

The Un-silencing of Students: Examining the Influence of Students of Color Voices in Transforming Professional Development & Pedagogy

Khamia B. Powell, University of California Irvine

January 15, 2022

- ***Summary:***

This project was led by Khamia Powell, doctoral candidate at the University of California Irvine and in partnership with a regional high school in Southern California, and an incredible focus group comprised of students of Color. Historically, schools have operated in ways that overtly or covertly attempted to assimilate culturally, linguistically, and racially/ethnically diverse students. Subsequently the foundations of education center Eurocentric ways of knowing, thinking, and being. Even today, many educational structures, policies, and practices are steeped in the history of these “master” narratives—stories that determine what should be considered ‘standard’ and ‘normative’ and ‘good’ thereby denouncing anything that falls beyond that narrow purview as ‘deficit’ or ‘problematic’ and thus ‘bad’.

This project aims to illuminate students of Color’s lived experiences in school to elevate their counter narratives (Bell, 1980) to these “master” narratives, to illuminate the impact of institutionalized cultural subjugation, and to uniquely identify critical areas of development for teachers and schools. Students of color are often one of the most marginalized populations and thus silenced voices. Subsequently, their stories must be told, and their experiences must be shared, to shed light on the current educational experiences of students of Color.

Although accompanied by the findings of large-scale quantitative student survey data, the aims of this project concentrated on the focus group (n= 8). The focus group met for eight 1-hour lessons to examine topics relative to overall school and classroom culture, relationships, and sentiments of belonging. Qualitative transcript, reflection, and creative-artifact data were used to address the aims of this project by illuminating the voices and perspectives of BIPOC students to identify what is necessary for educators/schools to become culturally responsive and create identity-safe spaces where students of Color can thrive and succeed to their fullest potential.

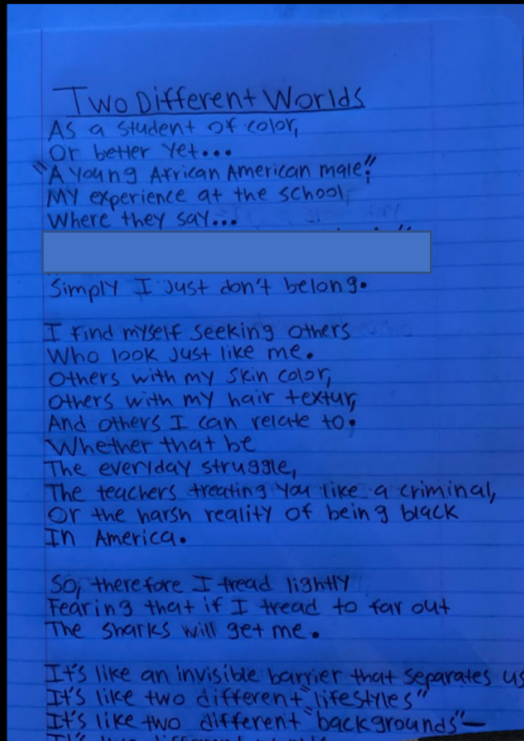
- ***Were our project’s objectives met?***

The aims of this project were met as it illuminated the lived experiences of students of color in high school. The findings revealed a culture of whiteness upheld through educational structures, policies, and practices. This work defines culture of whiteness, as a climate that centers, celebrates, and elevates Eurocentric ways of knowing, thinking, and being. It is historically based on socially- conferred power and privilege given to, and thus attributed with, white people. Today, it persists and proliferates in educational institutions based on what is considered “normative” and “good” and thus highly regarded, respected, and thus observed as “standard” for everyone. Those who do not abide by or are perceived outside of this purview are considered deficit and as a result are problematize, minimize, dismissed, or diminish as the “other”. It is oppressive and dehumanizing.

My findings suggest that students' perceptions of school connection do, in fact, vary by race/ethnicity. White students feel the greatest sense of connection- although the numeric minority (based on previous survey findings of over 2,000 students). Findings also suggests a culture of whiteness that likely validates and humanizes white students' thus promoting this sense of belonging. Conversely, students of color explicated how they do not feel the same sentiments of connection because their cultural assets and funds of knowledge are relegated to margins within classrooms/school. They feel forced to assimilate into "whiteness" to be offered equitable treatment and learning opportunities, and therefore feel dehumanized in schools and classrooms.

Student of Color: "It is harder for (us)... to make a better life.... My mom is an immigrant too. (But she's Black) and she grew up in a sugarcane field. It was hard when she came over here... She tried to make a better way of living. You don't really have those advantages like the white people do. ...That's why some kids who come from low-income environments try to do good in school because that's really the only way out-school and trying to get a scholarship. But for white people they don't really need that because it's (like) 'they're good no matter what', like 'no matter what, you're going to be good' because you're a white person"

Student of Color: "What group do we think can really be a success at (SCHOOL NAME)? Oh, I'll say white people. Yeah, of course, I will... But if you are in a certain class, like a certain AP class, and you have a bunch of white people in there, you can't really talk how normally you talk... you have start thinking about putting on a white voice when somebody calls on you. You have to change the way you talk and everything. I don't know." why."



Two Different Worlds
 AS a student of color,
 Or better yet...
 "A young African American male"
 MY experience at the school,
 Where they say...
 [Redacted]
 Simply I just don't belong.
 I find myself seeking others
 Who look just like me.
 Others with my skin color,
 Others with my hair texture,
 And others I can relate to.
 Whether that be
 The everyday struggle,
 The teachers treating you like a criminal,
 Or the harsh reality of being black
 In America.
 So, therefore I tread lightly
 Fearing that if I tread too far out
 The sharks will get me.
 It's like an invisible barrier that separates us
 It's like two different lifestyles
 It's like two different backgrounds
 It's two different worlds.

DEAR TEACHER

Dear Teacher,

"This (is the) experience between Black and white students, mainly. That's where I was coming from with that. I hope they just see that, like, not everything is like not we're not all living like a Teen Movie, like I said before, we're not all living a Teen Movie (life). It's not all happiness... it's not... it's two different worlds. Or maybe there's more different worlds to us. (But) ...again this is a new perspective of how some people's lives really are. It's should not only be about one group...."

Sincerely,
Your Student

*typo student-endorsed as a means of authenticity *Identifiable information has been anonymized

Three areas emerged as particularly robust regarding this culture. First, overt instances of racism against students of color have been normalized within the culture of whiteness. They highlighted how explicitly racist comments

and/or derogatory language go un-addressed by teachers and staff, and remarks are minimized to mere humor at the expense of students of color. They described ways students of Color are unjustly profiled and disciplined, but the same behavior of white students is not perceived as a threat or misconduct.:

Student of Color: "I was (sitting in the back of the classroom) ... and he (the teacher) moved me to the front. He was like, "Oh, I just moved (STUDENT NAME) to the front like Rosa Parks" and then I was like, "Huh?" and then he was like, "Oh, don't take it like that!". And I was like, 'well, you wouldn't say it to me if I was white.' I didn't say that, but that's what I thought. I just feel like they think they can almost take advantage of and humor themselves with us because we can't really do anything. And I don't know, I just feel like they take advantage of the fact that we're not privileged enough to fight back because (if we do) we have to worry about getting in trouble and we might have harsher consequences (than the white students)".

Student of Color: "...All the white people only talk amongst themselves. I tried talking to them, being friends with them, and they just push me to the side. I haven't had really good experiences sitting near them either... This one kid had the audacity to make a really bad (racist) comment about Mexican immigration. When he found out I was Mexican, he just gave me a look. But I didn't think much about it because I'm like, 'oh, you know, that's normal', I consider it normal at this point."

Secondly, deficit teacher ideology and perceptions of students of Color negatively influence teacher-student interactions and pedagogical decision-making subsequently creating classroom climates that feel exclusionary and dehumanizing.

Dear Teacher,

I guess my main point was to add in the feeling of 'we don't belong' and the feeling of 'being alone'. It was one thing that really stood out for us because in like this whole thing and like even at school and stuff- the only thing anyone ever wants, sometimes is to fit in and belong. Like we've explained before, stereotypes are such a big thing. So, we included that, and we wanted to basically just include everything that we felt because I think we both know like deep down that whatever we're feeling now as a student of color, other students color, feel the exact thing.

Sincerely,
Your Students

Dear Teacher,

School hasn't been the safest place for me
Cuz as a student of color
I truly cannot be me
I don't feel represented enough as a whole
Things like this are getting out of control

And why do teachers go ahead and tell us that they are there for us
 And then they go along and make us feel less than enough
 I don't understand cuz we're right there
 But sometimes it feels like they really don't care

And I don't want to be seen as a stereotype
 Because the color of my skin should not define
 I wanna be seen as equal as everyone,
 so we can live in peace, learn, and have some fun

But at the end of the day, I feel like I don't fit in
 Cuz I look around and find nowhere to sit
 So I end up sitting all alone
 Feeling like I don't belong
 While I look at my peers laughing and having fun

And my anxiety's kicking in, tell me I don't fit in
 And the teacher's asking for an answer
 But I can't find one within.
 So I start to freak out and realize someone raised their hand,
 But the teacher calls on me and I still don't understand

So I want to make a really big confession
 About how my school doesn't handle oppression
 There is never a sense where we feel like we belong
 Cuz when we hear racist stuff apparently it isn't wrong.
 But I want to feel equal, it's something I desire
 I feel it in my bones kinda like a burning fire

Dear Teacher,

"I want to make a really big confession and blah blah blah oppression". I feel like that part is important because like our school more recently, they're like trying to fix it. But like they're just like recognizing it and then they think they're fixing it, but they're really not.

I feel like it would be a lot easier if we're all in person. I feel like just having people come together and just talk about their experiences or like in this case, racism, like if white people were there to just listen to the people of color- like every group of people of color, should listen to each other as well because even though, like we all face racism, like we experience it differently. Just having everyone understand where and how they how they exist in the world and what their experiences are... I think it would really help everyone understand and like, well, if we understand where we were coming from maybe we'd have a better solution to fix it.

Sincerely,
Your Students

*Identifiable information has been anonymized

Students of color reported feeling fewer and less quality educational opportunities than white students.

Student of Color: "...Teachers are harsher on students of Color, compared to white students. Last year, I saw it a lot when a white student would submit assignment and (earn) a low score, they (the

teachers) just tell them (changes to “teacher” voice), “Oh, it’s okay! Just make it up whenever; you can email me!” But (if it was) a person of color; they would be harsher and say stuff like, “You need to pay attention in class, you need to be on top of your game, you can’t expect to excel in the future if you’re going to have that slack...” and stuff like that. Where was that type of energy when the whites did it?!”

DEAR TEACHER,

You insist that you’re only doing what you do to look for our best interest.
Then why do you turn the other cheek when we need you the most?
If I’m such an amazing scholar
Then why do your actions say otherwise?

You can’t simply push me and expect me to fly
Don’t throw me in the river and expect me to swim against the current
If you put me behind everyone else in a race,
don’t expect me to come out first place

I wouldn’t have had to fight as hard to walk onto the stage that last day
I could have laughed a little more,
Taken more time for myself,
Even work to be better
Yet, it was the opposite
That time was spent in tears, working just to prove you wrong

Dear Teacher, I speak for many
Please take my advice
I guess I was more than you thought I could be
Now I can move on with my life

Dear Teacher,

“Sometimes you expect us to be better, but it’s like, how can you expect me to do this if you set (unrealistic) expectations. Sometimes you set it higher than the students that aren’t of color, like the white students, and then you don’t want to help us. You expect us to (accomplish) certain things yet you leaves us to do it on our own. Hopefully, as you’re able to notice this, you (will be able to) help me the same way you help other students. That’s it, you know, like help students of color the way you help the white students, most of the time.”

Sincerely,
Your Students

SINCERELY, YOUR STUDENTS

Lastly, classroom praxis and curriculum lack methods to adequately leverage the cultural funds of knowledge offered by students and communities of color. Additionally, the curriculum and learning standards lack representation where students of Color can be viewed in positive and more comprehensive ways. The students illuminated the impact of a culture of whiteness on students of Color’s sentiments belonging/isolation and their tensions surrounding their institutionalized ultimatum: to consciously renounce their own cultural identity or assimilate into “whiteness” to access equitable educational opportunities, treatment, and social regard. The pervasiveness of a that culture, albeit advertently or inadvertently, contributes to the miseducation and dehumanization of students of color that upholds systemic inequity:

Student of Color: “When we’re learning... we never really hear about people of Color when it comes to English, or any other subject.... You rarely hear ...the history for Mexican Americans... the conquistadors ...and other things that happen with Mexico and the Spanish. Like how they took over certain empires and stuff! And then for African Americans, you literally just hear about slavery. And then for white people... you hear all the things they’ve accomplished and all the things they did for America. And it’s like... people of Color also did (things) too! But it’s never talked about or represented in the books and the teachers just don’t talk about it. And I think that’s really unfair.”

All these factors contribute to the lack of belongingness BIPOC students experience daily and the additional stress and pressure students of Color feel:

Student of Color: “I really, really, really, really disliked starting conversations or answering if the teacher asks a question. I’m not going to be the first student that raises their hand and answers- even if I know the

answer. I just get socially anxious. And if I say something dumb and everyone's going to laugh... teachers really do dismiss things like that. And I think that makes (like me) kids disengage from partaking in (class). But some (white) kids are really expressive- I feel like teachers prefer that because those kids are not really afraid to try again. As I for someone like me (students of color), if I get something wrong, they'll laugh and then I'll start getting really self-conscious and think about it for the rest of class. It's not that students (BIPOC) aren't paying attention, we're just finding ways that we can say or answer something without like looking dumb."

These experiences and sentiments create inequitable learning environments and opportunities for students of Color, while privileging whiteness, in ways that contribute to educational inequity, disenfranchisement, and oppression of students of Color- thus diminishing their dreams, promise, and future life outcomes.

The implications of this work may inform how to re-evaluate the goals and objectives of teacher education programs of pre-service teachers and the professional development of in-service teachers. Based on these findings, professional development should be more critical and provide opportunities for teachers to engage in more critical learning- work that deeply considers the teachers' identities and implications for how they perceive others, a structural analysis of history (including the history of education) and structural racism, and a critical analysis of their practice and curriculum to determine how these factors intersect in their practice in ways that either challenge educational inequity or endorse it.

- ***Who attended, listened, etc. and how many?***

Each focus group session had 8-10 contributors, all students of Color- diverse in gender, race/ethnicity, grade and/or course level, sexual identity, grade point average, socioeconomic status and other factors that contribute to the diversity of human experiences. Although each session was one hour, a few students often elected stayed longer to debrief or elaborate on specific experiences.

Sessions centered on three key topics:

- School and Classroom Culture (ex. *what are your overall impressions of school? Describe what you would consider institutional/personal successes? Challenges?*)
- Relationships (ex. *how would you describe your interactions with teachers? Administration? Peers?*),
- Belonging (ex. *In what ways do you feel like you belong- or don't belong- in school/classroom? What contributes to your sense of belonging?*)

The final session was a student showcase, which was an opportunity for the students to present their creative artifact with the group, expound on what they hope their teachers/school will take away from viewing it (ex. *Why did you choose to highlight this? Why is this important to you? What do you hope will be gained from seeing, hearing, understanding this?*), and debrief about their experience engaging with our focus group.

- ***What was challenging about completing our project?***

Data was collected during a highly tumultuous time amid the global pandemic. For that reason, our sessions were held virtually- possibly posing a challenge for interpersonal interactions, building a community, facilitating somewhat sensitive dialogue, and placing limitations on activities. Although the virtual sessions were not ideal, the students were incredible and committed to this work through their presence, engagement, and collaboration, which ultimately made the impact the pandemic on our work minimal.

- ***What impact do we think our work had on the campus community?***

Institutions, including schools, operate according to their organizational memory- routines established through prior collective action. Many school structures, policies, and practices are based on antiquated and based on a culture of whiteness- all at the exclusion of people of Color. This work, grounded in students of Color's lived experiences, is important because it reveals the educational, social, and racial inequities deeply embedded within our system, and subsequently our courses, practice, and classrooms. For educational inequity to successfully be addressed, we must understand how the current system is dysfunctional, which means having critical conversations with those whom the system most oppresses. This work is both a starting place and charge for campus communities to do an institutional evaluation to better understand the current state of affairs based on experiences of students of Color who are most harmed by maintaining the status quo.

- ***How might the Center change the process moving forward to further support VOICE Initiative awardees' efforts?***

This was a unique year for everyone due to the restrictions of the pandemic which posed challenges to normal means of operating, including aspirations of interpersonal engagement. With that in mind, the Center coordinated several virtual opportunities to gather in virtual-space and remained accessible in-between. Therefore, under the circumstances, the Center did an incredible job creating opportunities to share our work, fostering motivation and support to continue this work, and building a close network of colleagues who engage in this work. I am more than grateful for this opportunity!

