore it has been easy for many to turn a color-blind eye away from the role that race plays out in our schools. The subsequent paragraphs seek to explore the implications for having a predominately white teaching staff in schools with predominantly students of color and how this phenomenon has affected the success and perceptions of minority students across the nation.

Research has found that, “as student populations become more racially diverse, the teaching profession is becoming less so. In 2002, about 40% of the children enrolled in our nation’s schools were students of color. At the same time, 90% of public school teachers were white, and 40% of U.S. schools had no teachers of color” (Patterson, 2007, p. 20). Explore Charter School in Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York is a specific example of these staggering statistics. At Explore, 61% of the teaching staff is White, along with most of the administration and other central staff members (Kleinfield, 2012), while 98% of the student body is African American or Hispanic (Chu, 2012). According to one student, “it seems like it’s black kids and

white teachers” here (Kleinfield, 2012). In addition to this, over 80% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price subsidized lunch, showing the rate of poverty that lies in the district as well (Kleinfield, 2012).

Unprepared and Unaware

Race is a very sensitive subject for not only students, but parents as well. According to the New York Times, “Explore’s administration neither encourages nor discourages discussion of race” and, “rarely is it openly examined” (2012). Many of the teachers are at a loss for how to address the concept of race for many reasons. First, many of the teachers at Explore are young and come from different backgrounds than the students they teach (Kleinfield, 2012). Second, teacher preparation programs are not preparing white teachers to effectively handle race, class, and other cultural issues in the classroom. Lastly, white teachers, who comprise the majority of the faculty at Explore, have the privilege of not having to consider race in the story-lines of their day-to-day lives.

As stated above, the white teachers of these minority children, have a very difficult time relating to the students that they teach because they do not share similar life experiences nor do they come from similar backgrounds. One student’s mother is quoted in an article saying, “What do they know of our lives? They may be good teachers, but what do they know? You’re coming from Milwaukee. You went to Harvard” (Delmonte, 2012). Her questions are all valid and answering these questions plays a significant role in allowing teachers to understand who their students are and what they must do as a human being and as a teacher. But unfortunately, “the white teachers can’t relate as much to us no matter how they try—and they really try”, says one Explore School student (Delmonte, 2012). Teachers need to get to know their students, their

families, and the communities in which they live in order to gain a sense for who they are, where they come from, what they deal with daily, and what needs to be done as a result (Ladson-Billings).

An additional issue in confronting race in the classroom is that teacher-preparation programs do not equip teachers with the knowledge, experience, and skills to effectively address race in school with and in relation to their students. According to Ladson-Billings, “there is very little reliable literature on preparing teachers for diversity. And almost nothing exists on teacher preparation specifically for African American students” (2009, p. 8). This lack of diversity education is clearly evident at Explore. Corey Gray, a white teacher in his first year stated that discussing race “could be a Pandora’s box to some extent. Is there a proper effective way to bring it in? There probably is. Do I know the way? No, I don’t” (Kleinfield, 2012). Another teacher noted that, “it was hard on [him] as a first year teacher and not knowing what to do” when racial issues broke out in class. He knows he should do more, but is unsure of what doing more would look like and consist of (Kleinfield, 2012).

Lastly, white teachers are privileged in not having to think about diversity and what being a different color means. These teachers have benefited from the educational system in which they work, and thus believe that the experiences and teaching that they received is the model of success for their students. However, white teachers are often unaware of how this educational system privileges the white race and how they themselves are contributing to the system. As Vavrus describes, “teachers who have not examined their identity and racial structures are likely to use teaching strategies that have worked well in mainstream settings, thereby perpetuating the status quo and academic achievement discrepancy between students of color and white students

(as cited in Williams, 2008, p. 34). Furthermore, white teachers must learn to not only see themselves as white teachers, but as individuals, “who are members of the larger dominant group and who are advantaged by and implicated in the maintenance of an educational system that advantages them and students who are like them” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 662). Without acknowledgement of how they fit into the picture of race, teachers cannot expect to discuss racial issues without bias.

Standing on a Pedestal

Another implication of having a predominately white teaching staff is the danger of thinking down upon students and comparing them to oneself or to others. It has been found that students are very perceptive and many of them, “know on some level, whether it is intuitive, somatic, or otherwise, how their teachers feel about them”. Therefore, teachers not only need to watch their demeaning words, but also their action or inaction and how it may be perceived by the children (McKenzie, 2009, p. 135). An eighth grade explore student recalls a time when she was talking to his teacher and she mentioned that she liked to listen to the rapper Eminem. She said that her teacher said that was ghetto. “She was white” she says, “I was pretty upset. I was wondering why she would say something like that. She apologized, but it sticks with me” (Kleinfield, 2012).

Humiliating, shaming, disrespecting, etc., like in the incident above, are all covert abuse behaviors exhibited by teachers, many without their conscious knowledge or reflection (McKenzie, 2009). When the self-reflection from the teacher to the student is negative, as in the incident described above, “it is extremely difficult to maintain an unblemished sense of self-worth” (Rosenblum and Travis, p. 226). Although the teacher apologized, her words will stay

with the student, further contributing to the negative stereotypes and perceptions of African Americans that will be reflected in their self-image.

An additional issue that arises as a result of looking down on others is that of deficit thinking. Teachers who have a deficit mentality have very low expectations for poor and minority students and their families and base their judgements on stereotypes. A stereotype is a prediction that “members of a group will behave in certain ways” and assumes, “that all individuals in a category possess the same characteristics” (Rosenblum and Travis, 2012, p. 336). A parent at Explore recalls a phone conversation with a white teacher who was so surprised at how involved she was in her child’s education. The teacher was quoted in saying, “Oh, you’re so involved” which was quite patronizing to the parent because she thought that parental support was expected at the school (Kleinfield, 2012).

Because of the stereotype that poor and minority parents are uninvolved in the education of their children, the teacher was shocked that she encountered a parent who was involved. Unfortunately, because of such stereotypes, many urban schools do not perceive parents as allies in the educational process, but rather as “roadblocks” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 144). They are, “frequently perceived as lacking the resources (i.e. experience, know-how, etc.) to provide meaningful home educational experiences for children” (Lopez et al, 2001, p. 256). It was very clear that this particular Explore parent cared about their child’s education and the white teacher was shocked as a result.

Deficit thinking also can transcend into the classroom leading teachers to ignore the true educational needs of the students and expect failure (Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, p. 427). According to Flessa, “this focus on failure is a potential self-fulfilling prophecy” as students

begin to buy-in to the perceptions that teachers have set for them, either consciously or subconsciously (2009, p. 334). One of the greatest underlying issues leading to the deficit thinking theory is that teachers and administrators, “have not looked into the face[s] of [poor and minority children] and seen beauty and potential” (as cited in Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, p. 414). Rather, these educators, “emphasize what children affected by poverty lack, rather than what they possess” and, “emphasize what they cannot do (not what they can do)” (Flessa, 2009, p. 341, 336). Teachers see their students through a glass half empty lens and assume that since their glass of potential is so empty and their glass of social and personal difficulties is so full, that these children will inevitably fail and there is nothing that the teacher can do to avoid it. Teachers do not perceive these students as capable and competent and thus do not believe that they can be successful in the educational setting (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 142).

Open Arms

Many teachers accept the myth that, “America is a white nation that is becoming more diverse” and that, “their mission as teachers was to help these diverse “others” to be like them” (King, 2000). Student at Explore constantly struggle with this issue. As reported by the Times, “outside the school the kids are being reminded of what their race is,” and “when they come to school, it’s as if they are asked to ignore who they are” (2012). Teachers with a color-blind eye fail to realize that, “different children have different needs”. This misperception does not allow them to truly see their students through the lens of their racial and ethnic differences, which is detrimental toward “their ability to meet their educational needs” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 37).

According to Flessa, “students comes to school with values and behaviors that are in direct conflict with the behaviors valued at school” (2009, p. 354). Because of this, it is crucial for teachers to embrace the home culture of the child in order to meet at a common ground from which to start their education. According to Ladson-Billings, “culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (2009, p. 19). In order to stay relevant, teachers must look beyond themselves to discover teaching practices that enable minorities to be academically successful while still maintaining their cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20). However, this practice requires teachers to actually see color and see culture and urges them to refuse to cast a color-blind eye on their student body and acknowledge their differences and what they mean for education and success (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Furthermore, effective teachers understand that different cultures have differing views of education and those beliefs may be affecting student achievement as dictated by the terms that the school and state have set in place for what success is. Villenas and Deyhle add that often, “kids feel that they have to choose between family and culture and school success” (1999, p. 422). Teachers need to be prepared to open their minds toward cultural differences and learn to, “work with rather than against the community” in order to develop a toolbox with which to make sense of what happens in the classroom and learn to judge success in terms of the culture rather than in terms of collective society (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 147). Research has found that, “teachers who understand and ensure cultural competence use minority students' "cultural funds of knowledge and practices to enrich both culture and intelligence, instead of the current

practice, which is to see cultural knowledge as not useful or as an obstacle" (as cited in Amos, 2011, p. 482).

The Prison School

A final implication for schools without diverse teaching staffs, involves the criminalization and militarization of the student body. As stated by the *Times*, because the Explore School staff was, "convinced that student unruliness was impeding learning, the school installed a rigid discipline system. Infractions — for transgressions like calling out without permission, frowning after being given a demerit, being off task — lead to detention for upper-school students. On some days, 50 students land in detention, a quarter of the upper school" (2012). Because of this zero tolerance system, "some students have taken to referring to Explore as "the prison school" (Kleinfield, 2012). In addition, students that exhibit model behavior are accepted into the Respect Corps and are given a t-shirt to display their respected place over the rest of the student body.

According to Brewer and Heitzeg, there is, "no dispute that the poor and people of color, particularly African American, are dramatically overrepresented" in the criminal justice system (2008, p. 628). Lipman agrees and argues that it is dangerous to use language and implement practices in our schools that are used in the prison and military systems for fear that students will feel like delinquents if they do not live up to the impossible standards (2003). Using demerits, having an elite group of respectable students in a Corp, zero-tolerance policies, wearing uniforms, and punishing students for expressing themselves, as evidenced in Explore, continues the practice of assimilation of students of color and exhibits the need for white teachers to control their African American counterparts. Such "schools teach competitive individualism and

unquestioning submission to authority, Lipman says, and you can lose your personal identity and purpose when you continually try to conform (2003, p. 347).

Recommendations

My second recommendation is for the teachers to uncover their potential biases and see the ways in which their personal privileges play a role in the treatment and stereotypes of minority students. Hyland believes that “it has become clear that successful teachers of students of color must not only incorporate and respect cultural practices and values, but must be able to understand and critique the oppressive relationship between the dominant US culture and the students' cultural group” (2009, p. 96). The teachers and administration should begin to openly discuss the racial issues and biases that may exist in their structures, policies, and mentalities and develop some process for self-reflection, especially for the white teachers.

Also, because there is little research and resources available for teaching African American students effectively, the faculty should consult their African American teaching colleagues at Explore and at other schools who have successful teaching practices for minority students, in order to gain more insight into what it takes to be a teacher for students of color. Lastly, the teachers need to venture out into the community in order to gain a better sense for who it is that they are working with. Teachers are not certified to teach a subject that they do not know well, but they are certified to teach students they do not know well. There must be a balance between knowing your subject and knowing your students, otherwise, there will always be a disconnect between the two.

An Explore student said, “[skin color] doesn’t really matter as long as your teachers are good teachers” (Kleinfield, 2012). Ultimately, good teaching is not a function of the color of our

skin. It is much more closely related to the temperament of our mind and the hue of our heart. We did not choose *whether* to be White, but we can affect *how* we are White. This is both our challenge and our hope” (King, 2000).

Resources

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