

Black Like Me: A Shared Ethnography

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This study focused on a concept entitled shared ethnography. The researcher and youth participants share race in common. Critical Race Theory was used to analyze the reflective journal. An after school science program in a high poverty urban environment provided the context for this study. The findings of the study suggested that when researcher and subject share race in common, the researcher has a distinct insight into the subjects' experiences and that the subjects reveal more about their experiences. A shared ethnography implicates the power between researcher and subject in critical issues of race and racism.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) pays attention to the idea that race matters (West, 1994). Specifically, in forming an authentic knowledge base of urban schools through a critical review that accounts for the demographics of an urban environment is important. It pertains to acknowledging the historical aspects of racism in the educational system and how history has led to the state of persons in the urban landscape of today. However, CRT is a new theoretical concept in science education, but it is essential to use this theory for better understanding of the everyday experiences and connected psychological underpinnings, which shape the lives of urban youth. For this study, a Black female educational researcher took into consideration her personal experiences in working with urban youth while understanding her own challenges, advantages, and disadvantages through documentation of the time spent with urban youth in an after school science program as their instructor. A reflective journal of each day's experiences was recorded.

There are two critical components of this study: 1) the researcher who is a Black female researching Black urban youth and; 2) the youth participating (subjects) in an after school science program taught by the researcher. In this study, the reflective journal speaks to the researcher's ideas, thoughts, and experiences through her interactions with the students, in terms of discussion between the students and she, and her (the researcher's) own understandings of these interactions.

Conceptual Framework

The researcher in this study describes herself as a Black female scientist, educational researcher, and teacher educator. This concept has been described as a native researcher or native anthropologist (Banks, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Padilla, 1994). In researching urban youth, this researcher was native in the sense that both the youth researched and she are considered part of a historically marginalized group in society. Some researchers may describe this position as a limitation. However, it is important to discuss the advantages as a native researcher. Inherently, this is a position where the researcher has something in common with those being researched. However, the literature suggests that being a native researcher can work against the quality of the study. As a native researcher, the research and the outcomes of research may be considered biased due to the researcher's personal interests within the urban community. However, the view here is that as a native researcher, the researcher in this study is an insider in the group, and has an opportunity to learn about the students and offer a perspective that is highly informative because of the researcher's affiliation with the urban community.

In connecting CRT to the concept of native researcher is quite clear such that CRT addresses race and racism in society. CRT stems from the race-based critique of the critical legal studies movement from the early 1980s and the lack of attention paid to race in critical legal scholarship (Bell, 1995; Calmore, 1992; Harris, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). CRT uncovers how race and racism operate in law and society (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso (2001) discussed how CRT combines the concepts of race, racism, and racial stereotyping to examine how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups. Five themes form the basic perspective of CRT: 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism in which racism has had a central role in the structuring of schools and schooling practices; 2) the challenge to the dominant ideology in which the system of education is a part of societal inequality; 3) the commitment to social justice in which peoples are liberated and empowered; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge in which students' stories are told to draw upon their life experiences; and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective in which race and racism must be examined from a

historical and contemporary context (Calmore, 1992; Davis, 1989; Delgado, 1984; Garcia, 1995; Lawrence, 1987; Matsuda, 1991; Olivas, 1990).

CRT allows employing ethnographic research through narrative, in particular personal narrative, within the context of a reflective journal. Narrative is one of the most compelling components of CRT because it highlights the experiences of participants, and is presented here as thick, rich descriptions of marginalized experiences documented through the lens of CRT. Thus, the overarching research question for this study: What in-context experiences can be made explicit when a Black female researcher studies Black urban youth?

Methodology

This study took place within the context of an after school science program in an urban middle school. The term “urban” details the socioeconomics, location and demographics of the school. The middle school was located in a large metropolitan city and consisted of 55% Latino/a and 45% Black students where 90% of the students qualified for free lunch. Three participants include the researcher and two Black students. The students included a male student in the 7th grade, Allan, and one female student in the 6th grade, Ayanna. The after school science program or the Science Club met once a week over a period of three months on a voluntarily basis. Ten students in total participated in the Science Club each week. The researcher was also the instructor of the Science Club.

The conceptual framework for this study and the methodology used were both important and critical to this investigation. A critical ethnography was implemented to pay attention to issues of social justice in education (Calabrese Barton, 2001). Specifically, one of the primary themes of CRT is a commitment to social justice and thus, these two ideologies and practices were used for this research. To meet this goal, the researcher became engrossed in the culture of the school and the after school science program. Here, the researcher drew upon her experiences with the students and her own prior experiences that she has carried with her as a Black woman living in America.

The primary data source was the researcher’s reflective journal. Experiences were documented on the Science Club in terms of researcher’s thoughts and feelings, and student comments and

interactions with the researcher. At the end of each Science Club meeting, written reflections were recorded electronically of the day's events and experiences.

Results

Analyzing one's personal documentation in terms of thoughts and emerging biases can be truly reflective and a process of self-discovery. In the analysis of the reflective journal all data was coded for emerging themes using a Grounded Theory approach (Fassinger, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach is based upon the meanings of social interactions and relationships through analysis of the data collected. In using a Grounded Theory approach, data collection consisted of personal writings in the reflective journal, on the basis that the data was grounded in the researcher's personal life within a social context of the Science Club. This was a reflexive approach, in that analysis and ideas were made explicit. The following themes emerged from the analysis: shared ethnography, researcher insight and subject disclosure/revealing.

Excerpt 1

Ginny Marx came to visit. She is a tall White woman, and they (the students) automatically assumed that she was from the university.

The school in which the Science Club was held had a partnership with a local university such that visitors at the school were a common occurrence. Often, students would see unfamiliar faces in the hallway or in their classrooms, and soon those faces became familiar. In the above piece (*Excerpt 1*) a researcher, Ginny Marx, entered the classroom where the Science Club was being held, and in attempt to introduce her to the class, the students in unison stated that this woman was from the university. In the culture of this school, a person affiliated with the university was held in a high regard. However, after Ginny Marx left the classroom a question was asked to the students if they had ever met her. The students all stated that they had not met her. The students were then asked how they knew that she was from the university. The students stated that they "figured" she was. Surprisingly, when the researcher of this study, a Black woman, was introduced to the students by the principal of the school as the Science

Club teacher they were “surprised” to know that she was from the university.

The following excerpt (*Excerpt 2*) was written after a field trip was taken with the students in the Science Club to a museum. Angie Furla, a teacher from the school, accompanied us as a chaperone. Once we arrived in the neighborhood of the museum the students established the differences between their community and the community the museum was located in. The students discussed issues of race, racism and economics.

Excerpt 2

Today is the day of the field trip for the Science Club. Once I arrived at the school I found out that Angie B. will be coming with me. She was truly unpleasant and hardly spoke to me. I know that she did not want to go, but get over it! I notice that issues of respect keep coming up all of the time. Racism or lack of respect: it is what it is.

The students were really excited about going and were all ready to go. Everyone was there except for Rob. The students liked to be on their own in a sense. On the train there Ameer and Allan were socializing about Harry Potter and talking about the DaVinci Code book. Ayanna chats with Carrie and Bella on the train, the girls even start eating their lunch on the train. Bonita and Yanelle chat too. Allan again with his smart comments says that I would look better without makeup. Eventually Angie seems to warm up a bit, but not really. I overhear Allan telling Ameer why he hates people and also tells him about the ad campaign about “Seeing Black People...” and that he believes that it is “racist and a mockery”. The conversation then switches to lost cities, such as Atlantis.

Once we arrive in town the students are amazed by the skyscrapers and eateries and shops and people. They discuss their favorite food places that they see like Subway and Wendy’s Restaurants. Ayanna states “look at the pollution coming out of that building.” Ayanna says that there are probably not any 25 cent chips because there are too many

White people around. They are amazed by the skyscrapers and the architecture of the synagogue. Allan says that this place must be rich and points to the synagogue. Ameer says that everything around here is rich. The students ooh and aaw over the Mercedes-Benz dealership. This area is surrounded by other high-end stores such as PINK and Christian Dior, etc.

Discussion

The combination of using CRT and critical ethnography to employ, analyze, and discuss the research allows the inclusion of race as important, essential, and valid in conducting research within a social justice framework. Any study that is done in a high poverty urban environment where the subjects are members of historically marginalized groups must account for issues of race and racism in the context of the environment. Race and racism are not isolated ideas from the contexts of society and societal inequities. In dismissing issues of race and racism in urban schools, researchers are not giving a true account of how these topics shape urban students' lives.

The term, shared ethnography, was defined in this research as a way to describe the researcher and subject of the same race in understanding the experiences and occurrences in their lives as truly understood because they have both lived these experiences and occurrences, and thus it is shared. Additionally, because of the nature of an ethnographic study whereas the researcher becomes a part of the culture, can further be described as a shared ethnography. Shared ethnography allows for the researcher to have insight on the subjects' experiences and for the subjects to feel comfortable to disclose/reveal their ideas because of the commonalities between researcher and subject. A shared ethnography was experienced here between researcher and students because both are Black. Furthermore, the research is further understood because the researcher is not just experiencing life with the students, but living the same experiences with them.

The majority of teachers in the school where the Science Club took place were White. The researcher experienced a distinct remembrance of joy and excitement in the students' eyes, when they were informed that she would teach the Science Club. A sense of acceptance and appreciation from the students and an immediate comradeship was

experienced as well. However, it is noteworthy to parallel that in *Excerpt 1* where the students assumed that Jenny Marx was from the university with their first impression of the researcher, the most obvious difference in appearance between the two; race. The researcher in this study stated that as a Black female researcher researching Black youth, and as their teacher in the Science Club it was clear that their assumptions were based upon their experiences in their world. The fact that the students and researcher share race in common made it able for the researcher to acknowledge clearly that the students' assumptions were based upon their experiences. The researcher in this study was not surprised that the students did not assume that she was from the university when first introduced to the class by the principal. According to her, as a Black woman in today's society being a researcher is not typically the most obvious occupation that one would associate her with, due to the limited number of Black women researchers in education.

In *Excerpt 2*, reports were made on the field trip to the museum. The chaperone, Angie Furla, was not pleased to chaperone the field trip. While observing at the school, acts of disrespect were witnessed between teachers and students in addition to issues of race and racism that continuously emerged. Students in the Science Club felt comfortable sharing their ideas about the new environment they were in once arriving at the museum. Allan's comments about "hating people" were in reference to a local advertisement that discussed Black persons on television in various comedies and dramas. However, he expressed to me later that he despised the advertising campaign because it referenced Blacks in a negative stereotype as uneducated and overwhelmingly jovial. Ayanna's comments about 25 cent chips not being sold in a White neighborhood showed how she equated economics with race. Simply put, in a White neighborhood one cannot find inexpensive food. In this, what does this mean for her as a young Black student? Does it mean that if she cannot afford the snacks in a White neighborhood that there is no place for her in that neighborhood or that she is not welcome there? Furthermore, Allan equated economics with religion and culture in that he specifically stated that because he saw a synagogue that the area must be rich.

Ideas about race, racism, and economics were welcomed and shared between student and researcher. The realization here was that rather than focusing on how these ideas were formed, the focus should

be on what the impact of these ideas had on students' lives in learning in school. Clearly, the students equated goodness with being rich and felt comfortable to inform the researcher. The students were aware of the issues of race, racism and class and were affected by it because they were able to talk about it in a societal/economic context with the researcher. The researcher did have race in common with the students and understood their experiences. Regardless of class in terms of the researcher's own experiences growing up in upper middle class America, the color of her skin was and still is always noticed first. Talking about race can be uneasy and uncomfortable at times so class is used as a descriptor instead. Nevertheless, research must be true to the importance of race because regardless of class, race is sometimes the most obvious way to categorize and stereotype people.

Conclusion

In understanding shared ethnography, researchers entering an urban community should remain true to the data, true to the experience, and true to the voices and stories of urban youth. A shared ethnography is an experience between researcher and subject that can enhance ethnography such that more critical information is gained. This study revealed that participants had a certain level of comfort with the researcher because of their common shared life experiences. In this case, race is the common shared experience. In using CRT to analyze this idea, it acknowledges that race is important and that it is powerful in shaping one's everyday existence in America.

A shared ethnography not only allows for empowering youth by understanding their lives, but also empowering the researcher to feel a special obligation and unique ownership in ensuring that the stories of urban youth are told. More importantly, it is seen here that these students have developed ideas that equate race to economics. This is something that must be examined in terms of ensuring that students from historically marginalized groups have access to learning and excelling so that they too can live the American dream. Students have expressed their feelings of un-acceptance in certain neighborhoods and this is an idea that needs to be further investigated. These results imply the need to further motivate students to excel in school and introduce them (through education and mentorship) to successful people who look like them and have the same common background.

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