Reflection 1 - Multicultural Education and Social Capital

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The dynamics of addressing diversity in education at the policy and classroom levels is both nuanced and complex. Today’s educators stand in front of their classrooms and colleagues with unique backgrounds and experiences that have shaped their views. Unwillingly, or sometimes deliberately, these views have an impact on the students that educators encounter.

Gender and race issues have plagued our social fabric since the inception of our nation. Numerous examples abound in a microcosm of the larger society—our public schools, where subtle mechanisms are at play. An example of a recent controversy that brings this to light (or obfuscates it) is the administering of the Specialized High School Admission Test (SHSAT). This test is given to eighth graders who wish admittance into one of New York City’s Specialized High Schools. This free, public high school education is one of the best in the country. Recently, over 50% of the graduating seniors from Stuyvesant High School (SHS) are admitted to Ivy League colleges. The NYC public school system is over 70% African-American and Hispanic yet only 5% of the students at SHS are. Furthermore, 55% of male students made the cut for admission while only 45% of females do. This is confounding when considering girls have earned more As and hold more bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees than their male counterparts in recent years. What about this test makes this so? It is certainly more challenging in the math section (and argued that is weighted as such). Is this why boys do better? The apparent disproportionality in admissions has been the subject of news articles, studies, and litigation in recent years. The NYC Department of Education does not release any metrics or analyses associated with this test.

This week’s articles focused on minorities and the concepts of social capital, social status, and educational underachievement. Felicia R. Lee discusses in the first article, “Why Are Black Students Lagging? (2002) the notion that African-American students disengage from
academics because they are perceived as “acting white.” The article alludes to many factors at play including cultural identity (and opposing the dominant culture), lower teacher expectations (bias), poverty, and inadequate teachers in urban areas. Most provocative is the notion that validation is lacking for superior academic performance by black children. They feel like they don’t belong because the dominant culture and vernacular is not comforting and revert to the feeling of belonging that they receive from their racial peers with their familiar social customs and speech. This is despite knowing that this may be detrimental to their current successes and future aspirations.

In the second article, Counterfeit Social Capital and Mexican-American Underachievement (2003), Robert Ream discusses the impact of student mobility and social capital (independent variables) on mathematical and reading performance (dependent variables) as measured by achievement tests. The results of these tests are correlated with the independent variables to make a statement on underachievement by Mexican-American students. Moving around from school to school not only affects academic achievement but also compromises social capital defined as the connections and familiarity by which students gain access to better resources and quality teacher interactions. The measurement of school social capital is hard to grasp. The research proposes that a subtle form of bias may be at play. This is termed counterfeit social capital.

The characteristics of social capital that enable beneficial, productive results have the potential to have negative effects. There is the potential to foster behaviors that worsen economic benefits, inhibit social inclusion and mobility, and facilitate crime and educational underachievement. As an educator, it is important to recognize when these subtle dynamics may be operating.
My compulsory public education contained very few experiences in dealing with diversity. However, the few minorities that I encountered made lasting impressions on me because they were treated so differently by the teachers. I chronicled my experience with my friend, Marshall, one of the very few African American students in my elementary years, in a previous reflection on *The Dreamkeepers*. At the bottom of it, what I noticed as a child was that he was at the center of classroom problems—at times derived—and I felt stung as he was publically rebuked. I thought it was empathy but recently my thought has shifted to a more dynamic emotion. Dr. Brene Brown in her Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) talks, claimed the story of race relations in this country is a chronicle of collective shame. Guilt, humiliation, and shame exist along a spectrum of situationally contingent variables. Dr. Brown defines guilt as “I did something bad,” humiliation as “I made a mistake and I don’t deserve that treatment,” and shame as “I am bad, unworthy, and I deserve it.” I believe many minorities feel shame when interacting within and among larger groups. Educators do not have the same expectations but attempt to level the playing field with that approach backfiring. At operation here is a different breed of shame—the shame of privilege—a transparent and patronizing attempt to help. It involves lowering standards for struggling minority students, to dilute expectations that result in making those students feel inferior because the social capital which allows them to gain such favor results from an inherent weakness—I am not good enough, I am deficient, I need help and nobody else does, I am no good, I am ashamed. The shame of privilege (absent in a classroom full of minorities, taught by a minority teacher) causes the teacher to redress larger social issues one minority student at a time. The student is given a break—a lower set of expectations and standards—because the teacher wills them to do better. Although well-intentioned, this form of fairness operates in the educator’s mind as such: I was a child once but I
was lucky by birth, this child was not. Why am I deserving of this life so inherited? Why are they not? Sympathy toward out of school factors (OSF) play a role in this treatment. David Berliner (2009) identified a handful of these that significantly challenge educational achievement and learning opportunities for minority children. They are: (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics.

As difficult as it is to resist redressing these issues, expectations should be level. If not it only delays and clouds the inevitable reality of the adult world. Common Core learning standards make this all too clear as college and career readiness pathways encompass the same base skills.

My experiences working with minority children are limited but significant. After graduating from college, I worked in a group home for adolescent boys—mostly Latino and African-American—as a junior group home counselor. This group family was dealing with a wide spectrum of issues: schizophrenia, sociopathic behavior, bipolar disorder, learning disabilities, and profound intellectual deficiencies. The most profound issue, for me, was that they were not wanted and came from horrid conditions.

After a brief apprentice period under the senior group home director, I was assigned to run the home over an extended holiday weekend. My instructions from him were brief: “stick to the routine, help yourself to my liquor if you are so inclined, and don’t read the case files—you are not ready.” I disregarded all the instructions. These young men knew I came from a different planet and on most days, I would go back to that stable and supportive planet. Not that weekend, however. I stared at the ceiling all night long, feeling nauseous after reading the case files. Even though this was almost thirty years ago, I have never forgotten that sinking feeling. I felt the
shame of my own privilege and very thankful for it. Although tired, I set out the next day to redress all these ills. The routine was broken, chaos ensued, and the dominant emotion was anger. In some way, I felt they knew how I viewed them—with pity. I was a counterfeiter pretending to offer a new social currency and like everyone else in their lives, I was just passing through. Ralph Ellison describes this best in the prologue to his masterpiece, *The Invisible Man.*

“That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this, that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful.”

After time had passed, I was able to place that experience in perspective. That group did not need sympathy or fun. What they needed was to count on themselves, to perform the basics of personal maintenance and hygiene, and to establish a consistent routine to function with the remote chance that someday, with the right intersection of points, they might flourish. This was not happening on my watch as my tenure was short. I was in no position to redress their
victimization but I was in a position to teach the skills to help them begin overcoming incredible obstacles. This view may be adaptable to the vocation of a teacher. In a diverse classroom that vocation is expressed by teaching equally, by using the right tool for the right situation, and to humanize—therefore truly seeing—any invisible phantoms that may be sitting in your classroom.
References


