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HIDDEN CASUALTIES OF URBAN TEACHER TURNOVER: BLACK STUDENTS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Although teacher turnover affects many schools to some degree, it is especially problematic in urban settings (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). This qualitative study examined the perspectives of five Black urban students who experienced a mid-year teacher change in their 7th grade mathematics classroom. Findings suggest that these students were able to identify instructional strategies that support their learning, and describe the importance of positive student-teacher relationships in the classroom. Specifically, the data indicated that students wanted better support from their new teacher after they experienced losing their first teacher during the school year. Concluding recommendations emphasize the importance of attending to the needs of students in urban schools, from their perspectives, in cases of teacher turnover.

Keywords: Black students' perspectives, urban schools, teacher turnover

Introduction

Teacher turnover remains a consistent problem for all schools (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012; Keigher, 2010) and for urban schools in particular (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teacher turnover is defined as "major changes in a teacher's assignment from one school year (or within a year) to the next" (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008, p. 8). Teacher turnover encompasses situations in which teachers leave the classroom for a minimum of one year (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997), transfer to another school (Ingersoll, 2001), or leave the classroom after one year and never return (Borman & Dowling, 2008). It can describe when teachers move from one classroom or subject area to another, from one school to another, or out of the profession altogether. No matter the reasons teachers leave, support for the students who experience teacher turnover needs to be established in order to improve students' learning and classroom environments. In a perfect world, when teachers leave, there would be ample opportunity for an incoming teacher to read lesson plans, observe classroom interactions, and ask questions of the departing teacher and students. New teachers—mostly substitute teachers—who

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enter classrooms after the start of the school year must find ways to support students in the classroom.

This article investigates Black students' perspectives on their experiences with teacher turnover in their mathematics classroom. The specific question I address is: What key challenges do Black students describe related to their experience of losing their mathematics teacher during the school year? I define and situate the experience of teacher turnover in urban settings, particularly as it relates to student achievement, discuss the importance of building positive student-teacher relationships, share Black students' perspectives that illuminate their experiences with teacher turnover, and offer some insight for teachers and school leaders who work with teachers in order to help students and teachers navigate the beginning stages of losing their teacher during the school year.

Teacher Turnover and Student Achievement

Many large-scale, quantitative studies on teacher turnover focus on reasons why teachers leave, including poor working conditions (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005), low salary (Quartz, 2003), and perceived lack of safety (Smith & Smith, 2006). Studies that consider the effects of teacher turnover on student achievement reveal that it is most often harmful (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, & Smith, 2003), especially in schools where there are large populations of low performing and minority students (Ronfeldt, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011). It is important to note, however, that the relationship between teacher turnover and student achievement is not a causal one; there is no evidence that teachers who leave schools caused lower student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2011).

In contrast to large quantitative studies on teacher turnover, there are fewer qualitative studies that provide nuance for this phenomenon. There are some studies that investigate teachers' experiences related to teacher turnover (Guin, 2004; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Luther & Richman, 2009), but fewer studies illuminate students' experiences. Kloss (2013) examined high school music students' perspectives of this experience. He found that students reach to new teachers in different ways and students experience a wide range of emotions. He goes on to argue that more studies need to be conducted with students who experience teacher turnover.

Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Researchers have indicated the importance of examining relationships between students and teachers in the classroom. Students who attended urban schools revealed positive student-teacher relationships as a vital part of their success (Nieto, 1994). Researchers have found that Black elementary and middle school students preferred teachers who cared for them and wanted to develop positive relationships with their teachers (Brown, 1999; Howard, 2001). Student-teacher relationships are important and we have limited understanding of these relationships at the middle school level, especially from the perspectives of African American students.

The qualitative study reported here adds nuance to this literature by investigating students' perspectives on their experiences in the context of teacher turnover in order to support students in the classroom. The findings in this article highlight students' perspectives that point to the importance of gaining a better understanding of the ways they experience learning in the context of teacher turnover.

Methods

The study reported here took place in Westside School, which is located in a small urban Midwestern city of about 120,000 people. At the time of this study, Westside School had about 1,800 students, with about 700 students in grades 7-8 and 1,100 students in grades 9-12. Students who identified as Black comprised 73% of the school population and 78% of students were eligible for free and/or reduced lunch.

Data Collection

I observed a 7th grade mathematics classroom with 28 students, three times per week during the 2014-15 academic year for a total of approximately 110 hours. In addition to classroom observations, I conducted hour-long semi-structured interviews with five 7th grade Black students who were all 13 years old. The students' names were: Medina, Jasmeen, Caron, Aliyah, and Tariq[2]. Each student had high aspirations, which included becoming a nurse practitioner, nurse, scientist, chef, and engineer, respectively. Student interviews occurred every two to three weeks for nine months throughout the school year to have them discuss their experiences in their classroom. Students who participated in the study were also asked to write journals to document their experiences in their classroom. Students were encouraged to write in their journal at least three times a week on any of the topics provided or could choose to write something that was not associated with the journal prompts.

Mrs. Brown was the full-time teacher of this class at the beginning of the school year. In November, she chose to teach in another school for personal reasons. The new teacher, Mrs. Edwards, entered the classroom two weeks later, replacing a substitute teacher. As this final transition to Mrs. Edwards took place, I witnessed several students' behavioral shifts (i.e., being repeatedly asked to leave during instruction) in the classroom. These observations prompted me to examine student perspectives of their experience with teacher turnover because it also became a central theme in what they talked about in our interviews. From my experiences as a teacher in an urban context, I was aware of how common an experience this was for many urban students. I thought it was important to investigate how students experienced teacher turnover. Although the study took place in a mathematics classroom, the findings reported are relevant to all classrooms.

Data Analysis

I started the data analysis by looking for recurring themes in student interviews. I audio recorded and transcribed student interviews and read through students' written journals after interviewing all five students. During these iterative analyses, emergent themes (Patton, 2002) were used to organize the data into categories. Emergent themes require coding and forming categories after data collection (Patton, 2002).

I examined the data guided by the research question, which led to an establishment of three themes. First, students discussed the effects of teacher turnover on their learning and performance. I coded comments as being instructional strategies when students discussed the challenge of adjusting to the different types of instruction. I coded comments as learning and

[2] All names and identifiers recorded in this study are pseudonyms.

performance when students discussed the effects of teacher turnover on their learning and performance in the classroom. Second, I coded students' comments related to student-teacher relationships when students worked to build a relationship with their teacher.

Findings

Instructional Strategies That Students Think Support Their Learning

Students expressed a challenge to teacher turnover because they had to adjust to different instructional strategies when learning mathematics. Caron stated, "I had to get used to it [instructional strategies], which is why my grades got bad. It [the teaching] was different, so I had to get used to it." Once Mrs. Edwards was in the classroom for about a month, some students realized their grades were negatively affected. Jasmeen mentioned her poor grades were a result of the difference in instructional strategies between the teachers. She posited,

> I think getting a new teacher messed me up. When Mrs. Edwards came in it kind of switched up with what Mrs. Brown was doing because they teach differently. Mrs. Edwards talks all the time and Mrs. Brown let us work in groups so we could talk. Talking to people helps me understand what I'm doing.

Jasmeen recognized the misalignment between her learning preferences and Mrs. Edwards' teaching style. Jasmeen wanted her teacher to provide opportunities for her to talk to her peers in order to understand the mathematics concepts, but Mrs. Edwards taught using teacher-centered instructional approaches.

Medina also noticed differences in her teachers' instruction. Medina described specific differences when Mrs. Edwards taught mathematics. She stated, "With Mrs. Brown, she let us solve problems any way we wanted. But, Mrs. Edwards makes us solve the problems exactly like her. It's like we are copying everything she is doing. I am not used to that." Medina described Mrs. Edwards' approach as "following steps." Jasmeen focused on small group work and the need to talk with other students to help her understand mathematics content and Medina focused on the ability to solve problems in ways that made sense to her. Jasmeen and Medina described direct instruction with low cognitive demand. Many studies have found that these approaches are common for low socio-economic status students of color (Anyon, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 1997), yet these students recognized that the practices Mrs. Edwards used were not best for their learning.

Students not only recognized differences in instructional strategies when they compared their experiences with Mrs. Brown versus Mrs. Edwards, but they also made suggestions about what teachers could do to help students adjust to differences if they lost a teacher in the middle of the school year. For example, Caron suggested, "Like, I think she should ask us what we were doing before she came instead of just coming in and teaching her way." Teachers might be inclined to teach content in a way that makes the *teacher* feel comfortable. Sometimes the teaching methods chosen by teachers do not align with the learning preferences of their students (as seen in Jasmeen's and Medina's contributions above). If teachers had strategies for asking students about their prior experiences, then the students' new teacher would be better informed about instructional strategies that work for those particular students.

Students even pointed out that Mrs. Edwards spent time reviewing concepts they had previously learned. Caron stated, "I already learned that stuff. We [referring to himself and other students] tried to tell her, but she doesn't listen." I observed that Mrs. Edwards ignored Caron and his peers--even when they overtly registered their concerns about the content she taught when she first entered the classroom. If Mrs. Edwards took the time to listen to students' perspectives on their mathematics experiences when she first entered the classroom, she would have had a better sense of what they had learned. Even if Mrs. Edwards thought it was best to review concepts to ensure a better understanding, that rationale could have been explained to the students.

In this section, students described differences between Mrs. Edwards' and Mrs. Brown's instructional practices, identified which instructional strategies were helpful to their learning, and pointed out that they tried to communicate some of this information to Mrs. Edwards. I am not arguing that the new teacher must only adopt all of the instructional strategies of the teacher who left the classroom. Rather, it is important for mathematics education leaders to explicitly support teachers to get an understanding of the instructional practices that existed in the previous classroom as well as students' perspectives about the instructional practices they feel supported their learning. If the new teacher's instruction differs, then it might be helpful to explain to students why certain instructional strategies would be utilized.

Quality Student-Teacher Relationships are Important for Students' Learning

Students especially struggled with the fact that Mrs. Edwards did not try to get to know them as individuals, not only when she first entered the classroom but also as the school year progressed. Similar to other findings in research literature, students described the importance of a quality and/or caring teacher-student relationship and its effect on their learning. Caring student-teacher relationships were identified by students as critical to supporting students' opportunities to learn in classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Noddings, 1992). Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden (1995) found that caring student-teacher relationships encouraged students' academic development. In order to cultivate positive caring relationships, intentional interactions must occur between teachers and students.

Medina noted, "I want to get to know Mrs. Edwards better." I asked Medina to explain why she wanted to get to know Mrs. Edwards. Medina noted, "Well, if I am in class with a stranger, I don't really want to be there, so I may not pay attention like I should." When learning new content, it is imperative for students to pay attention to the instruction. In this case, Medina said she had little interest in learning because she considered her teacher to be a stranger. Medina seemed to indicate that knowing her teacher helped her be excited to come to class and to learn mathematics. For example, she said, "I don't know her [Mrs. Edwards] so I am not excited about coming to class to learn math. If I knew her, it would help me learn math."

Although students wanted Mrs. Edwards to know them, they also wanted to know her, Ty stated, "Mrs. Edwards is my math teacher, but we don't talk much. I just ask her questions about math and that's it. She is just somebody that teaches me math and that's it." He acknowledged that Mrs. Edwards did answer his questions about mathematics, but he did not have an opportunity to get to know Mrs. Edwards' other identities. I asked him to describe some things he wanted his teacher to do. He stated, "Students and teachers should do things that bring us closer. I think every teacher should try to have a relationship with the students." Tariq had expectations that teachers should get to know their students and attempt to build a relationship

with them. The information, learned throughout that process, he seemed to indicate, would bring the students and teacher closer. To echo previous statements, students' relationships with their teacher may impact their mathematics learning.

As with the first finding, students not only recognized the importance of a quality student-teacher relationship, they also gave suggestions for what teachers could do to facilitate such a relationship. For example, Medina gave a suggestion about what Mrs. Edwards could have done when she first entered the classroom:

> When Mrs. Edwards first came in, she didn't say, "Tell me two or three things about you." She just came in and started teaching us. She still does not talk to us at all. I think she likes teaching math, but not getting to know us.

Medina suggested a practice that Mrs. Brown deliberately did at the beginning of the school year: Mrs. Brown wanted to establish a caring relationship with her students, so she would occasionally ask her students to tell her about themselves. Medina acknowledged that Mrs. Edwards enjoyed teaching mathematics; she thought Mrs. Edwards did not want to get to know her students as individuals.

Discussion

This study provides new insight into the phenomenon of teacher turnover in urban classrooms by positioning students as stakeholders with voice in the teacher turnover conversation. More specifically, it highlighted challenges students faced when they experienced teacher turnover in their mathematics classrooms. Educators and school leaders need a better understanding of the ways students perceive and respond to teacher turnover with regards to its influence on students' learning and emotional support in the classroom. This information can inform school leaders as they prepare mathematics teachers who enter these classrooms after a teacher leaves in the middle of the school year.

Researchers have argued that teachers who moved into classrooms after a teacher leaves mid-year teacher turnover need better support (Ronfeldt et al., 2011). The lack of support for teachers may affect students learning experiences in the classroom. The students in this study experienced feelings of disruption and alienation from the learning process. Although Mrs. Edwards' instructional style was drastically different from their previous teacher, these findings showcase the difficulty students faced when they get a new teacher after the start of the school year.

Students also focused on the importance of building positive student-teacher relationships. The findings serve as a good reminder that students need to believe their teacher cares for them (Noddings, 1992). The contextual reality of urban schooling might make it difficult for urban teachers to build positive student-teacher relationships. Institutional and structural barriers might limit teachers' ability to "to connect with students" (Milner & Tenore, 2010, p. 568). These barriers include, for example, a focus on preparing students for standardized tests and the lack of administrative support. However, these barriers should not impede working to support students in these kinds of situations.

School leaders must provide intentional support for teachers who navigate their professional duties in ways that support their students. Because teacher turnover may jeopardize relationship building, due to the unstable environments in which teacher and students must

engage, it is important to begin to formulate positive relationships with students as soon as possible. In fact, Katz (1999) explicitly identified teacher turnover as a structural condition that precludes the development of positive "relationships with students" (p. 809). Although developing positive student-teacher relationships is important, teachers who enter the classroom in the middle of the school year should be explicit about building relationships with students.

Students are experts on their own experiences (Erickson & Shultz, 1992). In the literature on students' perspectives, minority students often go unheard (Lee, 1999). Martin (2012) suggests that researchers should explore the various intricacies of what it means to be an African American student in various contexts. Cook-Sather (2006) noted students are active participants in school and society: "Students insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; . . . they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education" (p. 359-360). If school leaders and teachers listen to students, they are able to consider experiences that are important to students and the ways they talk about those experiences. It is also important to promote academic and interpersonal continuity for students who experience teacher turnover. The most accurate way to receive this information would be to have authentic conversations with students to hear their experiences in the classroom prior to the new teacher's presence.

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