

Dissecting Difference: Class and Race
EAD 822: Diverse Students and Families
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In America, the divisions based upon class and race is real. It is idealistic to discount these systems of classification as they have existed since the birth of our country and perpetuated an unjust societal structuring, yielding unearned privileges based upon difference. The concepts of class and race can be constructed in a variety of ways (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). People do not tend to discuss these concepts; because identifying them as real makes one guilty of acknowledging the inequality they produce (Alvarez & Kolker, 2001). Our nation must transcend beyond our historical negligence of this issue, and begin acknowledging these divisions and valuing the benefits generated from our differences (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Race and class largely impacts how individuals decide to position themselves in society and how they will interpret the world. Health, life span, educational achievement, and quality of life, along with less obvious factors such as being treated as both competent and deserving, or as unworthy and inferior is all impacted by one's race and class (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). Generally, those who are White, male, heterosexual, economically advantaged, and able-bodied assume equality exists because they receive the better share of this unjust system which is perpetuated by the invisibility of race and class. Either out of obliviousness or the denial of race and class as real, these divisions create insulated groupings of people who rarely move beyond their social enclaves and feel uncomfortable working across lines of difference (Ogbu, 2003).

The social distance found within race and class carries extreme consequences of stigmatizations and false-beliefs, while furthering the inequality in society. The identity and how one is received, particularly of those individuals found within the lower tiers of our societal hierarchy, greatly shapes their confidence in themselves and ability to positively contribute to society (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). The psychological damages that result from an individual's need for respect, self worth, and understanding are extreme when they are replaced with a perception of being bad, inferior, or less able (McKenzie, 2009). KB McKenzie has also researched the consequence of this "shaming" that occurs, especially in schools, and found that its effects can affect the rest of an individual's life. Essentially, when an individual encounters labels with connotations of being a criminal or gangster, treated in such a way that devalues their being, or humiliated they tend to embrace destructive acts to redeem their self value and respect (McKenzie, 2009). When schools or society fails to be accepting of others, these victims are drawn to alternative family structures which are often oppositional to the status quo (Ogbu, 2003). For as long as we fail to respect and acknowledge our differences and develop an authentic sense of community our stratified structuring of society will be inept of being recreated to foster equality (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

If we were to investigate how race and class has manifested itself in our public schools we would find stark differences in its impact on the educational approach as it relates to the Hispanic and African American students. One would find critical variations that must be acknowledged, further investigated, and then implemented across lines of differences to ensure all students were successful.

Particularly with Hispanic students, there are institutions that are not only providing a high level of education, but also aiding with their transition into American society. Hispanics find themselves emerged within a difficult position of disadvantage because a disproportionate amount of research focuses on the Black/White issues within education, and often overlooks the barriers that language present in the educational experience (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). Despite the challenges, there have been schools that house large numbers of language minorities and have been successful because they have operated with a few fundamental approaches. First, these schools and all of their constituents have recognized the importance of appreciating the

culture that students carry with them and have implemented deliberate ways to blend it *with* the American culture (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). All that creates a culture, including the value system, norms, knowledge, customs, language, and history (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012) of these students have been deemed valuable and strategically incorporated into the structuring of the school. The instruction and approach to education found within these institutions have essentially tailored their approach to meet their students where *they* needed them most. Additionally, the affirmation of their individuality and heritage has worked to fuse two different cultures, which now creates a “transcultural identity” with bicultural/lingual competencies capable of navigating two worlds (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). These schools regard towards honoring their students’ sense of humanity and dignity must not be overlooked with the cases where language minorities succeeded in American schools (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

However, this is not the approach often implemented with African American students. The stigmatization of African American students is visible as their state of being “othered” is immediately apparent (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). Because of the external markings of darker skin it prevents transcendence beyond the historical legacies of oppression, deficit, and need. Similar to how Deaf people have considered the high risk implant surgery or how Little People will the strength to undergo bone-breaking surgery to extend their limbs (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012), African American’s attempt to assimilate into the Eurocentric, dominant mold by chemically processing their hair, bleaching their skin, and dismissing darker-skinned partners that may result in dark skinned children (Davis, 2005). Educational institutions are failing to recognize and dismiss African American culture in the structuring of the school and instead are guilty of promoting stigmatizations of criminality (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012), stereotypes of inferiority (Ladson-Billings, 1994), perceptions of unworthiness (McKenzie, 2009), and the rejection of their historical significance (Ogbu, 2003). Many African Americans are forced into accepting an adversarial stance towards the dominant culture by rejecting it and prioritize loyalty to those who accept them above all else (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). This educational approach clearly contradicts how language minorities are educated, and works more towards fitting the oppressive agenda of our society, and not so much the liberatory desires of African Americans.

Schools must be restructured to create social justice and equity (Theoharis, 2007). The school must become an intervention between the students’ lives and society (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teacher’s effectiveness must be enhanced and premised on providing a broader, more relevant knowledge and skill-based style of learning (Theoharis, 2007), and the entire educational staff must examine themselves to see how they may be perpetuating the cycle of how race and class affects interactions and pedagogies (McKenzie, 2009). The school culture and community must be welcoming to all and challenge the assumptions regarding marginalized families and their abilities (Theoharis, 2007). Schools must no longer minimize differences between students (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990), and instead place value and attempt to create fluid identities to drive our country into the global economy (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). Lastly, by valuing difference and strategically using it, we create the most valuable element to success--hope.

Our country is founded upon legacies of injustice based upon race and class, and despite it not being birthed in our time; it is our responsibility to dismantle it before it threatens our future. The only way to deconstruct these socially created divisions is to first accept they exist. America’s history proves *some* can be successful by dividing and conquering. As for the future and *our* collective success in it, we may instead try a different approach--unification and collaboration.

References

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