The Community Teacher: Perspectives of African-Born Teachers

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the question: How do African-born teachers in U.S. urban schools conceptualize the 'teacher" and his/her role and characteristics in an African school context? The data resulted in the conceptualization of the teacher as "the community teacher" who is intimately invested and integrated into the community, internalizes teaching as community service, believes and commits to collective responsibility, builds synergistic relationship with parents/families and the community, holds high expectation for students and self, and engages in social activism for community empowerment. The paper concludes with a discussion of implication for urban teacher preparation.

Key Words: community teacher, urban teaching, teaching as community service, pedagogy, culturally responsive education, African educational practice

Across the nation, the academic underachievement in many urban students is well documented and remains disturbing for educators, families, community leaders, political leaders, professional organizations, and even the government (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Obama, 2009). In 2012, in spite of numerous reform initiatives, only little and insignificant change has occurred. No one puts this educational travesty into perspective more profoundly than the late and renowned educator, Martin Haberman, who in numerous reports, urged us to be outraged by the educational realities of diverse urban and low-income students. As he illuminates:

> Seven thousand youth drop out of school every day. The achievement gap between racial groups and economic classes continues to widen. The persistent shortage of teachers who can be effective in 120 failing urban school systems, guarantees that the miseducation of seven million diverse children in urban poverty will continue (Haberman, 2008, p.1).

Almost six decades after the declaration of the unconstitutionality of the "separate but equal" doctrine in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, many diverse urban students remain intellectually impoverished. Haberman (1991, 1995) has observed the pervasiveness of the "pedagogy of poverty" in teacher practice that is grounded in deficit thinking and theories of genetic inferiority. As one who immigrated to the U.S. from a so-called "Third World" country, where education works as the "great equalizer," and all children are successfully educated and have a chance at upward social mobility, I continue to be baffled, concerned, and even outraged by the "third class" education U.S. urban students are provided.

Within the last two decades, much has been written about the theory and practice of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). However, much of this scholarship reflects Western perspective. For ages, in spite of limited educational resources, teachers in many African communities have successfully fostered the education and citizenship development of children from underresourced, non-literate families. Few children came from professional, affluent, and middle-class families, and most often, children from non-literate and underresourced families outperformed them. African immigrants have been headlined as "the new model minority" who surpass their native-born African American peers including White students and other immigrant subgroups (Kperogi, 2009; Page, 2007; Ogbu, 1978). The academic success of African/Black immigrant students demystifies the stereotype of Blacks as intellectually inferior and incapable of high academic performance. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) published the *Bell Curve*, which theorized a racial intelligence hierarchy with Asians on top as intellectually superior and Africans at the bottom and genetically inferior. African immigrant education success implies that when students have the right teaching, challenge, support, and more importantly, the right teacher, they can be successful. As a multicultural scholar, I have been actively engaged with the scholarship on culturally responsive teaching (CRT). My reflection on CRT reminds me about my homeland teachers and their empowering teaching practices. As I collaborate with my African-born teacher educator colleagues across the U.S., read their narratives, and reminisce with them about our homeland education, it has become very clear how culturally responsive, socially just, and empowering their pedagogical practices were. The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept and practice of "the community teacher" from an African perspective. Two theoretical constructs frame this study: the scholarship on teacher quality and culturally responsive teaching.

Conceptual Framework

Teacher Quality Matters in Urban Schools

Contrary to earlier studies, which link urban students' learning and achievement to deficit theories—pathological disorder, inferior intelligence, family conditions and poverty (Murray & Herrnstein, 1994), today evidence suggests that the teacher is the most significant factor that affects student learning outcomes and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Haycock, 2001; Manning and Baruth, 2009; Marzano, 2003; Presley, White, & Gong, 2005). Katie Haycock of the Educational Trust has documented convincingly that it is not the kids, their parents or their backgrounds but the teacher that has the most effect on student learning. Margaret Haley (1938, 272-273) reminds us of the high call to the American school teacher, capable of sending out a generation of thoughtful children, able to think, able to change those conditions which must be changed for democracy to survive.

Sadly, Haley's vision of the American teacher does not exist for urban students who are subjected to "banking education" (Freire, 1970) and pedagogy of poverty that foster low-level learning. Is it any wonder that many urban students 15- to 17-year-olds cannot perform basic mathematical tasks, demonstrate reading skills similar to White 13-year-olds (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005), suffer high suspension and drop-out or push-out-rates, and attain lower college entrance and graduation rates (NCES, 2005)! Kunjufu (2002) points out that while the average SAT score for European Americans is 1054, it is 856 for African Americans. Ladson-Billings (2009) laments the dismal academic realities and writes, "African-

American children are three times as likely to drop out of school as white children [...,] five times as likely as whites to be dependent on welfare [...]" (P. 2). Ladson-Billings (2000, p. 212) also reminds us that "while possessing a high school diploma is no guarantee of success in U.S. society, not having one spells certain economic and social failure." This educational travesty calls for urgent meaningful reforms. However, meaningful reforms will not occur unless those who are in charge of the day-to-day teaching of students are adequately prepared to be highly and culturally competent and able to enact effective practices.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Within the last two decades, much scholarship has focused on the emerging research on CRT espoused by scholars who posit that teachers must become culturally responsive and competent in order to effectively teach diverse students (Gay, 2000; 2010; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2009). The rationale is that U.S. schools, including urban schools are hegemonic; they reflect the culture, curriculum, and pedagogies of the dominant culture that disadvantage urban students. These researchers argue that teachers often lack an understanding of how best to work with urban students and their parents and discount the role of culture in teaching and learning. While the concept of teaching for cultural responsiveness has been framed in various terms, all scholars agree that it is an appropriate approach to bridging the disconnect between students' cultural frame of reference and school learning in order to support their effective learning retention and successful academic performance. Gay (1997) aptly argues that CRT is not necessarily new; that it has been routinely used to make learning relevant for European American students and hence their academic success; that it is the absence of this for students of color that has placed them at a learning disadvantage and therefore academic failure (p.211). Ladson-Billings (1994) defines and identifies the characteristics of culturally relevant teachers: such teachers see themselves as artists, as part of the community and view teaching as giving back to the community; they believe that all students can succeed; view knowledge as a social construction and integrate student knowledge into the official curriculum; they build relationships and learning communities that are humanely equitable and extend to the community.

However, while the research on CRT is innovative, relevant and helpful, other frameworks have emerged that align with notions of community of learners, community of practice, learning community (Wenger, 1998) and "the community teacher" (Murray, 2001). Although scholarship about community of learners, learning community, teaching community, and community of practice exists, little is known about "the community teacher." Peter Murray's (2001) pioneering work is a rarity in this regard. He conceptualizes "the community teacher" as:

> an accomplished practitioner who is culturally connected with students, families and communities, works to build a contextualized knowledge of culture, community, and identity of children and families as the core of his/her teaching practice; possesses a "multicultural competence" with a deep and sophisticated understanding of race, racism and the contemporary contexts of schooling by living and working in the same under-resourced communities as the students he/she teaches and understands first-hand the obstacles facing young people growing up in central city neighborhoods (pp. 4-5).

How have other world communities conceptualized the "teacher"? This study expands on the scholarship on preparing teachers for CRT by examining "the community teacher" from an African perspective.

Method: Procedures, Data Sources & Collection

This paper emerged as part of a larger qualitative study that explored the perceptions of African-born teachers in U.S. urban schools about education, schooling, and teaching. The study's overarching questions were: (a) What are African-born teachers' perspectives about education and schooling in the U.S.? (b) What are African-born teachers' perspectives about education, schooling, and teaching in their countries of origin? Several sub-questions were developed including the one addressed in this paper: How do African-born teachers conceptualize "the teacher" and his/her role and characteristics in an African school context? Using a purposeful and network sampling design (Patton, 2002), fifteen participants were interviewed. The study used a convenient, criterion-based sampling: Teachers who (1) were born and schooled in Africa prior to immigrating to U.S., (2) taught in their homelands, and (3) taught or currently teach in U.S. urban schools at least for three years. Participants were diverse in country of origin, gender, age, and teaching experience. Three participants were from Cameroon; four from Nigeria; one from Congo; one from Ghana; two from Senegal; one from Togo; one from Sudan; one from Sierra Leone, and one from Burkina Faso. Six participants were elementary teachers, three middle school, and six high school teachers. There were 8 females and 7 males. Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 75 years. Participants' teaching experience in U.S. urban schools ranged from 5 to 35 years.

Data collected included participants' demographics, one-on-one 60 to 90-minute interview, focus group conversations, and researcher's field notes. The interview questions were open-ended. Among them were: Tell me about your teaching experience in your homeland. How would you describe the educational, schooling, and teaching practices in your homeland? How does teaching in your homeland compare to teaching in the U.S. (roles/ characteristics, practices, etc)? What similarities and differences do you see between educating children in your homeland and in the U.S.? Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes using content analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). During the interview, participants were prompted to elaborate on their responses. For example, tell me more: what was the teacher like? Data sets were analyzed separately during and after the collection. Field notes were taken and used to summarize participant's responses and read back to them. Data sets were analyzed separately during and after the collection. Data analysis involved reading and rereading interview transcripts, field notes, and using both inductive and deductive coding. First, the researcher thoroughly read each participant's transcript to gain a sense of the responses, and identified reoccurring concepts and themes; then read and re-read to refine the themes, and then compared participants' responses both within interviews and across interviews—and clarified meaning through "linking together or finding consistent relationships among patterns, components, constituents, and structures" (LeCompte and Shensul's, 1999, p.177). The findings were organized according to the research question. Member-checking and clarification were obtained through emails, follow-up visit and telephone conversations. It is important to note that all participants' responses were relatively identical even though they were from different countries of origin. This became even more evident during the focus group conversations. It is also significant that all participants' responses were generally identical even though they were from

different countries of origin. This became even more evident during the focus group conversations as participants echoed and reinforced each other's experiences and perspectives. This is not surprising, given the similarities in the African culture, the colonial experience, and the educational systems. Pseudonyms were used to conceal participants' identities.

Findings

Defining the Community Teacher

How do African-born teachers conceptualize "the teacher" in an African school context? All participants painted an idolized and romanticized image of the African teacher and expressed deep nostalgic emotions that were captivating and inspirational, in some cases singing songs of praise they sang as children in their homeland. Various examples, phrases, and profound stories were used to convey the image of the teacher; the teacher "was in the community," "everyone knew the teacher as 'Teacher' and 'Miss." The teacher "served the community," "was the community scribe," "the voice of wisdom for family and community;" and s/he "organized community events, you know, like the adult night school." Based on participants' comments, a broad definition was constructed, read back to the participants individually and during the focus group conversations. Participants agreed and accepted the definition of "the community teacher," as one, who is intimately invested and integrated into the community; internalizes teaching as a community service, and acts in immeasurable and demonstrable ways to make a difference in the lives of the children and community in which he/she teaches.

Teaching as a Community Service

How do African-born teachers in U.S. schools conceptualize the role and characteristics of "the teacher" in an African school context? The data revealed that the role of the teacher transcended the traditional function of imparting knowledge to one that was encompassing and service-oriented. The following comments illuminate this role:

> The [community] teacher understands teaching beyond the traditional teaching responsibility of teaching subjects to help students pass exams. The teacher provided a well-rounded education to students, even helped the parents/families. The teacher was in our church—organized the church choir, the harvest festival and read and wrote letters for our parents.

Philomena echoed and elaborated:

> Teachers knew that parents and the community valued children who would care for them at old age and bring good things to the community—running water, electricity, good roads. Doctors, lawyers, and engineers were important but none compared to the high regard given to teachers. Teachers knew the high respect accorded them, internalized it, and felt obliged to teach well as if their own lives depended on it.

Commitment to Collective Responsibility

Participants conveyed that "the teacher" while recognizing and internalizing his/her individual responsibility, also believed in the African adage, "It takes a village to raise a child." The teacher was committed to the collective responsibility toward educating all children. Participants conveyed that the teacher functioned in the context of the whole as exemplified in the adage. As Philomena noted, "Teachers were committed to student success. You all remember how teachers, for four months, each day, took turns prepping the matriculating class in the evenings from 4 pm-7 pm with no financial compensation. They were selfless." Participants also described the close-knit relationship among teachers who knew what was going on with every student in the school and were in one accord when they "straightened" an unruly student. Consider this comment:

> "Teachers always worked together, always seemed to be on the same page. A teacher, regardless of the grade level he/she taught, could discipline any student, anywhere. They took interest in all students, encouraged them and disciplined them when necessary."

Ikechy echoed a similar comment but also made a contrasting observation of the lack of collaboration that compounds discipline issues in U.S. urban schools:

> In Africa, teachers had respect for each other, cooperated so well and literally spoke with one voice. Students could never pit one teacher against another. Here there is competition. Teachers compete among themselves and don't embrace a team spirit to solve problems. They say and do different things and so students pit them against each other. The culture is, you do your thing and I do my thing. This is why there are so many discipline problems.

Teacher-Parent Synergistic Relationship

Participants expressed passionately how the African teacher cultivated mutually respectful relationships with parents/families, who were not literate or spoke English or French. Participants shared that the teacher demonstrated high regards for parents by curtsying when meeting and greeting parents/families, and addressed them as "papa/baba" and "mama/madam." Fatima, originally from Nigeria, shared this:

> It was common to hear the voice of a teacher saying hello baba/mama as we settled down to dinner." The teacher came to the house when a student did not show up in school or was ill, or when the family was celebrating or in mourning.

Pedagogy of High Expectation & Possibility

Debbie Wei's (2006) exchange with one African immigrant student illuminates the power of African teachers' belief:

> Here [U.S.] there are more things, it is true.., but two things are very different. One, in Eritrea, every one of our teachers believed in us. They believed not only that we could

learn, but that we had to learn for the future of the country (p. 121).

Participants were unanimous in their agreement about teacher belief in student learnability and how they challenged them, pushed them for high level work and talked about the tough-love approach they used to get them to their utmost best. Mosul recalls: "School was highly regimented, strict discipline, and failure was not an option. You were caned for missing one point on an assignment and you learned to not miss it next time but we knew they cared deeply for us and it paid off."

Affirmed and Negotiated Students' Culture and Language

All participants expressed how teachers who came from different ethnic and language background quickly learned the language of the community so that they could interact and communicate with their non-English-speaking parents/families and integrated the culture—songs and stories of the community—into the curriculum. All participants expressed how the teacher welcomed children's storytelling in their mother tongue. Vicki recalled how school was motivating because the teacher embraced their culture and language:

> We had the storytelling period. The teacher encouraged us to tell stories in our language and sometimes in English. The best time was when we told stories with songs and the teacher and class sang along, clapped, and danced. Students loved school; cried if their parents required them to skip school due to family exigencies.

Conclusions and Implication for Urban Teacher Preparation

First, although the participants did not use the term "the community teacher," their constant reference to "teacher" and "community," made it clear that the African teachers they talked about were "community teachers." This generated the broad definition of "the community teacher" as one who is intimately integrated into the community, internalizes teaching as community service, a community activist who acts in immeasurable and demonstrable ways to make a difference in the lives of children and the community in which he/she teaches. Second, for the most part, the finding about the African community teacher aligns well with some of the characteristics of the culturally relevant teacher discussed by Ladson-Billings (2009), Gay (2010) and Murray (2001). However, one distinguishing characteristic of the African community teacher that is absent from Ladson-Billing's (1994, 2009) and Murray's (2001) frameworks is the concept of teaching as community service and the identity development and socialization of the teacher to teaching as community service. The identity of the teacher as a "community teacher" is transcendental as the teacher internalizes his/her role as more than imparting knowledge to students. U.S. Urban students with challenging lived realities, need teachers who identify, integrate, and invest in the community and see teaching as a community service that is high-stakes; and accept teaching not merely as a "job" or "calling" but as one of service to the community.

To provide the kind of "African community teacher" for urban students, teacher preparation programs must be deliberate, systematic, explicit, and intentional in providing curricular experiences that socialize them to developing a communal orientation and teacher

identity of community service. This involves assisting teachers to make a paradigm shift in their worldview. Most teachers in urban schools are European Americans and middle class who were socialized to a worldview of individualism, loose relationships, valuing tasks over relationships, which contrasts with the African worldview of intersecting networks and deep relationships. This is the context for the African community teacher orientation hence teaching is not just for the individual student but for the larger community as well. If urban teachers are socialized to internalizing their role as community service, they will be more likely to invest and commit to the academic excellence and provide an all-round development for students; failure will not be an option as failing any child will mean failing the community. Preparing teachers to internalize teaching as community service is the best hope for reviving urban schools and their communities. Teaching as community service fosters teacher commitment to (a) collective responsibility for student success (b) engagement in the pedagogy of high expectation and possibility (c) sustainable synergistic relationship with parents/families, and negotiating students' culture, language and curriculum.

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