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Centering the Voice of Black Male Urban High School Students on Effective Student-Teacher Classroom Relationships

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Abstract

While teaching is often touted as the single most important factor for the success of students, at the core of instruction is a foundation rooted in the classroom relationship between students and teachers. Despite teachers being regarded as the authority of instruction within their respective classrooms, what is frequently missing is the voices of students articulating their thoughts on factors that impede or enhance an effective student-teacher relationship. Thus, the author sought to examine academically successful Black male urban high school students' perceptions of the student-teacher classroom relationship. Findings reveal three significant features of such relationship, including: (a) teacher perceptions of Black male students; (b) the willingness or unwillingness of teachers to include culturally relevant teaching; and (c) the importance of validation of student voices on teacher pedagogy within classrooms. Ultimately, listening to one of the most marginalized student groups can assist with allowing these young men to feel valued, as well as offer teachers the tools to improve their relationship with students in the classroom setting.

Keywords: Urban high school students, student-teacher relationship, student voice

Educational standards, acts, and or policies (e.g. No Child Left Behind, Common Core) are frequently recommended as ways to improve the educational experiences of students, yet these mandates are typically representative of short term solutions. The act of teaching, however is a constant fixture in the educational process and studies highlight that teachers can have the single biggest impact on student success within schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner, 2010). Milner (2013) maintains that teaching is not a linear act; it is rather a multifaceted and complex process, which is influenced by both out-of-school (e.g. family income, parental educational level) and in-school (e.g. instructional practices, school culture) variables. While the factors listed above directly or indirectly effect the learning experiences of students, this study will place emphasis on an in-school variable: the student-teacher classroom relationship. Milner (2018) defines "relationship-centered teaching, as learning opportunities, instructional moves, and overall classroom construction that centralize relationships as the object (curriculum) and mechanism (pedagogy) of teaching and learning (p.61)." Additionally, Milner (2018) maintains that while scholars (Howard, 2010; Sleeter, 2011) have noted the importance of relationships as a central aspect of teaching and learning, "educators, preservice or in-service, are rarely purposefully prepared to build the kinds of relationships that can potentially serve as learning bridges in the classroom (p. 61)." One way to strengthen teacher preparation on student relationship building is to gain insights from students.

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Enhancing the scholarship that centers student voice on ways to establish a productive relationship with teachers is critical because Milner (2018) contends that "students find it difficult to learn from teachers who do not have--or at least have not demonstrated--a strong level of concern for them through the relationships they exhibit (p. 62)." Furthermore, students are directly impacted by the interactions employed by teachers within classroom spaces. Gregory & Chapman (2012) note that there is not a one size fit all approach to teaching and specifically relationship building. However, Milner (2012a) notes that "instructional practices and related educational experiences need to be constructed in ways that address and are responsive to students' varying needs because of the range of differences that students bring into the classroom and because of the social context in which students live and learn (p.694)." Given that students are not often queried about the act of teaching, an investigation of student perceptions of effective teaching broadly, but more specifically of student-teacher relationship, is warranted. This is especially important because of the troubling trend to blame students for problems associated with urban schools.

While validating the voices of all students is critical, listening to urban students in general and Black males specifically can be beneficial for teachers, as the voices of these students are seldom heard. Scholars have conducted studies centering Black male secondary student voices on a variety of school topics including, the role of racism, the effects of the zero-tolerance policy, and the perceptions that school personnel have toward these young men (Howard, 2008; Duncan 2002, Canton, 2012; Owens et al., 2011). While the literature highlighting Black male voices continues to grow, Howard (2013) notes that "Black male accounts of their own schooling experiences have registered only a minor blip on the radar of social science research because it is assumed that they are unable or unwilling to tell it (p. 64)." By concentrating on ways to foster an effective student-teacher relationship, educators can gain insight into the minds of these young men about how to improve teacher interactions with students in the classroom with the subsequent potential to develop teaching and learning theory and practice. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how academically successful Black male students, who attend urban schools, conceptualized notions of effective teaching, with an emphasis the student-teacher relationship in the classroom.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework*:* Student Voice & CRT

In recent years, the concept of student voice has increasingly become a part of educational literature. Conner, Ebby-Rosin, and Brown (2015) discuss researchers' attention to student voice as "a strategy that engages youth in sharing their views on their experiences as students to promote meaningful change in educational practice (p. 3)." Moreover, the authors maintain that student voice efforts have three primary goals: (a) to share students' perspectives on their educational experiences; (b) to call for reforms that the students feel will better address the learning needs of themselves and their peers; and (c) to change the social construction of students in the school (p. 3). Scholars have attended to students' perspectives on a variety of educational topics that include: school reform, notions on college preparedness, experiences in single-sex classrooms that aided with transitioning into high school, and effective implementation of common core (Friend & Caruthers, 2015; Mitra, 2008; Flennaugh et al, 2017; Flennaugh, 2017; Yonezawa, 2015). Yet little attention is devoted to students' voices about how to foster productive relationships with teachers within classrooms. Cook-Sather (2010) argues that students have a unique perspective about learning in schools that educational stakeholders should learn from in order to enhance their craft. Through this study, I sought to explore how students and teachers can develop a classroom relationship predicated on the notion that students and teachers can learn from one another.

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In addition to the conceptual framework of student voice, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used as a theoretical underpinning for the study. In the seminal article, *Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education,* Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) illustrate how race persists as a significant factor in determining inequity in the schooling experiences of students of color. Moreover, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) advanced CRT with an emphasis on the methodological aspect of the theory. Two tenants put forth by the authors that are applicable to this study are the "centrality of race and racism" (p. 25) and "challenging the dominant ideology" *(*p. 26). For Black boys, issues of race are embedded in their daily learning experiences and the effects of racism in the classroom cannot be understated when examining student-teacher relationships. By recognizing the experiential knowledge of students, CRT is a theoretical frame that validates the experiences and voices of those who are seldom heard, helping in turn to challenge conventional notions of who Black young men are and how valuable they are to the classroom space (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Howard, 2010). With an emphasis on providing a voice to students, a CRT frame could help teachers learn how race is a factor in fostering relationships with students. This study was designed to address this concern by centering Black males' thoughts on factors that foster or impede an effective student-teacher classroom relationship.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were twelve Black males selected from a larger study conducted over a five-month period from August 2015 to December 2015 examining 200 successful Black and Latino males enrolled in three high schools (which had student populations of 1,564, 1247, and 4,464) across a large metropolitan county in the western region of the US. The twelve participants were chosen based on recommendations from school personnel and knowledge gained from the larger study. These students were not only successful in the conventional sense of the word (*e.g.* grades, enrolled in high level courses, expected college entrance), but these young men were also deemed as "success stories" in their respective communities. While there have been studies that examine the educational plight of successful or high achieving Black males (Everett, 2016; Ford & Moore, 2013; McGee, 2013; Wright, 2011), the research on these young men can be extended by listening to how they describe their classroom relationship with their teachers. Thus, the primary research questions guiding the study were:

(a) What are factors that either impede or strengthen a classroom relationship between students and teachers?
(b) What role does race play in fostering student-teacher relationships?
(c) By providing voice to students, what can teachers learn about ways to enrich both their relationship and pedagogy?

Below is a table with the participants' demographic information. In addition to more conventional demographic information such as names, age, and race, their parents' education as well as the AP courses that they took are included. While all Black males can contribute to thinking about enhancing student teacher relationships, participants were chosen from the larger study because there was a limited number of Black males in higher-level courses. Thus, including the AP courses in the table aimed to highlight an example of the academic potential and ability of the participants.

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Table 1: ***Participant Demographic*** **(Pseudonyms were used)**

Name	Grade	Age	Race	Parents Education	AP courses
Chris	12	16	Black (African)	College grads	AP Calculus; AP Chemistry
Steve	12	17	Bi-racial	Some College	AP Calculus AP Physics
Everett	12	17	Bi-racial	Masters	AP Stats/AP Chemistry
James	12	17	Bi-racial	College grad	Physics
Sherman	12	17	Black	Masters	Bio, Chemistry, Physics
Jason	12	17	Black (African)	Masters	
Eugene	12	17	Black (African)	Bachelors	Calculus Chemistry
Eric	12	17	Black	High School	Physics
Derwin	11	16	Black	Some College	Honors Chemistry
Doug	11	16	Bi-racial	Bachelors	Physics
Jake	11	16	Black	Bachelors	Biology
Charles	11	16	Black (African)	Masters	Calculus Chemistry

Data Collection/Data Analysis

The primary goal of the study was to uncover and interpret the meaning that Black male students attribute to effective student-teacher relationships. Therefore, a qualitative study was considered an appropriate methodological design to address the questions. The primary mode of data collection were semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013). Each of the interviews conducted was audio-taped and transcribed, and lasted approximately 60-70 minutes. The overall focus of the questions was designed to gauge Black male secondary students' perceptions of effective teaching by querying about the strategies, approaches, and methods of teaching that participants describe as having the potential to enhance teaching and learning. Additionally, the questions were employed to examine what teachers, researchers, and policymakers can learn from Black male students' about how to better serve this student group in the classroom. Upon completion of the interviews with the participants, transcriptions were conducted and after the cursory review of the data I began the open-coding process. Merriam (2009) states that "after working through the entire transcripts, the researcher can then go back and group the codes established to construct categories (p. 179)." Following the creation of the categories, I merged the themes affiliated with each category to establish the preliminary analysis. Furthermore, I analyzed categories seeking recurring themes that resulted in the specific findings revealed in the next section.

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Findings

Centricity of Race and Racism

Despite the participants being deemed as academically successful, several teachers held low expectations and/or had negative perceptions of them. When asked what role, if any, do teachers play in fostering or impeding success for the Black males in the classroom, Steve responded:

> The teacher has to put everyone on the same playing field, as far as professionally and when talking to the class. But I'm not sure that in their day to day thinking that they expect the Black students to do well. Maybe it's the classroom population. Maybe the teacher sees that because this class doesn't have as many students of color they extrapolate from that and say, well this is supposed to be my achievement class, there is three Black guys in here. All the rest of them are not in here and that's probably for a reason. That's probably what the teacher sees.

In a similar vein Chris stated:

> Sometimes a teacher will have a preconceived notion that, "Oh, it's a Black male. He's not going to do as good as these other people," but I think teachers, kind of think that off the bat.

Steve and Chris contend that relationships between Black male students and their teachers were rooted in a foundation of low expectations and preconceived notions. Moreover, Everett, noted, "A lot of teachers have this mentality of, if you don't care then there's really no point. Like I'm going to try to help you learn but I'm not going to go too far out of my way." This mentality of low expectations, preconceived notions, and giving minimum effort by teachers when instructing Black male students, was exacerbated by the notion that a few teachers would show favoritism to other students. James expressed this concern by stating:

> There was a lot of favoritism towards the Latino students. You know. They would get more attention. They would get more help on assignments than we would; In my opinion because he [the teacher] speaks Spanish; He's just felt more comfortable around them.

James asserted that in a class with Black and Latino students, the Latino pupils would occasionally receive favorable treatment from Latino teachers. Moreover, a few of the participants expressed the notion that if classes were comprised of majority Black students, some teachers would exert less effort and demonstrate a lack of belief in their abilities, which was resulted in objections from students. Everett commented:

> Black males, they're more willing to speak out in general. They will say if teachers disrespect us in some way. They will say it to the teacher. And that usually causes a confrontation. I would say at school, with Black students, the teachers might not try as hard to teach his students because he doesn't believe in his students, that just goes to the personal relationship he has with them, his willingness to try to teach the students.

A few of the participants described that a significant challenge to establishing an effective student-teacher relationship in the classroom is the preconceived notions that teachers have toward Black males. Responses included teachers exerting limited effort in the classroom, as well as an all-round absence of confidence in Black males' ability to excel in the classroom. The young men perceived the teachers to have low expectations which was contingent on the level of the course being taught (*e.g.* regular, honors, or AP), and the number of Black students enrolled in a course. While all the participants did not experience teachers, who had preconceived notions of Black

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males' abilities, a significant number of them maintained this issue was critical and was an impediment to positive student-teacher interactions.

Racial and Cultural Inconsistency

The inclusion or exclusion of race and culture in the classroom was another pervasive theme in the data. Many participants discussed a racial and cultural gap (Howard, 2010) that existed between the students and teachers, resulting in a lack of pedagogy that was relevant to the lives of Black male students. When asked if most teachers embed culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) in their daily lessons, the responses were mixed. Jason, expressed that most of his teachers did not utilize the pedagogical method, by commenting:

> Most teachers don't do that [use culturally relevant pedagogy]. They just want to teach what they teach and if you learn it, you learn it. If you don't, you don't. They wouldn't take the time out sometimes to know about you as a person.

Similarly, Eric commented, "not really. Only in my English class and my Business class, it doesn't really help you with the real world. They're basically just teaching a lesson." For Jayson and Eric, culturally relevant pedagogy was not often employed by teachers due to their decision to not deviate from conventional teaching lessons. While some participants did not experience culturally relevant teaching in their lessons, others did. Derwin described how his teacher embedded cultural interests outside of their classes into their lessons by stating:

> A lot of students like hip hop for example, so a teacher would embed hip hop with statistics by having a survey about hip hop. That can attract everybody because mostly everybody likes music.

Likewise, Doug replied:

> For math or science, they'll[teachers] tell us real world applications and how we would be able to use this in an everyday situation. So that happens a lot in Econ or History classes. They want us to know where this came from and how it evolved over time to where it is now. So they[teachers] want us [students] to be able to show what happened and why we're here now.

One of the factors that was salient to the relationship between Black male students and their teachers was the inclusion or the omission of culturally relevant teaching. While teachers may not have checked off all of the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, the teachers who did incorporate elements of culturally relevant pedagogy better understood who their students were outside of the school. However, some participants detailed that most of their teachers did not implement lessons that were aligned with who they were as students outside the classroom space, jeopardizing an opportunity to foster a stronger relationship with these young males and to keep them fully engaged. The third theme replete in the responses was validating the voices of students on the type of pedagogy that the participants deemed effective.

Challenging the Dominant Ideology (Student Voice)

Effective pedagogy is a critical element of the student-teacher relationship, and the students were given the opportunity to articulate their perceptions of effective instruction. Jake detailed that when teaching students, teachers should:

> Be able to have patience and talk to us, and we've got to be able to trust them, they've got to be able to trust us, you know. They got to have faith in us that we can, make a difference,

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> or we can get a better grade, you know? If you have nobody supporting you, you're just going to feel like why even bother, you know? You need a support system.

Additionally, Charles commented that he wanted teachers to:

> Encourage them, let them know what's out there, what you can be in life, because after high school you don't really know where you may be in college or supporting your family getting a job. Just being supportive and just helping them really. Do hands on stuff with them… ask them to stay after class talk to them and encourage them to be better really.

Doug and Charles commented that effective teaching in the classroom had less to do with the pedagogical strategies and more to do with having confidence in the ability of Black males to be successful in the classroom and beyond. Adjectives such as trust, faith, patience, encouragement, and support were highlighted as critical to fostering an effective relationship. Alternatively, Sherman delved into more instructional guidance for his teachers by stating:

> Most teachers give you problems to work on. They don't give you the freedom to build up self-motivation to learn and realize, "Hey, I could do a whole lot more with this phone I have in my hand than just Instagram and stuff like that. I can find some information." Allow students to gain more responsibility and master the subject on their own. When you get something, you have to find a way to break it down yourself. Maybe that does mean going on YouTube and searching videos, or maybe looking for examples. The ability to use technology is effective in one's own teaching. Just maybe a little bit more technology access would really benefit.

The participants articulated that a priority for the students is to have teachers acknowledge their potential and be willing to help them achieve success. Furthermore, the participants maintained that independent learning, as well as, being flexible with the use of the internet as a tool for learning are strategies that would improve teacher instruction.

Discussion/Conclusion

Factors the participants contended were critical for productive student-teacher relationship included: (a) the perceptions that teachers held of Black males; (b) the willingness or unwillingness of teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the lessons; and (c) the validation of the voices of students regarding ways to enhance pedagogy within the classroom setting. One of the concerns highlighted by the participants was the negative perceptions teachers placed upon Black male students. Scholars (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010; Reynolds, 2010) note that teachers not only portray Black males in an unfavorable light, but they also attribute any underachievement to cultural deficiencies and not to their own teaching. Preconceived notions about Black male students, who are often marginalized both inside as well as outside of the classroom, can prohibit the ability to create a foundation of trust between students and teachers in the classroom. Milner (2018) recommends that "teachers should engage students directly in conversations to learn from, with, and about them (p.64)."

The second finding was the teachers' willingness or unwillingness to employ pedagogical strategies aligned with the culture and/or lives of Black male students. Howard (2010) claims that teachers must be cognizant about fostering the growth of racial consciousness that is integrated within their teaching. Having teachers who are comfortable with discussing race in the class not only allows for open and honest conversations, but also helps teachers to understand who their students are outside of the classroom, which can further enrich teacher pedagogy. The third principle the participants recognized as critical when developing an effective relationship between

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the students and teachers is to allow students to make recommendations on ways to improve teacher instruction. Mitra (2003) argues that seeking advice from students on the perceptions of teaching not only will impact the way students learn and will encourage their own abilities but will also help teachers meet the needs of their students. Furthermore, Daniels, Deborah, and McCombs (2001) have found a correlation between teacher interest in students' learning needs and greater student interest in schoolwork. Students in general, and Black males in particular, are aware that success in the classroom is contingent on the type of relationship that exists with their teacher. For the participants in this study, the three areas of importance when establishing a successful classroom relationship include addressing the preconceived notions teachers have regarding Black male students, implementing pedagogy that is relevant to their lives outside of school, and providing a voice for students to offer their opinions on the type of teaching that works well for their learning styles. Boutte (2012) argued that negative legacies bequeathed to urban schools can be reversed and rejected via transformational approaches (p. 516). Educational scholars, practitioners, and policymakers can begin by allowing students to offer their insight on one of the most important elements of education: the student-teacher relationship.

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