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Cultural Mismatch or Opportunity for Mutual Growth?

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The latest demographics indicate that diversity among schools' teacher and administrator populations is not keeping pace with the diversity among student populations. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) projects minorities will represent half of all children in the U.S. by 2023. The Applied Research Center (2000) reports 40 percent of classroom learners will be children of color, while the teaching population will remain approximately 85 % white females by the year 2010. Some rural schools in particular have been found to have predominately monocultural and monoracial educators (Nganga, 2005). From 1991 to 2000, a U.S. Census Bureau (2000) report noted 82 % of the documented immigrants who came to the United States came from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa while only 15 % came from Europe.

Some first-year teachers report not being prepared to work with the diverse populations found in the schools. A MetLife Survey (2001) noted one-third of teachers report a lack of preparation to reach students with backgrounds different than their own. In 2006, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported one in five students ages 5 to 17 spoke a language other than English at home. In another MetLife survey (2008) 20% of teachers felt unprepared to help students who did not speak English. While some advocate increasing diversity in the teacher

population (Branch & Kristonis, 2006; Irizarri, 2007; Keleher, Piana & Fata, 1999), others advocate improving preparation of all pre-service teachers (Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003; Marbley, et al., 2007). In an effort to offer insight into and suggestions for issues raised as a result of a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, this paper details episodes and things learned while teaching English language learners and other student populations who did not share the background of the teacher, and explains those experiences using select cultural and psychosocial theories. Thanks to various online communities it was possible to reconnect with some former students and validate all of the statements, episodes and conclusions presented in this paper.

Cultural mismatch of teacher and students

I worked as a band director at two schools in downtown Miami, Florida for a total of four years. My first teaching job was working as a band director at an urban high school nestled in the area known as Little Haiti where the race riots of the early 1980s took place. Schools frequently mirror their surrounding neighborhoods (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1984). While the school did not have a great deal of incidents of violence during my tenure, this school did reflect its neighborhood as an odd tension was omnipresent. As one of the few European American males in this school, I was teaching a student population that was 90% African American, 9% Hispanic and less than 1% European American. Approximately 65% of the population was eligible for free or reduced lunch programs. English language learners represented 19% of the student population. Also, in downtown

Miami, my second high school teaching job was in an area known as Little Havana. The school demographics included a population that was over 90% Hispanic with a small minority of African American, Asian American and European American students. The vast majority of the Hispanic students were Cuban although there were also Puerto Rican and Colombian students. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students virtually mirrored the first school and, as a result, all of the instruments were school-owned. English language learners represented 22% of the student body. Several issues involving language, values, customs, and traditions arose as a result of the cultural mismatch with my students.

Language difference

All my life I had been a member of the majority European American group. However, in both of these schools, I represented the extreme minority. And, in both schools, the students had names for me that could only be described as racial slurs. All of a sudden, working at inner-city schools, I found myself a minority and the focus of students' jokes and slurs. At the first school, there were students from Haiti, and some of them spoke Haitian Creole. Some of the students who were not Haitian learned to communicate in Haitian Creole as well. At any moment some of the students would begin laughing, and they were laughing at me. The racial slur they created for me was a descriptive term for the color of my skin and this term helped the students use language to remind me I was separate from, rather than a part of them. Eventually it came to be a term of endearment and a laugh we could share; but that camaraderie would take time and trust. And, as this trust began to build, their term for me was used "with" me

rather than "toward" me. I felt completely overwhelmed in this, my first teaching position and never made an effort to learn any words from any of the languages spoken by the multilingual students. I did make this effort in my second school.

At the second school a similar thing happened with not one but two slurs being directed at me. One of them, while initially derogatory, stuck and likewise became a term of endearment some of my former students still use today. One student from this school reflects on the language barrier created by my inability to speak Spanish, "For many of us it was the first time we actually met a 'gringo' from Wichita, Kansas. Our jokes and expressions were suddenly cut down to 50% because we couldn't translate them to English. Somehow they lost their meaning when we translated them."

I tried to learn as much Spanish as I could. I had taken two years of Spanish in high school. In retrospect, it seems the entire time was spent conjugating verbs at my desk. I had not learned to speak it or understand it. I asked one of the boys to teach me a few of the unpleasant words in Spanish. His first reaction was amusing, "No, I can't do that!" Once I told him my intentions and assured him he would suffer no consequences, he taught me quite a few. Not five minutes later as we entered his band class, two students were engaged in a conversation in Spanish and one of them swore. "Watch your language," I said in English. After that, the word was out, "Don't cuss around him. He knows Spanish." "Knowing Spanish" was an illusion that lasted only for a while, but I never heard any of the students swear in Spanish in my presence anymore. Eventually I learned more than the curse words in Spanish, and my feeble attempts to learn to speak Spanish became part of the glue that would bond us together. When students left

for the day, I would tell them, “see you *by* the morning” in English, and this would usually prompt a laugh or a smile because both the students and I learned prepositions did not translate well from Spanish to English. Olmeda (2009) refers to this as a type of merging of languages. In my case, blending linguistic borders helped bring down some walls.

Values

Language was not the only barrier to overcome. To both schools I brought white middle class values. The concept of situated cognition (Brown, 1989) has been used to help explain the mismatch of cultural values between teachers and students (Whitfield, Klug, & Whitney, 2007). Chief among these was the recognition of the existence of varying expectations of education as well as perspectives of appropriate behaviors for the classroom. Traditionally, the expectation for students is to arrive on time for classes and other commitments. I expected nothing less from my students. I soon learned that the notion of time was not universal. For some students time was elastic and somewhat flexible. Performance and rehearsal practices were not always adhered to.

One Saturday prior to a competition I asked the students to arrive at the school at 3:00 p.m. Less than half the band was present at that time. When I complained, one of the students who did arrive on time said, “They’re on Cuban time. If you want them to come at 3:00 you need to tell everybody to get here at 2:15.” Once the entire band arrived I told them anyone not present when the busses departed would be left behind. I had occasion to exercise this promise and in the process left behind, among others,

the principal's daughter. Fortunately he, despite being Cuban himself, supported my efforts to maintain punctuality.

Moll and Gonzales (2004) have utilized the "funds of knowledge" (p. 700) concept to describe the knowledge students possess from their own cultural and community experiences. One example of this concept came in the form of rehearsal and performance practices by students at the first school. The woodwind class had 32 students in it and was primarily girls while the brass and percussion class was 45 students, exclusively boys. Having this many students in a band class is not uncommon. As a result of the general compliance, the woodwind class and I were able to get a great deal accomplished toward learning the music we needed to play on the field and in the stands. Unfortunately, the sound of woodwind instruments doesn't carry outside the way brass and percussion instruments do. The brass and percussion class was a much greater challenge. Rehearsing music took much longer because the boys in the brass and percussion class were not as willing as the students in the woodwind class to stop, go back and fix things needing to be fixed. They were "in a groove" and wanted to "keep jamming." "Ah, man, why do we have to keep stopping?" And, due to the nature of the instruments, the relative lack of musical accomplishment in the brass and percussion classroom would have a greater effect than successes by the woodwinds on the sound we produced on the field.

We had to perform the national anthem at the first football game of the season and it was, I must say, not good. Even my principal came to me later and told me it must get better before the next game. And it did. This happened partially because the students were beginning to see I wasn't going to try to change them and partially because they were beginning to see, or perhaps I

was helping them see, overblowing was appropriate for some songs and not for others. However, our performance really improved when I realized the way these students liked to perform and rehearse had value; it wasn't necessarily wrong, it was just different. My entire life I had valued structure, discipline and certain restraints performing in more formal contexts yet my students valued overblowing and jamming from beginning to end without stopping. These performance and rehearsal styles were part of a fund of knowledge reflecting a collective urban marching band culture. I eventually allowed students to rehearse in this manner as a reward and perform in this manner when it was appropriate. In addition, this transformation occurred because I wanted to be part of the laughter, not the source of it. I explained the difference between *forte*, *fortissimo*, and "blastissimo" – a term I didn't coin but used to get my point across. Many of the students thought this was funny and responded by playing to the edge but not over it. So, using humor and meeting the students half way on this issue helped knock down walls as well.

Ogbu's (1978, 1993) concepts of voluntary and involuntary minorities provide a theoretical frame to explain the differences in the students' values between these two schools. The students from the first high school band were clearly part of what Ogbu (1993) deemed an involuntary minority or a group forced to be part of society through slavery or another form of conquest. An individual who is an involuntary minority is thus relegated to maintain an almost permanently subordinate role in society. The voluntary minority, on the other hand, is part of a group who came to the United States voluntarily to seek opportunity and prosperity. As a result, the voluntary minority is far more likely to be willing

to take on the characteristics and some of the values of the dominant group.

The band members in the first school overblew their instruments, followed an urban marching band tradition created in part by bands at traditionally African American universities and created dances to reflect both their culture and their school identity within that culture. These students personified Ogbu's (1993) involuntary minority, and their resistance was a form of group solidarity, and had less to do with defiance than it did their attempts to hang onto the musical values of their culture. Conversely, although they were doing their best to operate on a culturally more appealing and flexible time schedule, the voluntary minority construct helps explain why students in the second group were more willing to take on the characteristics of the majority band culture with no overblowing, traditional marching style and a desire to pursue excellence, as defined by the majority culture.

Customs and traditions

In both schools, students had previous band directors who shared their background. The director in the first school, who was African American, had been there for five years prior to my arrival and the director at the second school, who was Cuban, had been there for 14 years. The customs and traditions I found upon my arrival were either continued or established by these two gentlemen. The shared traditions between a band director and band students can be very powerful because together, teacher and students go before a panel of judges to be rated as superior or excellent. Given these years of shared experiences, it was no

surprise students were initially resistant to a band director from a different ethnic group.

Ogbu's (1987) cultural inversion or resistance culture, where group identity and solidarity take precedence over individual achievement, provides an explanation for some of the students' behavior; they were trying to continue an important part of their cultural identity. In the first school, an important tradition involved continuing the customs of the urban marching band. "Are you going to make us march 'corps' style?" "We don't do those little steps. We march eight to five!" "The dances we create are part of us. Don't take those away from us or tell us what we can and can't do in our dances." I recognized fairly quickly the resistance I was getting, as well as the racial slur they used instead of my name, had less to do with the color of my skin than it did the students' fear of being transformed into a (drum and bugle) corps style marching band, something not part of their cultural identity.

In the second school, group identity and resistance came through a pride in the tradition of group excellence established by the long standing former director. The resistance culture was created out of a fear of becoming less than excellent. "There was a huge sense of fear when Mr. J left. I was scared the traditions weren't going to be maintained and Mr. J. was such a big deal at the school and in the community as well." The resistance was driven by an attempt to retain a tradition of excellence.

Students in both schools were willing to defy my authority and risk their status in the school band in order to preserve their respective identities. This is significant for two reasons. First, students at both schools had found an outlet for their cultural identity within the walls of the school band. Second, the cultural relationships were now reversed where Delpit's (1995) deficit

model of diversity is concerned. This model is used to describe the mistaken assumption that racial and ethnic minority and low-income students must overcome deficits associated with their culture, community or social class in order to learn. The focus of attention is now on what students cannot do and do not have instead of what students can do and what they do have. However, in these instances, I was the minority with the deficit. There were definitely times when students in both schools were putting the focus on what they felt I did not have and what they felt I could not do. Part of this was because I was not their former director but part of it was because their former director shared their backgrounds. From the students' view, I had to overcome the deficits of my upbringing in order to be a part of their culture.

Implications

When a teacher who has been part of the majority group in larger society becomes a minority in the school culture, does the deficit model of diversity reverse? It certainly seemed to do just that in my case. The students' focus was on cultural differences rather than on the potential for mutual growth and success in school. There were several lessons to be learned from the cultural mismatch between students and teacher. One clear lesson was the common need for acceptance and a sense of value. These students found approval and validation within the school because of their membership in the band. This is a powerful advantage high profile school organizations have, particularly when they can make room for the students' funds of knowledge. In the regular classroom so much daily activity is focused on individual achievement it becomes more difficult for students to find a collective identity. If

a common goal among the students can be found, and the young classroom teacher helps them achieve this goal, the resistance culture may disappear. Cultural inversion favors cultural identity and group solidarity over school achievement. However, if a common goal is embedded in the school experience, it is far more likely the school's culture will be transformed rather than the child being assimilated into the school's culture.

A cultural mismatch only remains a mismatch when the people involved, teachers and students, make the choice not to learn about one another. The issues defining my mismatch – language, values, customs and traditions -- were no longer mismatches when I was willing to learn about the students, collectively and individually, and accept them for who they were. My mismatches with students became less important when linguistic borders began to be blended and we could communicate in a mixed variety of English and Spanish, also known as “Spanglish,” and other forms of combined languages. The mismatches with students became less important when we discovered a common language of laughter. The incongruence that existed between teacher and students became less important when I was willing to accept certain performance and rehearsal practices that confounded my sense of musicianship and what I found acceptable.

Recommendations

With these stories, and the theoretical framework chosen to explain them, come certain lessons to be learned and from those lessons are suggestions for teachers who find themselves in a similar position. There are six in total:

- Use humor as an ice breaker. It can cut through language barriers. The teacher learning the students' language can even become a source of humor. Some say music is the universal language. I will not be the only musician who will tell you *it is not*; but humor is.

- Learn a new language or learn as much of a new language as possible. It is very possible the native language can be blended to create a language that serves as a glue binding a teacher and a student or students who do not share cultural backgrounds.

- Provide students with a sense of belonging and ownership of their classroom. Winning over any student or every student may be as simple as listening to what they have to say and giving them at least partial ownership over the classroom; provide them with a sense of value and belonging to all things related to school.

- If the regular classroom is void of common goals, create some. These will become more important to students if their funds of knowledge become part of the fabric and identity of the school.

- Remember that when a student acts disrespectfully toward a teacher, it may very well be a gesture done in an attempt to get respect from peers.

- Virtually all teachers will have students or parents compare them to previous teachers; this is not new. The incoming teacher must be prepared to embrace the diversity of the students and their parents.

Conclusion

In an effort to help teachers who are not of the same ethnic or language group as their students, this paper detailed teaching episodes and things learned while teaching English language

learners and other culturally diverse student populations. The statistics presented at the onset of this paper indicate that treating others the way one wants to be treated must traverse cultural lines. The school and its teachers must intentionally facilitate this process not only by making students feel a part of the school, but also by making the school become a part of the students.

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