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Transformation from Within: Grounded Practice of Teachers amidst Cultural Change

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Francis High School (pseudonym) was opened in Los Angeles during the 1960s in response to the Civil Rights issues facing the African American community at the time. In 2001, after years of declining enrollment, Francis High School became a Jesuit owned and operated school and began operating under the Cristo Rey financial model. Despite its historical presence in the community and its rich athletic and academic legacies, the demand for a dynamic approach to education was imminent. Fortunately, a transformation ensued as the school's mission, goals, and policies changed in order to become more aligned with their new Jesuit, Cristo Rey identity. This article examines the experiences of three teachers who were present during the time of Francis High's transition, and considers how their practices and outlooks supported the transformation process for the school community. Utilizing the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy, this article analyzes their influence on the new school culture.

Keywords

Cristo Rey model, culturally responsive pedagogy, teacher perspectives, school culture, corporate work-study program

The 1960s continue to be one of the most transformative decades in US history. From the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King to the civil unrest and protests that took place in cities like Greensboro, Selma, Birmingham, and Los Angeles, the United States was contending with the consequences of decades of discrimination and marginalization. Amidst these turbulent events, Francis High School (pseudonym) was born in a community wrestling with systematic challenges that included police brutality, high unemployment, staggering crime rate, and a surging drug epidemic. Francis High was intentionally nestled in the epicenter of the disenfranchisement in response to the need of a more focused and economically feasible educational experience for the African-American community. In its earlier years, Francis High was extremely successful. During the

late 80s, when most urban communities found themselves wrestling with the consequences of concentrated poverty, both performance and admissions at Francis High began to decay. This institution, which had once given academic and athletic opportunities to families in the surrounding community, was now succumbing to the economic and social disparities and was in jeopardy of closing.

In response to the impending closure, the local Archdiocese solicited the help of the Jesuits to operate the school. The Jesuits, a Catholic order with a strong history of running successful educational institutions, had begun piloting an innovative corporate work-study program (CWSP) that would address the needs of the school. The CWSP introduced a financial model that would allow Francis High to enroll students from working class families in the surrounding community for a lowered tuition rate. Francis High students would be employed in internships at nearby corporations and the monetary compensation that the students would receive from the internship would pay for more than half of their tuition. The work-study program would also allow Francis High to market itself in a way that would distinguish it from other high schools and increase student body enrollment. While the work-study program may have been primed to meet the financial needs of the school community, the implementation of the program would bring about major structural and cultural changes in order to meet the program's requirements. This article discusses the role of the teacher in this setting and provides insight into how a small group of dedicated teachers were able to transform the identity of their school.

Method

In order to understand the role of teachers in the Francis High School community, interviews were conducted with each participant. Each participant answered questions regarding their understanding of the school's mission and the purpose of CWSP, their observations of students and parents before, during, and after the transition, and their interactions with the Francis High administration. In addition, participants discussed their perceptions of their roles at Francis High and the manner in which they advocate for students and the school community. The following are brief descriptions of each participant.

Nelson is a 25-year veteran educator and the longest serving faculty member at Francis High. He is African American and was born and raised near Francis High. He has served as head basketball coach and classroom teacher.

Nelson was at Francis High before the addition of the work-study program. He currently teaches ninth grade at the school.

Michelle is an 11-year veteran educator, and the only member of the CWSP staff to have also taught an academic course at Francis High. She is African American and was born and raised near Francis High. She successfully created the curriculum for the work-study program. She currently works in CWSP as a program coordinator.

Alma is a 13-year veteran teacher who joined the Francis High faculty the same year the work-study program was introduced. She is Hispanic and was born and raised outside of the United States. She currently serves as teacher and Department Chair.

Discussion

The CWSP required the culture of Francis High to change dramatically. One teacher recalled that the mission of Francis High before the CWSP program was simply to teach students to read in order for them to be employable. With the onset of the CWSP and the introduction of the Jesuits, Francis High was required to incorporate a college preparatory curriculum and prepare each student for success in the business world. Each of the interviewees discussed the role of culturally responsive teaching in achieving these goals.

Culturally responsive teaching builds on the work of critical pedagogy in that it incorporates the cultural knowledge, experiences, and behaviors of all students in order to make learning relevant and effective (Lucas, 2014). Culturally responsive teaching encompasses six characteristics that will help frame our understanding of the work of these three teachers. These characteristics are validating, comprehensive, multi-dimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory (Gay, 2000).

Validating

Culturally responsive teaching is validating in that it acknowledges and values the cultural heritages and socioeconomic realities of all students. It seeks to understand the lived realities of the students and how those realities affect the students' attitudes and approaches to the learning environment. Each teacher discussed the importance of validating students' experiences within the classroom setting. More importantly, they discussed validating those experiences for the administration. Michelle discussed the gap that existed

between the students' abilities and the administrator's beliefs surrounding those abilities. She shared:

Coming from this community I would get offended when people felt that people in this community couldn't have or couldn't obtain ... I brought my personal experience. I brought guidance. They brought charity. Many of them were at the end of their career seeking to "give back." I made a personal decision to be here.

Alma stated:

I fell in love with the school and the boys. It wasn't that [the boys] didn't want [the program] they just didn't know how to work it. I knew what they needed. I knew I had to be there for them.

Both Michelle and Alma felt an obligation to adjust the expectations of the administration. Michelle achieved this through her objection to low student expectations while Alma sought to clarify the causes of students' performance.

Along with validating the lived realities of the students, teachers also validated the purpose and role of the administrators. Each teacher understood the purpose of the CWSP and the role it played in the financial sustainability of the school. To that end, they were able to support the role of the administrator in ensuring the program's success. Nelson shared:

CWSP was going to keep the school open. We knew of what Francis High had already accomplished. We knew how important the school was for a city like this. The idea that it was really going to get better meant there was a future.

Comprehensive

Culturally responsive pedagogy honors the holistic approach to teaching. In teaching the whole person, it seeks to honor the person's human dignity and support individual self-concepts. All three teachers recognized themselves in the students. Students' realities intimately connected student to teacher resulting in the teacher feeling compelled to support aspects of the students' lives not normally appreciated in the school setting. This approach

not only benefitted the student but the administration at Francis High as well. Teachers modeled for administrators how to respond to the whole person. Teachers rejected one-dimensional definitions that focused only on a student's race or ethnicity. They understood the importance of engaging with all aspects of the students' experience, including their new identities as workers in the CWSP. As Nelson stated:

We would voice our problems [with CWSP] in the meetings. We felt like we were spending too much time jumping hoops for CWSP and not paying attention to student needs ... we were spending a lot of time maintaining the program. Admin would listen sometimes. The admin that listened more had a better vision.

Multi-dimensional

Culturally responsive pedagogy is multidimensional in that it incorporates a variety of different contexts, approaches, resources, and perspectives to accomplish its goal of educating the student. The diversity of the teachers collaborating with administration is important to the transformation process. The background, content areas, and previous experience of all three teachers were vastly different, yet their opportunities to engage with the administration was equitable. In addition, their relationships with students and parents introduced alternative perspectives needed to advance this new culture. When asked which administrator was able to achieve the most substantive change, all named the principal, whom they also felt was more open to engaging all stakeholders.

Empowering

The empowerment found in culturally responsive pedagogy involves a trust between the student and the teacher that allows the student to believe in the intentions and methods of the teacher to engender the desired result. In a similar way, Francis High teachers had to trust the administration in order to support the cultural change being proposed. There had to exist a faith that there was a common goal and that everyone involved had the best intentions for all students. Nelson expressed evidence of that faith when he shared:

We knew the Jesuits had a record of making things work. We believed they would give us resources to make Francis High better ... they had good intentions even if their approaches weren't the best.

Transformative

Geneva Gay (2000) states that being transformative helps “students develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions in effective personal, social, political, and economic action” (p.131). Each teacher discussed a deeply profound understanding of the characteristics of Francis High that made it unique. Their understanding helped to advance administration’s goals from those rooted in notions of charity, with presumptions of powerlessness, to one of transformation. The teachers intentionally supported the administration in being critical of their own beliefs surrounding knowledge, culture, and ability within the context of Francis High and in the larger society. In this manner, teachers were more than translators of cultural norms but were critical educators providing administrators opportunities to contend with their own presumptions and stereotypes.

Emancipatory

Culturally responsive teaching is emancipatory in that it absolves the teacher and student from being assessed using mainstream measures of achievement. It is liberating in that it values the importance of authentic knowledge and allows for the teacher to seek out ways of accessing that knowledge for all students (Gay, 2000). There existed, among teachers, an authentic understanding of the uniqueness of the work-study program and the effects the program might have on the lives of the students, parents, and faculty. Their understanding invited administration to engage new ways of measuring success and achievement. Along with academic success in their college prep curriculum, teachers noted success in areas of work ethic, learning new workplace skills, and acquiring business skills. Increased achievement on these measures resulted in students, parents, and teachers being more supportive of the program and more open to the school’s transformation.

The teachers at Francis High School were instrumental in the success and incorporation of the CWSP. Francis High teachers utilized their personal experiences to help administrators understand the communities they were serving. They directly supported the administrators by clearly understanding the administrators’ roles and trusting their intentions for the school community. Finally, the teachers embraced their roles as educators in their openness to engage administrators critically and introduce ways of measuring success that were authentic and honored the uniqueness of the community.

The relationship among the teachers and administrators at Francis High is one of mutual respect, collaboration, and community. Each member was invited to share their professional experiences as well as their lived realities in order to more clearly identify the needs of the students. The relationship was dynamic. It continued evolving and changing as dictated by the openness of the administrator and the response of the community at large to the transformation.

Conclusion

The influence of a single teacher can be impactful; however, the collaboration of teachers and administrators can transform the future of the school. The veteran teachers interviewed for this article displayed components of being culturally responsive in their interactions with students, parents, and administration. This response to their calling as teachers amidst deep structural changes included all of the elements of culturally responsive teaching. Their influence on the school included much more than instructional techniques; it constituted a strong teacher-administrator relationship, learning context, and support climate. (Gay 2000).

The culturally responsive teaching present among interactions of Nelson, Michelle, Alma, and their administrators demonstrated an acknowledgement of cultural experiences, a clear understanding of the needs of the school community, and a care for the experience of the “whole child” (Ladson-Billings 1995). While the effects of a teacher’s efforts are normally thought to only affect a student, the results of these educators’ approaches affected school administration personally and professionally. Their insight into the world of the students, as well as their keen understanding of the needs of the school make teachers an essential component of any school transformation. Nelson, Michelle, and Alma proved to be agents of transformation that helped to solidify the successful future of a school community once thought to be dead.

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