

Cognitive and Affection Reform in Urban Elementary Schools: Listening to the Voices of Children

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This heuristic narratological inquiry used video-taped interviews and observations to explore the experiences of 145 urban students in grades one through six who also represented diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The goal of the study was to identify curricular and pedagogical strategies that enhance what students love about school, while diminishing factors they disliked. Digital video recording captured students' voices as "stories about school," which provided thick description for analysis and interpretation. Through heuristic inquiry, the researchers used their personal insights and experiences to identify themes that suggested elementary students in urban schools want instruction that is active and engaging, makes use of their strengths and talents, and involves them in making choices about what and how to learn. They want caring teachers who have high academic expectations and desire to know more about their individual cultures as well as the cultures of other people.

Most educational reform has devoted more attention to cognitive initiatives that purport to increase the learning outcomes of students with less attention given to affective reforms that seek to listen to the voices of children and their stories about schools. The persistent focus on policies and programs that emphasize thinking ignores the role of emotions or relationships in the educational process. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) federal legislation (2001) with its emphasis on scientifically based research interventions (United States Government Accountability Office, 2006) increases the federal responsibility for student achievement with states responsible for utilizing scientifically based research to develop curricula and assessments reflecting their specific standards. The message in the legislation is clear – schools will be held more accountable for cognitive reform rather than affective reform. We posit that this message translates to: children should be seen (in the context of following instructions and completing academic assignments) but not heard (in the context of value for their authentic voices and lived experiences).

Quality education and improved academic achievement for students must also be supported by policies and practices that encourage educators to connect to the lives of their students, to have high expectations of them, and to interact

with them in ways that build mutually supportive relationships which promote learning. Learning is impacted by both cognitive and social constructions, and becoming instructionally effective requires embracing more than a student's thinking:

Feelings and actions are also important. We must deal with all three forms of learning. These are acquisition of knowledge (cognitive learning), change in emotions or feelings (affective learning), and gain in physical or motor actions of performance (psychomotor learning) that enhances a person's capacity to make sense out of their experiences. (Novak, 1998, p. 9)

Additionally, pedagogical issues related to affective learning entail understanding the sociocultural nature of learning, or the understanding that cultural context and content impact teaching and learning (Foster, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lee, 2006; Pang, 2005; Trumbull, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2003). Most educators agree that connecting new learning to the prior knowledge of students is a way to acknowledge and value the knowledge and experiences they bring from home and community. Lee (2006) suggested that if we understand that learning increases from making use of prior knowledge, then we must also acknowledge the possibilities of the generative nature of learning and development.

While educators have made some progress in learning about how young people learn, we still face the challenge of including what students bring with them to school in educational reform efforts. Mitra (2005, p. 521) stressed the rich possibilities that undergird reform initiatives that use the voices of students, "partnering with students to identify school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate.

Therefore, as professors in the academy – representing different cultures, backgrounds, and experiences – we came together in the midst of the current political environment to explore the possibilities of using student voices that reflect experiences and attitudes, often couched in the expressions of what they ‘love’ and ‘hate’ about school, in order to explore the value of collaboration with students in the school improvement process. Holfve-Sabel (2006) stated that:

Attitudes serve as stabilizing factors in understanding similar situations, and also in creating and maintaining the expression of one’s identity in the environment. The attitude concept is, in practice and in investigations, often judged as being as important as cognitive variables: the conclusion is that student attitudes may be investigated independently of student achievement. (p. 57)

We both recalled the painful memories of not being heard in schools and actions of educators that promoted our disengagement. The goal of our work was to find a way for children to be seen and heard by adults in schools.

The purpose of this heuristic narratological study was to use video-taped interviews and observations to explore the experiences and attitudes of urban students in grades one through six in order to identify curricular and pedagogical strategies that enhance what students love about school, while diminishing factors they disliked. The central question that guided the study was what do kids love about school and what do they hate about school? The theoretical framework draws upon knowledge, experiences, and experimental studies of affective factors related to academic achievement and high expectations, narrative and storytelling in the school reform process, and voice in the context of school experiences of students in urban elementary school settings.

Theoretical Framework

Suppression of the Personal

Most educators agree that affective factors are important dimensions of the teaching-learning process. However, the suppression of personal experiences within schools and teacher education often contributes to the absence of reflective practices, relationships, and overall caring which reproduces technocratic and corporate ideologies that sustain the official narrative of culture (e.g., Gay, 2003; Irvine & York, 1995; McLaren, 2003). Within such an environment, low expectations for academic success and deficit thinking are likely to influence educators' decisions about policies and instructional programs. We expect to teach students who are pliable and manageable; and, when students do not meet our expectations, they are often viewed as difficult to teach. Seelye and Seelye-James's (1995) study of classrooms in the United States revealed a hidden agenda of five rules that are consistently embedded into teachers' management plans: (1) Do what the teacher says, (2) Live up to teacher expectations for proper behavior, (3) Stick to the schedule, (4) Keep busy, and (5) Keep quiet and keep still.

The expectations of teachers frequently are based on the initial achievement of students or knowledge of their past performance. High expectations of teachers are correlated with student achievement and, in some cases, intelligence quotient scores (Ferguson, 1998; Good & Brophy, 1995; Good & Nichols, 2001; Rosenthal, 1994). Expectations for the achievement of culturally diverse students are often depicted in teachers' behaviors toward students. For example, Casteel (1998), analyzing the behaviors of 16 teachers, concluded that these teachers displayed different degrees of approach and avoidance when interacting with culturally diverse students. White teachers called on Black students more often using direct questions, and they received fewer process questions than their White counterparts. A process question requires an extended answer and is often described as a "why" question. Additionally, teachers gave more clues to White students compared to Black

students. White boys received more praise than any other group, while Black boys received less praise than any other group.

Levine (1995) provided a concrete example of how the hidden curriculum marginalizes students and renders them as “more challenged to teach.” He noted that the achievement and exclusivity of the dominant mono-culture lies in a “hidden curriculum,” where one has to be White to know the hidden rules for success. The hidden curriculum consists of structures of power and authority, teacher expectations of how students will behave and achieve, and student tracking designed to maintain the dominant culture or status quo.

In schools where educators and community members endeavor to reconstruct their work around children’s diverse needs, students’ voices are heard and their experiences are supported and expanded by skilled professionals who link affective factors to outcomes such as achievement and behavior. In essence, learning is viewed as a socially constructed act that involves establishing relationships with learners, valuing their diverse backgrounds, and helping learners use their voices to construct meaning of the world.

Narrative and Voice

Narratives focus on voice, testimony, autobiography, memory, and other forms of textual possibilities and “carve out spaces for the embodied voices of the silenced (the stress on the last two letters is important here, since it signifies an active process of control, regulation, and policing) to be articulated” (Apple, 1998, p. x). In this study, we treated the students’ interviews as narratives because their responses to

the questions constituted short stories (Chase, 2005; Grbich, 2007) about what they loved and hated about schools; the presumption is most of our conversations are considered stories. Narratology or narrative inquiry allows the researcher to capture the realities of people's lives and the meanings they attached to these experiences. Often associated with the stories people tell of their lives in communities, organizations, schools and other spaces in which they may occupy, narrative might be both a method and the phenomenon of study (Chase, 2005; Clandinin and Connelly, 1994; Creswell, 2007). The similarities and differences between narrative inquiry and stories are explained by Clandinin and Connelly:

It is equally as correct to say inquiry into narrative as it is to say narrative inquiry. By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon story and the inquiry narrative. Thus we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (1994, p. 416)

Shuman (2005) further described storytelling as “an aspect of the ordinary touted as a healing art . . . a means for transforming oppressive conditions by creating opportunity for suppressed voices to be heard or for creating opportunities to listen to those voices” (p. 5). Storytelling, according to Hollingsworth (1994), is not new, and can be traced to origins such as the:

ancient methods of teaching and learning from the Greek era of education, . . . in recent theoretical work which suggest that

personally meaningful knowledge is socially constructed through shared understandings (Vygotsky, 1978); in cultural feminism which emphasizes a holistic and collective orientation to world and work experiences (Gilman, 1988); in feminist epistemology which values considered experience as knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). . . and in the critical and contextual relevant nature of the social use of knowledge (Lorde, 1984; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). (p. 6)

Voice enables educators to use their constructed meanings for active engagement in community and to hear what children have to say about school as a foundation for school reform. Voice implies, according to Britzman (1990), “the individual’s relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual’s relationship to the other” p. 14). McWilliam (1994) in her work with pre-service teachers emphasized the importance of legitimizing individual voices, stating, “what is important here is that the pre-service teacher is silent not in the sense of ‘having no voice,’ but rather in the sense of having no context in which the dissenting voice is legitimated” (p. 71). Similarly, voices of children must be legitimated; their voices must become authentic and valued within the school. Hollingsworth (1994) viewed voice as also linked to an “emerging feminist consciousness” (p. 7) common to feminist research which values the lived experience of others rather than an objective view of experience. Hence, valuing the experiences of children allows educators and community stakeholders to eradicate the attitude that children should be seen but not heard. In this project, the lived experiences of

elementary students were expressed through their diverse voices and captured using video-taped interviews. Schools are one of the few remaining places where people can come together and make meaning of their lives and “the use of narrative, according to Phillion, He, and Connelly (2005) is in response to the recognition of the complexity of human experience in increasingly diversified society” (p. 9). Through listening to the voices of children, we hear their stories.

Storytelling and School Reform

Storytelling is currently viewed as an important tool for professional development, research, and teaching. Hollingsworth (1994), drawing on Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin’s work on narrative inquiry, used collaborative conversation to help teachers understand their common stories about learning to teach culturally diverse students. Wallace (1996) incorporated storytelling as a strategy for broad-based leadership development. Storytelling and dialoguing with colleagues enable them to “explore their feelings, emotions, situations, and events that vividly evoked various aspects of their professional work . . . through reflection, they constructed meaningful insights based on the shared themes found embedded within their stories” (p. 16). Other educators have used stories to help change the culture of schools and indoctrinate new teachers to the values and norms of the institution (e.g., Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, Stolp & Smith, 1995; McWilliam, 1994).

As Gruenewald (2003, p. 284) suggested, “my hope is that reading poems and stories about school can help teachers, and others entrusted with the education of children, to begin asking, and living, some fundamental questions, and to rethink the entire proposition of what does, and does not, happen within ‘the shutter’d room.’” Becoming an insider in a culture

means learning the cultural stories and the story frames that define it. From this perspective, culture is the master storyteller. Culture influences the telling of our inner stories and how we respond to the stories of others. Unless we are able to adopt the important stories and scripts as our own, we remain outsiders. We used this project to become insiders in the midst of the political rhetoric of No Child Left Behind to apprehend the voices of urban elementary students and the stories they tell about school in order to inform key reform initiatives.

Methodology

Design of Study

The purpose of this heuristic narratological study was to use video-taped interviews and observations to explore the experiences and attitudes of urban elementary students in order to discover common themes that reflect what students love and dislike about school. “Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality not quantity; with experience not behavior” (Patton, 2002, p. 7). While we self-reflected on the experiences that emerge, we also realized that our own experiences were equally important in that “the other can be understood only as part of a relationship with the self” (Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p. 24). Hearing the voices of participants as they seek to make meaning of their experiences in urban schools is essential to this inquiry. Guided by the theoretical framework and research questions, the study led to the telling of students’ experiences which served as data, leading to what Polkinghorne (1995) described as “analysis of narratives” (p. 12) to identify themes to inform the work of educators and other stakeholders in the school improvement process.

Identification of the participants was accomplished through the purposive selection of three elementary schools in a Midwest urban community: one charter school (School A), one traditional urban elementary school (School B), and

one African-centered elementary school (School C). This sampling procedure, generally indiscriminate, was open to schools that provided, explained Strauss and Corbin (1990), the “greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 180).

School A is a Title I public charter school emphasizing performing arts that serves 187 students in grades K-8 in the heart of a Latino community in the urban core. Student demographic data for 2007 included 91.4% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and racial enrollment percentages of 6.4% Asian, 17.1% Black, 63.1% Hispanic, and 13.4% White. There was a 94.7% attendance rate in 2007. There are 14 teachers and one administrator in the school, with 64.7% of classes taught by ‘highly qualified’ teachers according to *No Child Left Behind* criteria. State assessment results for 2006 and 2007 demonstrated that all students and subgroups within the school met ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’ for both mathematics and communication arts (State Department of Education, 2007).

School B is a Title I elementary school that offers a traditional structure and curriculum to 417 students in grades K-5 in an urban region that borders a rural / suburban community. Student demographic data for 2007 included 64.5% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and racial enrollment percentages of 6.1% Black, 17.3% Hispanic, 56.1% White, and 10.5% ‘Other’. There was a 94.2% attendance rate in 2007. There are 24 teachers and one administrator in the school, with 84% of classes taught by ‘highly qualified’ teachers. State assessment results for 2006 and 2007 demonstrated that for both mathematics and reading, the school did not meet ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’ and was identified as a ‘Title I School on Improvement’ for the past two years (State Department of Education, 2007).

School C is a Title I public school with an African-centered curriculum that serves 240 students in grades K-5 in the urban core. Student demographic data for 2007 included 90.6% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and a racial enrollment percentage of 100% Black. There was an 89.4% attendance rate in 2007. There are 16 teachers and one administrator in the school, with 100% of classes taught by ‘highly qualified’ teachers. State assessment results demonstrated that all students and subgroups within the school met ‘Adequate Yearly Progress’ for both mathematics and communication arts in 2006, and that the school did not meet AYP for mathematics and communication arts in 2007 (State Department of Education, 2007).

All students in grades 1-6 the charter school and in grades 1-5 in the traditional urban elementary school were invited to participate in the videotaped interviews through a letter and consent form that was signed by the parents of the participants. The invitation to participate in the African-centered school was shared with all fourth-grade students, due to a new reading program in the school that did not allow the possibility of scheduling interviews school-wide. Every student in each school site who returned the consent form was included in the interview process. The number of students from each grade level who were interviewed included the following: 20 first-grade, 21 second-grade, 11 third-grade, 38 fourth-grade, 23 fifth-grade, and 31 sixth-grade for a total of 144 student interviews.

Data Collection

The digital video footage captured during the semi-structured interview sessions became the source for qualitative examination of diverse perspectives and description of affective factors related to the students’ educational experiences. Semi-structured interviews began with four questions and allowed for more focused, conversational, two-

way communication between the researcher and informants (Merriam, 1998): (a) *What do you love about school?* (b) *What do you hate about school?* (c) *What would you change if you were in charge of the school?* and (d) *What would you like to say to teachers?* As conversations evolved the interviews became more contextualized and reflected the experiences of individual participants.

Additional data included observations in the three schools conducted during functions such as all school activities, recess, and academic programs. The researchers also observed in gathering places for students, such as before- and after-school programs, in the hallways, and in the cafeteria during lunch. The purpose of these observations was to understand the context of urban schools and to validate emerging findings from the interviews. We observed interactions between teachers and students, students and peers, administrators and students, and others. Our observations were guided by the following: (a) What is going on? (b) Is there a definite sequence of activities? (c) How do people interact with each other? (d) How are people and activities connected or related? (d) What do these observations reveal about students' attitudes toward school?

Data Analysis

Guided by the research questions and theoretical framework, we utilized open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and socio-cultural analysis (Reissman, 2003) to analyze 144 interviews and observations in three urban elementary school sites. Questions were (a) *What do you love about school?* (b) *What do you hate about school?* (c) *What would you change if you were in charge of the school?* and (d) *What would you like to say to teachers?* The coding sequence facilitated the processes of: (a) noticing interesting patterns in the data, (b) marking patterns with code words, and (c) retrieving them for further analysis. Using a conceptual framework, themes emerged

through the theoretical sampling of categories and incidents in the data. Voice, instructional experiences, multicultural content, relationships, and teacher expectations for academics and behavior were the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to propose relationships that suggested causal conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interactional strategies, and consequences. While this process is often viewed by qualitative researchers as a grounded theory approach, the use of the socio-cultural approach and grounded theory helped us explore the “broader interpretive frameworks that people use to make sense of particular incidents in individuals’ lives (Grbich, 2007, p. 124). The categories of the conceptual framework, which was expanded in the data analysis phase, were defined as follows:

1. Voice consists of the cultural grammar and background knowledge that students use to interpret and articulate their experiences related to school.
2. Culturally congruent instruction refers to cognitive and affective classroom and school activities that use the knowledge students bring from their homes and communities to extend their learning and to encourage collaborative learning.
3. Multicultural content includes instructional pedagogy and materials which reflect the diversity of cultures within a pluralistic society involving both local and global culture.
4. Relationships, characterized as interactions between teachers and students, students and peers, administrators and students, and others.
5. Teacher expectations for academics and behavior are defined as verbal and nonverbal messages and interactions, originating from the teacher’s assessments of students, which may have an impact on the student’s expectations about self and learning.

The heuristic nature of this study led to our active engagement in reflecting, discovering, and sharing life experiences; “the researcher then comes to understand the essence of the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry . . .” (Patton, 2002, p. 108). In other words, “What is the nature or essence of the experience of learning so that I can now better understand what this particular learning experience is like for these children?” (Manen, 1990, p. 10).

Findings and Discussion

Many students who volunteered to be interviewed were struggling academically and behaviorally. These were students who were challenged by the school’s demands, and through their responses to the interview questions they often revealed a greater insight into what is really going on in a school, such as specific stories about bullying, negative relationships with teachers, and instructional practices that seemingly perpetuated students’ inability to understand the concepts being taught. Stories about what they loved about school included recess, competitive learning games, reading self-selected books from the library, and fun and challenging math and science activities. Overall, their stories were focused more on affective constructions related to learning than cognitive constructions. Subtle and sometimes overt themes in the observation scripts were similar to those found in the interviews. Our findings have been organized according to the themes of lack of voice, traditional instructional experiences, limited multicultural content, relationships, and teacher expectations for academics and behavior. Surprisingly, there were also individual events and actions of teachers that depicted the theme of transformation, as McLaren (1989) suggested, “a critical and affirming pedagogy . . . constructed around the stories that people tell, the ways in which students and teachers author meaning, and the possibilities that underlie the experiences that shape their voices” (p. 229).

Lack of Voice

Voice is defined in this study as cultural grammar and background knowledge that students use to interpret and articulate their experiences related to school. To be included is to be heard and know that one's opinion counts. Taylor (1994) points out that it is a necessary human need for people to be recognized: "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (p. 26). Our findings suggested there are few opportunities for students' knowledge, thoughts, desires, and opinions to be heard in school reform. The theme of lack of voice countered by expressions of desire to be listened to and heard, were apparent in the interview scripts.

School A:

Sometimes you get in trouble when you didn't do anything...the teachers misunderstood you and you get in trouble until they figure out that you didn't do it. (Fifth-grade student)

The things that I wouldn't keep are the uniforms. I would let kids wear what they want to wear. (Sixth-grade student)

I want chocolate milk every day. (First-grade student)

School B:

Sometimes I don't like how much work they give us. They give us a lot of work, and it over-do's us, 'cause we have a lot of stuff to do at home as well. (Fifth-grade student)

What I don't like about school is when people boss you around. (Second-grade student)

School C:

I don't like other children gettin' yelled at. I don't like me getting' yelled at. (Fourth-grade student)

I don't like wearing uniforms. We want to wear our own clothes. (Fourth-grade student)

Our observations in the three schools yielded similar results. In before and after school programs, the hallways, the

cafeteria, posted documents and artifacts, student programs, and other places students gather within the school we did not observe activities designed to capture or share the voices of students. In the African-centered school, an activity called “Harambee” was conducted each morning which encouraged the students to stand in a large circle in the gymnasium, and clap their hands and share their voices in unison:

What I love about school is that every morning we get to have Harambee. Harambee means that we're pulling together, trying to get the day started. The first thing that we say in Harambee is, 'Would you please join me in Harambee,' then we count to three in Swahili. 'I pledge today that I will seek to open my mind, and I will seek and learn new knowledge. I will not harm, fight, or disrespect my fellow brothers and sisters. My body, mind, and the words I speak are clean. I respect my parents, my teachers, and myself. I will use my knowledge to stay in school and make a new and better world. I am great. I am great. I am great. My education will make me even greater.' (School C, Fourth-grade student)

While we heard the voices of students during Harambee in the African-centered school, the scripted recitation did not provide opportunities nor context, as McWilliam (1994) would say, to legitimize the “dissenting voices” of students.

Traditional Instructional Strategies

The diversity of students in schools calls for culturally-mediated instruction (Hollins, 2008) that consists of the use of culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content” (p. 148). In other words, according to Hollins (2008) “culture is viewed as the guide for feeling, thinking, and behaving, culture is central to school learning” (p. 14). However, in these three schools the students often spoke of instances of instruction which appeared to be more traditional, characterized by “transmission rather than agency, or mutual discovery by students and teachers” (Nieto, 2002, p. 5).

You have to follow along with your teacher and you can't just do it on your own if you already know what you're doing. (School B, Fifth-grade)

We discovered that many of these urban children liked having choice and expressed a love for learning. Many students spoke of having free choice for reading and going to the library instead of being given books to read.

I just love to learn! (School A, First-grade)

I love to learn new things. (School B, Second-grade)

Student engagement with classroom assignments often depends on the extent to which teachers integrate students' personal ideas and concerns with teaching and provide them more choices (Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995). Students expressed a desire for learning activities in the form of games, such as competitive learning activities like spelling bees, spelling baseball, math baseball, or holding up the answer to science questions to see who gets the most points.

In School B, we observed a program called "Rocket Math," where the students competed against themselves. It was a situation where they could chart their own progress and the students were trying to improve each time. A lot of the students at that particular school, when asked what they love about school, would say, "Rocket math!" These findings are contradictive of the pervasive stereotypes that often depict urban children as unmotivated and unengaged (Williams, 2003).

An area that NCLB has affected is the amount of time devoted to recess and other areas such as the arts, viewed often as non-essential to the 'academic core.' According to a study by the Center on Education Policy (2007), schools reduced allocated time for recess from 184 minutes per week prior to NCLB, to 144 minutes per week in 2007. Many of the

students in this study said that they didn't like the "short time of recess" and mentioned having only five or ten minutes to eat lunch. Students in the older elementary school grades remembered having more time for recess in the primary grades, and were becoming more and more burned out by reform initiatives in their schools that communicated purely cognitive approaches that focused on "drill and kill." They talked about changing school so that there would be more time for daily recess:

Sometimes, well this year, we've started to stop having recess, which is kind of like a time to let your brain go and just talk to your friends. Now we only have it at lunch and at the end of Fridays, so now we're just constantly in education. I mean, it's pretty cool, but then it's also a thing that you really just want to kind of take a break from learning for a little bit. (School B, Fifth-grade)

Valuing Diversity and Multicultural Content

Current research suggests that culturally responsive teaching with its emphasis on home, school, and community connections not only helps students understand the school curriculum, but also promotes literacy development (Hollins, 2008; Leftwich, 2002; Moll, 1992; Nieto, 2002; Schmidt, 2005; Tharp & Dalton, 1994).

Our findings in this area suggested most students, with the exception of the African-centered school, were not exposed to multicultural content. However, students made connections to affective dimensions of learning --- who they were and what they learned in their homes and communities and desired to see elements of this identity reflected in the school's curriculum and pedagogy.

I would play games with kids so they can understand. 'Cause when my mom was younger, she said that they had spelling games and math quizzes class against class to help us with our math test. I think that helps them learn better. (School C, Fourth-grade)

In the African-centered school, students connected multicultural content to cultural identity. We were particularly impressed by the perspective of a fourth-grade female student in the African-centered school related to multicultural content:

Yes we are learning about ourselves and feeling good about our own cultural identity, but I also want to learn more about other cultures.

We observed a project at this school where students were asked to investigate an Egyptian historical figure, and then dressed as this person to give a presentation for the class. The principal explained that in curriculum related to ancient history of the western world, Egypt is typically taught as part of the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea along with Greece and the Roman Empire. In the African-centered school, the curriculum presented Egypt as a part of a unified history of Africa. She stated that often students in the United States who are of African descent do not identify with the pharaohs of Egypt and the rich cultural and linguistic traditions, and that the intent of this project was to encourage the students in the school to see this as part of their proud heritage. An absence of multicultural education in preparatory programs may contribute to teachers and principals who are “less aware of the connection between affirming diversity and student achievement” (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006) which serves to continue to widen the achievement gap in schools.

Relationships

The importance of having positive relationships with teachers and other adults in school was especially valued by students. A male fifth-grade English Language Learner (ELL) student talked about “*getting in trouble when you didn’t do anything*”. He struggled to express his frustration with getting in trouble, and the teacher finding out later that “*you didn’t do*

anything,” and never being heard when he tried to explain his perspective of the incident.

We cannot communicate this finding of the critical need for positive relationships with teachers any better than it was expressed by students:

Some kids...they struggle, like I struggle in a lot of things. And, it's just that the teachers, sometimes they want everything to be perfect. But kids...can't...always...make...everything...perfect. (School A, Sixth-grade)

In our school we have good teachers...(pauses)...well some. (School A, Fifth-grade)

In our class, we like giving the teacher advice and ideas. And she'll be like (smiling), "Yeah!"(School C, Fourth-grade) I don't like when kids get in trouble in the cafeteria and they have to stand up against the wall. And they have to let their teacher see them be embarrassed. (School C, Fourth-grade)

Sometimes the teachers, if you be nice to them, they'll be nice to you. (School A, Third-grade)

The skills needed for teaching are the same skills needed for parenting. Teachers must believe that other people's kids are worthy of teaching. Lisa Delpit's (1988) work is instructive here in that educators must value other folks' kids like they would value their own kids, and teach other people's kids like they would teach their own.

Students also wanted to have positive relationships with their peers. They hated to see kids fighting with one another and bullying in school. Listening to the voices of children demonstrated that at one of the three school sites, a higher percentage of students shared that they disliked bullying, signifying that there was an issue of concern on the part of the students that needed to be addressed by the adults in the school.

I don't like it when people be mean to me. (Fourth-grade)

People calling me names, like people last year called me fat on the bus and stuff. (Fifth-grade)

Last year there was this one kid who kept calling me ugly and it really did not make me feel good. (Fourth-grade)

I don't think that people should be left out just because they're different, and then get made fun of for it. And I know how it feels, because ever since the end of first-grade people started picking on me. And I don't want other people feeling that way, after knowing how it feels. (Fifth-grade)

We even have a no bullying pledge, but that's not helping much because a lot of people are still getting bullied. (Fourth-grade)

Teacher Expectations for Academics and Behavior

Older students, fourth and fifth graders, did not feel that teachers had high expectations for academics and behaviors and felt that differentiated instruction and active engagement would lead to higher academic expectations:

We should have things happen more, like different kinds of projects that we can do that would make us happy. Like activities - like science experiments. Well, we do experiments, but sometimes they're not as fun as we think they're gonna be. (School B, Fifth-grade)

We did a science project about cells. The boys had to make a plant cell and the girls had to make animal cells by themselves. I made mine out of clay and brown sugar with different parts of the animal's body. (School B, Fifth-grade)

I think that teachers should sometimes throw in lessons that are more interactive to make them more interesting. Like, say, in science class, you could do more experiments. (School A, Fourth-grade)

Some students described the desire for individual work and respect for the individual with regard to behavioral expectations:

The teacher wants everybody to do the same paper at the same time. Even if you want to get on with it, you have to [complete the task] with the teacher and class as a whole. (School B, Fourth-grade)

What I don't like is that sometimes the teacher treats the whole class as a community if somebody acts bad. (School A, Sixth-grade)

We heard the strong desire in their voices to move forward, rather than to be held back, and to continue with their learning, rather than be involved in consequences for the behaviors of a particular student or group of students.

A chronic problem in the three schools related to the completion of homework assignments by all students. They hated homework and shared concerns about being assigned to work they don't understand. Students readily pointed out that they get help from their parents, but sometimes the parents get it wrong, too. A fifth-grade male student expressed his concern this way:

Sometimes my sister be helping me, and my mom – I mean my step-mom, and my dad be helping me. But sometimes...well, they're wrong. (School B)

During our observations and discussions with the educators in these schools regarding homework, they stated kids in urban schools are “three years behind” already or more. The teachers felt that without drill and practice, such as learning their multiplication tables, the students were going to fall further and further behind. The consensus was that there are not enough hours in the school day for teachers to do what needs to be done to “catch these kids up.”

The principal of one of the schools said there is tremendous pressure from parents right now to make sure that the school keeps assigning homework, so kids will be occupied, or engaged, or to help them to learn. Nieto (2002) describes the high risk of academic failure for minority students and students from poverty backgrounds that may motivate such ‘drill and kill’ daily homework requirements:

Research over the past half century has documented a disheartening legacy of failure for many students of all backgrounds, but especially children of Latino, African American, and Native American families, as well as poor European American families, and, more recently, Asian and Pacific American immigrant students. (p. 120)

Such practices may accelerate frustration and burnout, and for many kids may contribute to later decisions to drop out of school. As Haberman (1991) would say we feed these kids a constant diet of low level skills and by the time they reach middle school and high school they expect this pedagogy of poverty.

Yet, many of these urban elementary school students, when asked what they would change about school, said they wanted ‘*harder math*’. This desire for more challenging math and science was heard repeatedly during the student interviews. They wanted to do experiments, and they wanted to do the scientific method.

What I like about school is I love to get good grades...I like learning harder math and science. (School C, Fourth-grade)
I like when we do activities, and I like when the whole class is quiet and they're paying attention. And I like when I'm making good grades and being on principal's honor roll. (School C, Fourth-grade)

Transformation

Our findings also pointed to the theme of transformation, listening to and really hearing the voices of children and identifying possibilities for change or school reform. A few students revealed stories about schools that valued knowledge from home and community which tends to reflect culturally-mediated instruction, a blending of cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. This finding suggests the transformation of traditional schooling practices. A sixth-grader quietly spoke about his experiences with math and a more personalized connection to writing --- which he viewed as a special talent:

I like math, because I am sometimes good at math; sometimes I am not. And I like writing, and my teachers be saying that I am really talented at writing, 'cause sometimes the writing comes from my heart, and I express stuff. (School A)

The principal of School A was interested in following up on many of the students' suggestions from the interviews, and she added permanent student roles to the board of directors which governs the school.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study reflected the meaning and biases of our personal and professional experiences. As researchers, representing difference cultures and backgrounds, we viewed this project as a way to incorporate self and narrative for school reform. Yet, at the same time, we were both involved in the other discourse of changing schools using the old story, one with a predominant focus on the cognitive tasks related to standards, curriculum, and “fixing the children” in urban schools. Semi-structured interviews, “an extension of constructions developed by the inquirer” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 185), peer examination, and outside the field review verified emerging themes in the data, contributing to inter-coder reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

We used our constructed and contested meanings of the terrain of urban schools to understand the participants. However, it is only through ongoing meaningful dialogue with the children that the acts, meanings, intentions, motives, contexts, situations, and circumstances of actions become real for both the researcher and the participants. We also acknowledge the oversimplification of the assumption that listening to the voices of elementary children will promote substantial changes in schools, specifically the urban schools

comprising this study. All stakeholders, including state and local policy groups, higher education institutions, community members, administrators, teachers, parents, and students will have to collaboratively work with others to dispel the attitude that children should be seen but not heard. Using the voices of children, especially younger students, in school reform requires structural changes that value learning as consisting of both cognitive and affective constructions.

Conclusion and Implications

Findings suggested that elementary students in urban schools want to be seen (in the context of following instructions and completing academic assignments) and heard (in the context of value for their authentic voices and lived experiences). They want instruction that is active and engaging, makes use of their strengths and talents, and involves them in making choices about what to learn and how to learn. They want caring teachers who have high academic expectations and desire to know more about their individual cultures as well as the cultures of people. Urban elementary students in this study hated homework, especially when homework was given as new learning instead of reinforcement of information and skills previously taught. In addition to these findings, the following recommendations for urban elementary school reform that includes students' perspectives were generated from this study:

1. School reform initiatives must involve collaborative opportunities that involve significant numbers of students who are representative of the larger community; an approach that also involves educators, parents, community members, and a variety of other stakeholders to plan and develop programs that are grounded in what we know about learning and human development. Classroom instruction and enrichment or tutorial experience needs to be learner-centered, and access to the learners' diverse perspectives must be systematically implemented to better understand the effectiveness of instruction.

2. Differentiated instruction should be planned for the regular classrooms as well as after school programming. When students feel successful and believe that their needs are being met they are likely to become more engaged in school and out of school. There was little evidence that students' attitudes toward school benefit from 'drill and kill' approaches. More active and project-based learning that meet the developmental needs of kids is required to promote critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and creativity.
3. Teacher preparation programs and school district staff-development efforts should be closely aligned in order to prepare teachers to implement instruction that values cognitive and affective learning, giving attention to instruction that is culturally-mediated (Hollins, 2008). Teachers must constantly assess student learning, and involve them in planning and delivering instruction. This does not abdicate the teachers' responsibility for teaching and learning, but rather the teacher becomes the facilitator, which involves more complex skills. A reorientation of working relations and values for teacher preparation institutions and school districts would require less time for teacher educators to engage in traditional activities of research and publications and more time for school districts to design programs that provide ongoing collaboration and dialogue with those who prepare teachers --- teacher educators.

Listening to student voices provides the unique opportunity for teachers, school and district administrators, higher education faculty who work in teacher and administrator preparation programs, and other community stakeholders to connect the diverse experiences communicated through the voices of the participants to policies and practices related to both community and school-

based programming. As Cook-Sather (2002) stated, “It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education” (p. 3). In an age of scientific inquiry, a study such as this also serves to make meaning of research findings conducted utilizing qualitative paradigms. The long-term significance of such research may include policy recommendations for urban elementary schools to improve academic achievement of students from diverse, lower socio-economic backgrounds through inclusion of students’ voices in their own educational process, and enhancement of factors that positively influence students’ attitudes toward schooling.

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