2018

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Recommended Citation

Hunter, J. G., & Stinson, D. W. (2018). Caring, male African Americans, and mathematics teaching and learning (pp. 1110–1113). In T. E. Hodges, G. J. Roy, & A. M. Tyminski (Eds.), Proceedings of the 40th annual meeting of the North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education. Greenville, SC: University of South Carolina & Clemson University. Retrieved from https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/pmena2018/documents/public/PMENA+2018+Proceedings.pdf

CARING, MALE AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND MATHEMATICS TEACHING AND LEARNING

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In this paper, the authors report on a qualitative study that explored the influence a "successful" African American male mathematics teacher had on three African American male high school students' perceptions of teacher care. This critical ethnography study was guided by an intersection of an eclectic array of theoretical traditions, including care theory, critical race theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy. The study employed ethnographic methods during data collection; data analysis identified six overarching themes that the participants used to describe teacher care. Findings suggest that teachers should reconsider the ways they care for African American male students and that a caring teacher–student relationship has a positive influence on African American male students' descriptions and perceptions of teacher care.

Keywords: Equity and Diversity, High School Education

Introduction

Narratives on the achievement outcomes of Black boys in mathematics are too often negative (see Stinson, 2006). Contrary to these negative narratives, however, research affirms positive outcomes for students, including Black boys, when engaged in caring teacher–student relationships (see, e.g., Bartell, 2011; Roberts, 2009; Steele, 1992). But literature specific to caring teacher–student relationships, African American male students, and mathematics teaching and learning is all but nonexistent. Therefore, in this study, we sought to uncover the definitions that African American male high school students had of teacher care, and how, if at all, an African American male teacher might influence their perceptions of teacher care. We categorized the study as a critical ethnography where the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time (Madison, 2005). It was guided by an intersection of an eclectic array of theoretical traditions (Stinson, 2009) that included care theory (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1992), critical race theory (e.g., Tate, 1997), and culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Theoretical Frameworks

Care theory as an analytic framework has a vast history and has been described from many perspectives from a variety of disciplines. This body of knowledge is a result of contributions from several scholars who have defined care in multiple ways (see, e.g. Agne, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1984; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002, 2006; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Siddle-Walker, 1993). This multiplicity has often created somewhat of a muddled definition of care. Nonetheless, Gilligan's (1982) scholarship provided the foundation in which current research on an ethic of care is established where caring transitioned from being initially rooted in the field of nursing, to being recognized as a framework to base other research.

Noddings's (1984, see also 1992) scholarship is recognized as the first to expand Gilligan's (1982) work on care to education. Noddings believes human interaction was the central theme of care theory, which created a natural fit in education research. Noddings defines a caring relationship as inclusive of components of understanding, inter-subjectivity, and constant activity. She claims that a caring relationship is not complete unless there is some sort of

confirmation given by the cared for. Therefore, Noddings argues that the teacher–student relationship should be reciprocal and requires a certain amount of trade. She also reveals concerns of cultural relevance when it comes to care in the classroom. Noddings (2006) states, "Two students in the same class are roughly in the same situation, but they may need very different forms of care from their teacher" (p. 20). The teacher must understand each individual student to better provide the care defined by Noddings's theory.

Critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework was first derived from the legal field in the 1980s, when scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Alan Freeman searched for a way to more directly and adequately address race and racism in the United States (Roberts, 2010). It was initially rooted in critical legal studies (CLS), a movement that critically examined formalism and objectivism (Tate, 1997). CLS offered critiques of the law, but failed to address issues related to race. As a result of the shortcomings of CLS, came the development of CRT. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate were the first scholars to introduced CRT to the field of education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). CRT stresses the need to interrogate how the law as well as socio-cultural and -political structures and discourse reproduce, reify, and normalize racism in society.

Throughout the research project, male African American high school students were provided a non-colorblind opportunity to describe teacher care and explain the practices of a caring teacher (see, e.g., Thompson, 1998). This non-color-and-cultural-blind approach made it possible for the descriptions that the students had of caring teachers to include tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). CRP is frequently identified with the work of Ladson-Billings (e.g., 1992); she defines CRP as pedagogy that "prepares students to effect change in society, not merely fit into it" (p. 382). She stresses how vital the teacher−student relationship is to CRP, and says it allows teachers to "empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (p. 382). This type of pedagogy views culture as a powerful variable in the success of students, and it acknowledges the importance of high standards and expectations for teachers (Irvine, 2001). Roberts (2009) argues, "CRP is a philosophical construct that discusses a set of pedagogical behaviors that identifies, values, respects, and utilizes the cultural knowledge and performance styles of ethnically diverse students" (p. 16).

Methodological Considerations

The participants in this study were three high school-aged male African Americans—Kareem, Joshua, and Michael (pseudonyms, as are all proper names)—in a tenth-grade Geometry class at Divine High School, and the African American male teacher of that class. The student body at Divine is composed of all male African Americans; it is a public charter school, located in the "inner city," in a low socio-economic neighborhood. The three male participants are students of the same "successful" African American male teacher—Mr. Ira—who was selected by the process of "community nomination" (Foster, 1997), whereby members of a community of interest suggest individuals who they believe will be the best subjects for research. Mr. Ira had been teaching for over twenty-two years, working at Divine since it opened. He was a tenth-grade geometry teacher, 54-year-old father of three, originally from the northeastern United States, and identified as an African American man.

Data collection included semester-long, daily participant observations (and accompanying field notes) and three semi-structured interviews with each participant (all observations and interviews were conducted by the first author). The method of participant observation suggests researchers should take part in activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the participants as a means of learning about their lives and culture (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011), while field notes

assists in "constructing the case." The theoretical underpinnings of care theory, critical race theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy (described earlier) provided the lens to ground the logic of the observations. The first author spent almost every day for a school semester (16 weeks) at the research location for participant observations. Participant observation "puts you where the action is and lets you collect data…any kind of data that you want" (Bernard, 2006, p. 343). Field notes were used to record data from the observations. Field notes were crucial to recording the observations, laying a foundation for the contexts for the participant interviews; given that participant observation "is rarely, if ever, the only technique used by a researcher conducting ethnographic research" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 3).

Findings

During data analysis, six overarching themes were identified that the participants used to describe teacher care: (a) motivation, (b) culture, (c) confidence, (d) discipline, (e) concern for futures, and (f) environment (see Table 1). These themes were interpreted from the participants' significant statements, and of these six themes motivation and classroom environment were noted as the most important to the student participants. These African American boys wanted to feel (and be) capable and comfortable in a mathematics classroom. Fortunately for them, they had an African American male teacher, Mr. Ira, who also found these aspects of teacher care important and who would stop at nothing to encourage and create an environment designed for their success in mathematics.

Table 1: Overarching Codes/Themes and Sub Themes – Descriptions of Teacher Care

Motivation	Culture	Confidence	Discipline	Concern for Futures	Environment
Inspirational	Understands struggle	Believes in students	Rules	Will not allow students to cheat themselves	No judging
Leads by example	Fights stereotypes	Gives students hope	Expectations	Future job concern	Safe
Encouragement	Defends students	Teaches self-efficacy	Second chances	Treats students like his children	Comfortable
Makes students feel important	Diversifies lessons		Empathy	Cares about students' lives outside of school	Mistakes okay
Praises students			Patience		Family environment
			Firm but fair		Offset institutional racism

When it comes to the influence an African American male teacher had on the participants' perceptions of teacher care, there was some overlap with how they described teacher care. An African American male teacher simply softened the environment, so to speak, and made the student participants feel more comfortable. Clearly, the students perceived connections to the teacher participant, based on his appearance, and assumptions they made about him. Pursuing this further, and based on the participants' descriptions, we are all but certain that these assumptions were also rooted in their historical interactions with teachers of other races. These

interactions helped garner the assumptions and shape the eventual expectations the students had of the teacher participant in the beginning. Mr. Ira called for "empathy and patience as teachers weather the storm, because they will be tested." But when the storm is over, hindsight reveals that this is a nonissue. Because as intelligent as they are, the student participants, and Black boys in general, eventually crossed reference their pre-expectations with how they define a caring teacher.

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