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James S. Kaminsky
September 2008

This article provides case study of instruction that challenges the ritualized deference that students afford to the authority of history textbooks and teachers. It asks, What might encourage students to raise disciplined suspicions of the typical sources of scholastic authority? What might we learn about history instruction that makes

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in Volume 10 | Number 5 | August 1976

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James S. Kaminsky
September 2008

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Soumya Sathya & Tom Carroll
September 2008

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The Special Education Referral and Decision-Making Process for English Language Learners: Child Study Team Meetings and Placement Conference

James S. Kaminsky
Published in Volume 110 | Number 13 | March 2008
Tagged Administration, Higher Education, Dog Training

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the special education referral and decision-making process for English language learners (ELLs), with a focus on Child Study Team (CST) meetings and placement conferences/multidisciplinary team meetings. We wished to learn how school personnel determined if ELLs who were struggling had disabilities, to what extent those involved in the process understood second language acquisition, and whether language issues were considered when determining special education eligibility. We observed CST meetings and placement conferences for 19 students who were considered ELLs when they were referred. Findings revealed that in practice, only cursory attention was given to prereferral strategies. Most students were pushed toward testing, based on an assumption that poor academic performance or behavioral difficulties had their origin within the child and indicated a need for special education. Although some school personnel were quite knowledgeable about language issues, many were not. There was tremendous variation in the quality of what transpired during meetings. These differences were influenced by the intentions, knowledge, skills, and commitment of CST or multidisciplinary team members. All the factors we describe point to aspects of the process that should be improved.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, universities in the United States awarded nearly 2,000 doctoral degrees to graduates in fields such as astronomy, environmental science, petroleum engineering, and plant genetics; African Americans received none of these. This is not surprising considering that, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000), the average science scores of thirteen-year-old African American students are lower than the average scores of nine-year-old White students. Such data illustrate both the lack of an African American presence in science and technology professions and the systemic failure of schools to insure the science learning of African American students (Key, 2003). Moreover, this persistent gap in academic achievement in science, along with the lack of access to science careers, indicates that poor science preparation of African American students holds severe consequences for their life trajectories and supports Tate's assertion that "[u]rban science education is a civil rights issue" (2001, p. 1015).

Many reasons have been offered for the failure of most schools, particularly urban schools, to adequately prepare and engage African American students in science. However, most attempts to alter this pattern have relied on an increasing emphasis on standardized science curricula and testing. These explanations and reform efforts largely fail to acknowledge the relationship between the social, cultural, economic, and historical positions of the students, and how these factors influence classroom interactions and access to learning inside of school (Seiler, 2001). In addressing this gap in our understanding, we draw on both psychological and sociological theories in our study of urban science teaching and learning, since we believe that these perspectives afford new insights into important social and cultural aspects of participation in school science.

COMMUNALISM AS A CULTURAL DISPOSITION

We inform our search for deeper understandings of past and present failures in educating African American youth in science with the theoretical work of Boykin and his colleagues. This literature enumerates dimensions of African American culture emerging from roots in West Africa and molded by the experiences of slavery and oppression in the United States. Like Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), we suggest these dimensions as "proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities" (p. 19) and not as static traits ascribed to groups of people. Within this article, we focus on one of these dimensions, communalism, which can be described as "a commitment to social connectedness which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privileges" (Boykin, 1986, p. 61).

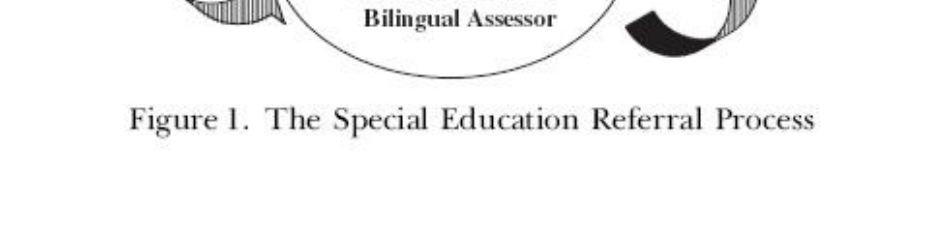


Figure 1. The Special Education Referral Process

motivation and engagement and allow access to the construction of science understanding. Moreover, we provide evidence for Tobin's assertion in which he writes, "What seems salient to the teaching and learning of science is that the development of solidarity, as a form of symbolic capital, is a critical step in the development of science fluency in a class" (2005, p. 29).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

City High is located in West Philadelphia near the University of Pennsylvania; however, the high school is a world away from the university in many respects. This large inner-city, comprehensive neighborhood high school serves a student population that is 87% low income. In a school district that is 64% African American and 19% White, City High's student body is 98% African American. The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) is used to determine the level of individual student performance as well as the degree to which schools enable students to attain proficiency of the standards. On the eleventh-grade assessment in 2001 (the year of this study), 77% of the students at City High were below basic level in math, and 64% were below basic level in reading.² Performance data such as these, along with low graduation and college attendance rates, are regularly used to support the correlation of high poverty rates and lower levels of family education with lower student achievement (Koher, 2001). However, the data should also urge us to question what can be done differently in classrooms, particularly science classes, to interrupt this cycle.

The racial and economic segregation at City High and within the surrounding community is salient in understanding the lack of academic achievement of its students. It is not a coincidence that the African American students who experience the greatest achievement gap are those living in conditions of poverty. Since mainstream experiences have been largely unavailable to them, the primary social fields in which they participate are structured to afford dispositions that position them to be "at odds with larger mainstream ideals" (Allen & Boykin, 1992, p. 589).³ This is particularly true in the field of school and is perhaps most pronounced in science classrooms where logic, objectivity, independent thought, and competition are highly valued (Lemke, 1990), and communal support and social bonds are often considered inappropriate.

COMMUNALISM AS A RESOURCE FOR SCIENCE LEARNING

In this article, we focus much of our analysis around Shakeem, an African American student from City High, who worked with us as a student researcher for three years⁴, and his interactions with peers both inside and outside of school. Specifically, we provide vignettes that illuminate the communal bond between Shakeem and another African American male student, Cedric, by exploring the crucial role that their connectedness plays in the social life of school and, specifically, in their interactions within their ninth-grade biology course⁵. In the following section, we commence with an example illustrating how Cedric's communal support of Shakeem contributes to the goal of learning in their science classroom. In doing so, we confront common notions (that are predominantly deficit perspectives) regarding how low-achieving, inner-city African American male high school students would likely engage in science class, and begin to highlight how little mainstream society understands and appreciates the strong communal bond that exists between some youth in these settings.

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING OF NERVE IMPULSES

During a unit on the nervous system, the students in the biology class were learning how neurotransmitters carry a nerve impulse across the synapse (the gap between two adjacent neurons), but Shakeem was absent on that day. The subsequent class began with an opening drill activity that asked the students, "Explain how an impulse gets from one neuron to the next." Cedric had understood this material well when it was taught on the previous day, and our analyses reveal that he became a key resource for his "boy" Shakeem's understanding of the neurological process.⁶ Following his own quick completion of the drill, Cedric asked, "You got it, Shakeem?" and then stated, "Look man. I ain't gonna tell you the answer, but I can help you." As he uttered these statements, Cedric pulled up a chair next to Shakeem, sat, and pointed to a diagram of neurons on a paper on the table. From then on, both Cedric and Shakeem's eyes were focused on the paper, and their heads were near each other as they leaned over the table. In the conversation that unfolded, Cedric proceeded to explain the path of the impulse, repeatedly referring and gesturing toward the circles in the diagram that represented the neurotransmitter molecules (e.g., "Look right here," and "These little things right here are the neurotransmitters."). Additionally, Cedric responded to Shakeem's questions (e.g., "That's them little dots, right?") and provided affirmation when Shakeem was correct. Moreover, Cedric corrected Shakeem's pronunciation of the word "synapse" and addressed his misconception that the impulse jumps across the synapse (Shakeem: "That's the synap." Cedric: "Synapse. Yeah. So it goes through [emphasis ours] the synapse to the receptors. See how this fits? It goes right into the receptor?").

We view Cedric's instruction to have been quite effective, since it was Shakeem who later volunteered to answer the drill question for the entire class at the chalkboard, and in doing so, he demonstrated an accurate understanding of the role of neurotransmitters in carrying an impulse. Salient here is that both Shakeem and Cedric's nonverbal (e.g., bodily positioning; gesturing to diagrams) and discursive practices (e.g., asking and answering questions; emphasizing Shakeem's correct pronunciation of the science canon; and addressing his misconceptions) indicate that they shared the goal of ensuring Shakeem's understanding of the function of neurotransmitters. The boys were not inclined to believe that Shakeem could not answer the drill just because he had been absent; neither did Cedric simply supply Shakeem with the correct answer; Cedric even made a point to say he wouldn't give him the answer. If viewed in isolation, some individuals might simply reduce Cedric and Shakeem's exchanges to one student randomly helping another classmate. However, we contend otherwise, and in the remainder of this article we support this vignette with additional data to argue that Cedric and Shakeem's social relationship, as manifested in their classroom interactions, demonstrates one of the many faces of a unique, deep, and purposeful communalism that is common among some African American urban youth.

A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACH TO CULTURE

The extent to which a distinct culture is shared by African Americans and the degree to which such culture represents retentions from African heritage are topics of frequent debate.⁷ We take seriously the caution of Gutiérrez & Rogoff (2003) not to view a disposition such as communalism among African Americans as a static trait ascribed to group membership. By focusing on communalism among African Americans, we are suggesting neither that only African Americans demonstrate this disposition, nor that all African Americans exhibit this disposition to the same degree. To suggest so would be to essentialize culture and to fail to recognize complexity within cultures and subcultures (Sewell, 1999). However, as theorized by Sewell, cultural systems of meanings and associated practices do exist throughout societies, even if only thinly coherent and marked by contradictions. For example, the concept that "I am because we are" represents a common generative theme in Black philosophy and in understanding African American social and historical experiences. This belief stands in contrast to Descartes' well-known adage, "I think; therefore I am." Instead, the focus is "more on collective structures than on individual decision-making" (Hord and Lee, 1995, p. 8). Moreover, the saying "I am because we are" has existed as a central belief of many African groups, and has been forged under influences of racial oppression and marginalization experienced, both historically and currently, by African Americans in the United States. The historical presence and evolution of this theme has led to the expression of communalism in ways that are different in magnitude and form when compared with communal practices in other cultural groups, and this is demonstrated profoundly among the most segregated African Americans, that is, those living in poverty. In fact, our socio-historical approach supports others' findings indicating that many of the students growing up in the inner city and attending schools like City High have both a cultural history (Boykin, 1986; Hale-Benson, 1986) and lived experiences (Anderson, 1999) through which they have come to embody particular communal dispositions. Therefore, while we acknowledge that there is heterogeneity across all cultural attributes and that contradictions certainly exist within every culture and subculture, we believe there is sufficient coherence in the way communalism is expressed and the role it plays in the lives of economically disadvantaged inner-city African American youth to warrant the study of its implications for their academic success.⁸

IS THERE A PLACE FOR COMMUNALISM IN SCIENCE CLASS?

The ideology that underscores most schools and curricula is not neutral (Nieto, 2004) and school science in many ways opposes central aspects of culture held by many African Americans in communities of economic disadvantage (Lemke, 1990; Barton, 1998). We argue that a commitment to social connections is often perceived in opposition to the interaction patterns and academic goals most common to science classrooms. For example, according to Lemke (1990), a frequent activity structure in science lessons is teacher-led questioning, which by nature inhibits student-to-student interactions and promotes competitive pursuits to individually develop a "correct" response for the teacher. With teacher-led questioning, students receive individual recognition for their answers, valuing separateness and competition over collaboration and community. Thus, in-school science interactions most often truncate the expression of a core African American cultural dimension, namely communalism, and contribute to the perpetuation of the status quo in which most African American students remain unsuccessful in science classes and marginalized in society.

We consider the role of cultural dispositions such as communalism to have salience to all areas of schooling; in fact, we expect that classes in history, mathematics, English, and other subjects are impacted in similar ways. However, we contend that the disposition of communalism has particular significance in science for several reasons. The lack of achievement of African American students in science has dire consequences for their success in school and in life, given that science courses often serve as gatekeepers and maintainers of the status quo. Since participation in a science community is a social process (Lemke, 1990), the appearance and usage of communal orientations in science classrooms should be welcomed and cultivated in efforts to improve students' science learning. These two points considered, we argue that if we can find ways to meld the social nature of science with the communal aspects of African American urban youth culture, we can create opportunities for African American youth to learn science that are currently missing in our schools. Thus, in the remainder of this article, we present analyses of communal dispositions appearing during interactions within a biology classroom as well as in fields outside of school. In doing so, we seek to elucidate both the failure of schools to enable these students to be academically successful and the role that communalism could play in affording greater success in science.

STUDYING CULTURAL DISPOSITIONS ACROSS MICRO-, MESO-, AND MACRO- LEVELS

At the macro-level, we are concerned with the reproductive nature of schooling and the persistent academic failure of many African American students. While recognizing the complexity of the issues connected with this lack of achievement, we attempt to understand it by studying the link between school performance and students' cultural orientations. Most other studies examining cultural mismatch have attempted to understand the gap by studying its instantiations at the meso-level, that is, by analyzing events in real time through ethnographic study of classrooms and schools (e.g., Ferguson, 2001; MacLeod, 1987); through analysis of verbal interactions (e.g., Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1983); or through the use of designed tasks and conditions that are congruent with cultural themes (e.g., Boykin et al., 2004). We remain cognizant of the macro societal concerns that drive our research, as we employ different lenses for moving across levels to study cultural dispositions at the micro-, as well as the meso-level.

The foundation of our research lies in video and audio recordings of teachers and students interacting in urban science classrooms and in student-produced film projects such as Shakeem's video-ethnography described in a subsequent section. Important themes and events evidenced in the tapes are identified at the meso-level through the use of particular theoretical lenses of cultural dispositions (Boykin, 1986), the sociology of emotions (Collins, 2004), and the generation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The relevant vignettes (such as the previous one on nerve impulses) are studied more closely, leading to transcription and analysis at the micro-level. Micro-analysis entails viewing shorter videotape segments across a range of speeds, from slow motion to frame by frame. This type of analysis often reveals occurrences that are not easily identified at normal speed, such as peripheral events, fleeting actions, and subtle movements. We believe that this focus on the details of nonverbal as well as verbal interactions during times of cultural enactment and production provides a window into developing deeper understandings of real-time, meso-level classroom workings. Using meso- and micro-analysis, we show how discourse and nonverbal communication such as body movement, direction of gaze, and use of material resources illuminate instances where students unconsciously and consciously employ communal practices while doing or learning science. In the next sections, we traverse these levels of analysis to disclose evidence of the generation of capital and positive emotional energy connected with communalism.

COMMUNALISM GENERATING POSITIVE EMOTIONAL ENERGY AROUND SCIENCE

The communal interaction between Cedric and Shakeem in the nerve impulse vignette is not an anomaly. Rather, extensive data sources collected in their biology classroom revealed that Cedric and Shakeem often worked together in class, and when they did, their "tight" relationship was usually evident. In the following vignette, the idea of "taking up for someone," which is a common theme and important occurrence among inner-city African American youth (Anderson, 1999), unfolds in the classroom and provides an additional example of communalism emerging in science classrooms in ways that may not appear to be directly, but are ultimately, linked to goals of science learning.

STD RESEARCH AND REPRESENTATION

In the biology class, pairs of students were asked to research a sexually transmitted disease (STD) of their choice and then to design a poster conveying information regarding the condition. Cedric and Shakeem worked together on this project and invested significant effort in the design of their poster. For example, they included drawings, whereas other students did not. When the co-teachers hung the posters around the room so that students could circulate, read the posters, and gather information (e.g., symptoms, cause, and treatment of the STDs) in order to complete a handout, Cedric and Shakeem's poster was placed near the back of the room.⁹ Initially, Cedric did not even see their poster, and when he did, he took the location of their poster to be a sign of disrespect for their efforts and questioned Mr. Ryan, one of the co-teachers, about the location of their poster. A portion of the discourse that ensued is transcribed below along with a description of the movements of the participants. It begins as Cedric is seated at a lab table, and Shakeem and Mr. Ryan are close by and to Cedric's left.

References

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Endnotes

1 Data were obtained from four different locations in the nation. For further detail regarding these sites, please see Abedi, Leon, and Mirocha (2003).

About the Author

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JANETTE K. KLINGNER is an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She was a bilingual special education teacher for 10 years in California and Florida. One research focus is the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. In 2004, she received the American Educational Research Association's Early Career Award.

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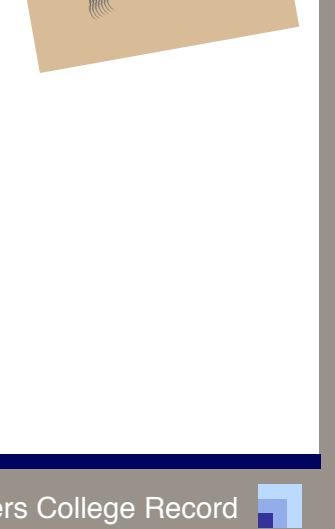
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INTRODUCTION

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We inform our search for deeper understandings of past and present failures in educating African American youth in science with the theoretical work of Boykin and his colleagues. This literature enumerates dimensions of African American culture emerging from roots in West Africa and molded by the experiences of slavery and oppression in the United States. Like Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), we suggest these dimensions as "proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities" (p. 19) and not as static traits ascribed to groups of people. Within this article, we focus on one of these dimensions, communalism, which can be described as "a commitment to social connectedness which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privileges" (Boykin, 1986, p. 61). Studies conducted by Boykin and others indicate a strong positive relationship between the academic performance of African American students and learning contexts that are communally oriented rather than contexts promoting competition and individualism (e.g., Boykin, Coleman, Lijla, & Tyler, 2004). Our work extends the construct of communalism into an inner-city neighborhood high school in Philadelphia (City High),¹ as we study student participation in science activities. Specifically, in this paper, we focus on understanding how communalism, even when engaged in ways that do not appear to be useful to learning, actually contributes to the accumulation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1992) and the generation of positive emotional energy in the classroom (Collins, 2004), and thus, may enhance motivation and engagement and allow access to the construction of science understanding. Moreover, we provide evidence for Tobin's assertion in which he writes, "What seems salient to the teaching and learning of science is that the development of solidarity, as a form of symbolic capital, is a critical step in the development of science fluency in a class" (2005, p. 29).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

City High is located in West Philadelphia near the University of Pennsylvania; however, the high school is a world away from the university in many respects. This large inner-city, comprehensive neighborhood high school serves a student population that is 87% low income. In a school district that is 64% African American and 19% White, City High's student body is 98% African American. The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) is used to determine the level of individual student performance as well as the degree to which schools enable students to attain proficiency of the standards. On the eleventh-grade assessment in 2001 (the year of this study), 77% of the students at City High were below basic level in math, and 64% were below basic level in reading; a Performance data such as these, along with low graduation and college attendance rates, are regularly used to support the correlation of high poverty rates and lower levels of family education with lower student achievement (Kober, 2001). However, the data should also urge us to question what can be done differently in classrooms, particularly science classes, to interrupt this cycle.

The racial and economic segregation at City High and within the surrounding community is salient in understanding the lack of academic achievement of its students. It is not a coincidence that the African American students who experience the greatest achievement gap are those living in conditions of poverty. Since mainstream experiences have been largely unavailable to them, the primary social fields in which they participate are structured to afford dispositions that position them to be "at odds with larger mainstream ideals" (Allen & Boykin, 1992, p. 589).² This is particularly true in the field of school and is perhaps most pronounced in science classrooms where logic, objectivity, independent thought, and competition are highly valued (Lemke, 1990), and communal support and social bonds are often considered inappropriate.

COMMUNALISM AS A RESOURCE FOR SCIENCE LEARNING

In this article, we focus much of our analysis around Shakeem, an African American student from City High, who worked with us as a student researcher for three years,⁴ and his interactions with peers both inside and outside of school. Specifically, we provide vignettes that illuminate the communal bond between Shakeem and another African American male student, Cedric, by exploring the crucial role that their connectedness plays in the social life of school and, specifically, in their interactions within their ninth-grade biology course.⁵ In the following section, we commence with an example illustrating how Cedric's communal support of Shakeem contributes to the goal of learning in their science classroom. In doing so, we confront common notions (that are predominantly deficit perspectives) regarding how low-achieving, inner-city African American male high school students would likely engage in science class, and begin to highlight how little mainstream society understands and appreciates the strong communal bond that exists between some youth in these settings.

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING OF NERVE IMPULSES

During a unit on the nervous system, the students in the biology class were learning how neurotransmitters carry a nerve impulse across the synapse (the gap between two adjacent neurons), but Shakeem was absent on that day. The subsequent class began with an opening drill activity that asked the students, "Explain how an impulse gets from one neuron to the next." Cedric had understood this material well when it was taught on the previous day, and our analyses reveal that he became a key resource for his "boy" Shakeem's understanding of the neurological process.⁶ Following his own quick completion of the drill, Cedric asked, "You got it, Shakeem?" and then stated, "Look man, I ain't gonna tell you the answer, but I can help you." As he uttered these statements, Cedric pulled up a chair next to Shakeem, sat, and pointed to a diagram of neurons on a paper on the table. From then on, both Cedric and Shakeem's eyes were focused on the paper, and their heads were near each other as they leaned over the table. In the conversation that unfolded, Cedric proceeded to explain the path of the impulse, repeatedly referring and gesturing toward the circles in the diagram that represented the neurotransmitter molecules (e.g., "Look right here," and "These little things right here are the neurotransmitters."). Additionally, Cedric responded to Shakeem's questions (e.g., "That's them little dots, right?") and provided affirmation when Shakeem was correct. Moreover, Cedric corrected Shakeem's pronunciation of the word "synapse" and addressed his misconception that the impulse jumps across the synapse (Shakeem: "That's the synap." Cedric: "Synapse. Yeah. So it goes through [emphasis ours] the synapse to the receptors. See how this fits? It goes right into the receptor.").

We view Cedric's instruction to have been quite effective, since it was Shakeem who later volunteered to answer the drill question for the entire class at the chalkboard, and in doing so, he demonstrated an accurate understanding of the role of neurotransmitters in carrying an impulse. Salient here is that both Shakeem and Cedric's nonverbal (e.g., bodily positioning; gesturing to diagrams) and discursive practices (e.g., asking and answering questions; emphasizing Shakeem's correct pronunciation of the science canon; and addressing his misconceptions) indicate that they shared the goal of ensuring Shakeem's understanding of the function of neurotransmitters. The boys were not inclined to believe that Shakeem could not answer the drill just because he had been absent; neither did Cedric simply supply Shakeem with the correct answer; Cedric even made a point to say he wouldn't give him the answer. If viewed in isolation, some individuals might simply reduce Cedric and Shakeem's exchanges to one student randomly helping another classmate. However, we contend otherwise, and in the remainder of this article we support this vignette with additional data to argue that Cedric and Shakeem's social relationship, as manifested in their classroom interactions, demonstrates one of the many facets of a unique, deep, and purposeful communalism that is common among some African American urban youth.

A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL APPROACH TO CULTURE

The extent to which a distinct culture is shared by African Americans and the degree to which such culture represents retentions from African heritage are topics of frequent debate.⁷ We take seriously the caution of Gutiérrez & Rogoff (2003) not to view a disposition such as communalism among African Americans as a static trait ascribed to group membership. By focusing on communalism among African Americans, we are suggesting neither that only African Americans demonstrate this disposition, nor that all African Americans exhibit this disposition to the same degree. To suggest so would be to essentialize culture and to fail to recognize complexity within cultures and subcultures (Sewell, 1999). However, as theorized by Sewell, cultural systems of meanings and associated practices do exist throughout societies, even if only thinly coherent and marked by contradictions. For example, the concept that "I am because we are" represents a common generative theme in Black philosophy and in understanding African American social and historical experiences. This belief stands in contrast to Descartes' well-known adage, "I think; therefore I am." Instead, the focus is "more on collective structures than on individual decision-making" (Hord and Lee, 1995, p. 8). Moreover, the saying "I am because we are" has existed as a central belief of many African groups, and has been forged under influences of racial oppression and marginalization experienced, both historically and currently, by African Americans in the United States. The historical presence and evolution of this theme has led to the expression of communalism in ways that are different in magnitude and form when compared with communal practices in other cultural groups, and this is demonstrated profoundly among the most segregated African Americans, that is, those living in poverty. In fact, our socio-historical approach supports others' findings indicating that many of the students growing up in the inner city and attending schools like City High have both a cultural history (Boykin, 1986; Hale-Benson, 1986) and lived experiences (Anderson, 1999) through which they have come to embody particular communal dispositions. Therefore, while we acknowledge that there is heterogeneity across all cultural attributes and that contradictions certainly exist within every culture and subculture, we believe there is sufficient coherence in the way communalism is expressed and the role it plays in the lives of economically disadvantaged inner-city African American youth to warrant the study of its implications for their academic success.⁸

IS THERE A PLACE FOR COMMUNALISM IN SCIENCE CLASS?

The ideology that underscores most schools and curricula is not neutral (Nieto, 2004) and school science in many ways opposes central aspects of culture held by many African Americans in communities of economic disadvantage (Lemke, 1990; Barton, 1998). We argue that a commitment to social connections is often perceived in opposition to the interaction patterns and academic goals most common to science classrooms. For example, according to Lemke (1990), a frequent activity structure in science lessons is teacher-led questioning, which by nature inhibits student-to-student interactions and promotes competitive pursuits to individually develop a "correct" response for the teacher. With teacher-led questioning, students receive individual recognition for their answers, valuing separateness and competition over collaboration and community. Thus, in-school science interactions most often truncate the expression of a core African American cultural dimension, namely communalism, and contribute to the perpetuation of the status quo in which most African American students remain unsuccessful in science classes and marginalized in society.

We consider the role of cultural dispositions such as communalism to have salience to all areas of schooling; in fact, we expect that classes in history, mathematics, English, and other subjects are impacted in similar ways. However, we contend that the disposition of communalism has particular significance in science for several reasons. The lack of achievement of African American students in science has dire consequences for their success in school and in life, given that science courses often serve as gatekeepers and maintainers of the status quo. Since participation in a science community is a social process (Lemke, 1990), the appearance and usage of communal orientations in science classrooms should be welcomed and cultivated in efforts to improve students' science learning. These two points considered, we argue that if we can find ways to meld the social nature of science with the communal aspects of African American urban youth culture, we can create opportunities for African American youth to learn science that are currently missing in our schools. Thus, in the remainder of this article, we present analyses of communal dispositions appearing during interactions within a biology classroom as well as in fields outside of school. In doing so, we seek to elucidate both the failure of schools to enable these students to be academically successful and the role that communalism could play in affording greater success in science.

STUDYING CULTURAL DISPOSITIONS ACROSS MICRO-, MESO-, AND MACRO-LEVELS

At the macro-level, we are concerned with the reproductive nature of schooling and the persistent academic failure of many African American students. While recognizing the complexity of the issues connected with this lack of achievement, we attempt to understand it by studying the link between school performance and students' cultural orientations. Most other studies examining cultural mismatch have attempted to understand the gap by studying its instantiations at the meso-level, that is, by analyzing events in real time through ethnographic study of classrooms and schools (e.g.,

Ferguson, 2001; MacLeod, 1987); through analysis of verbal interactions (e.g., Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981); or through the use of designed tasks and conditions that are congruent with cultural themes (e.g., Boykin et al., 2004). We remain cognizant of the macro societal concerns that drive our research, as we employ different lenses for moving across levels to study cultural dispositions at the micro-, as well as the meso-level.

The foundation of our research lies in video and audio recordings of teachers and students interacting in urban science classrooms and in student-produced film projects such as Shakeem's video-ethnography described in a subsequent section. Important themes and events evidenced in the tapes are identified at the meso-level through the use of particular theoretical lenses of cultural dispositions (Boykin, 1986), the sociology of emotions (Collins, 2004), and the generation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The relevant vignettes (such as the previous one on nerve impulses) are studied more closely, leading to transcription and analysis at the micro-level. Micro-analysis entails viewing shorter videotape segments across a range of speeds, from slow motion to frame by frame. This type of analysis often reveals occurrences that are not easily identified at normal speed, such as peripheral events, fleeting actions, and subtle movements. We believe that this focus on the details of nonverbal as well as verbal interactions during times of cultural enactment and production provides a window into developing deeper understandings of real-time, meso-level classroom workings. Using meso- and micro-analysis, we show how discourse and nonverbal communication such as body movement, direction of gaze, and use of material resources illuminate instances where students unconsciously and consciously employ communal practices while doing or learning science. In the next sections, we traverse these levels of analysis to disclose evidence of the generation of capital and positive emotional energy connected with communalism.

COMMUNALISM GENERATING POSITIVE EMOTIONAL ENERGY AROUND SCIENCE

The communal interaction between Cedric and Shakeem in the nerve impulse vignette is not an anomaly. Rather, extensive data sources collected in their biology classroom revealed that Cedric and Shakeem often worked together in class, and when they did, their "tight" relationship was usually evident. In the following vignette, the idea of "taking up for someone," which is a common theme and important occurrence among inner-city African American youth (Anderson, 1999), unfolds in the classroom and provides an additional example of communalism emerging in science classrooms in ways that may not appear to be directly, but are ultimately, linked to goals of science learning.

STD RESEARCH AND REPRESENTATION

In the biology class, pairs of students were asked to research a sexually transmitted disease (STD) of their choice and then to design a poster conveying information regarding the condition. Cedric and Shakeem worked together on this project and invested significant effort in the design of their poster. For example, they included drawings, whereas other students did not. When the co-teachers hung the posters around the room so that students could circulate, read the posters, and gather information (e.g. symptoms, cause, and treatment of the STDs) in order to complete a handout, Cedric and Shakeem's poster was placed near the back of the room.⁹ Initially, Cedric did not even see their poster, and when he did, he took the location of their poster to be a sign of disrespect for their efforts and questioned Mr. Ryan, one of the co-teachers, about the location of their poster. A portion of the discourse that ensued is transcribed below along with a description of the movements of the participants. It begins as Cedric is seated at a lab table, and Shakeem and Mr. Ryan are close by and to Cedric's left.

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Endnotes

¹ Data were obtained from four different locations in the nation. For further detail regarding these sites, please see Abadi, Leon, and Miracha (2003).

About the Author

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JANETTE K. KLINGNER is an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She was a bilingual special education teacher for 10 years in California and Florida. One research focus is the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. In 2004, she received the American Educational Research Association's Early Career Award.

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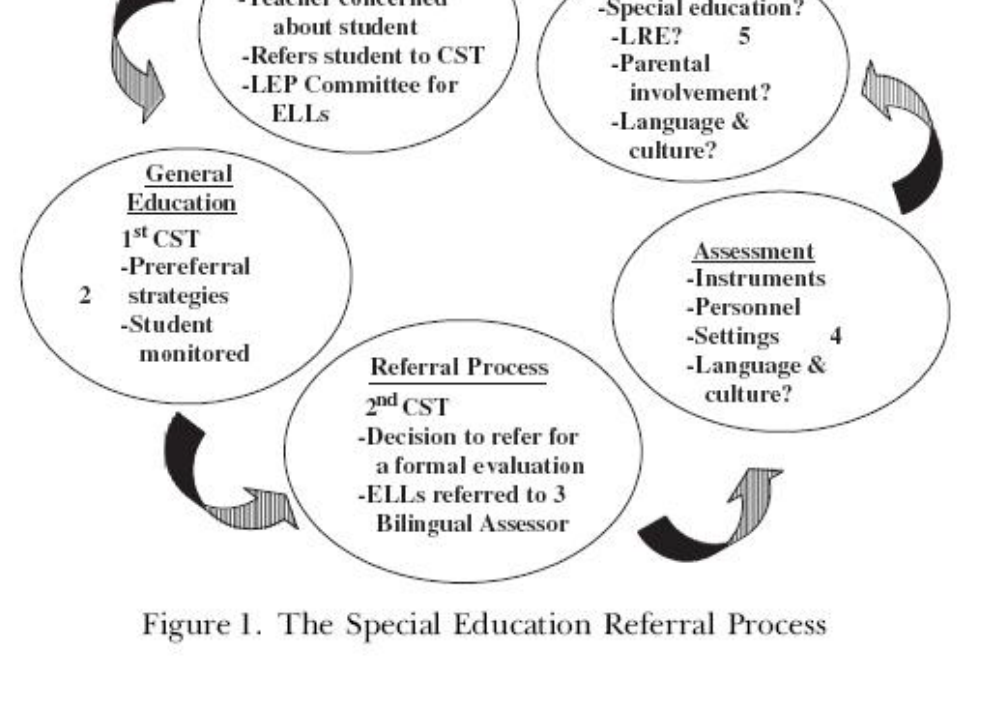


Figure 1. The Special Education Referral Process

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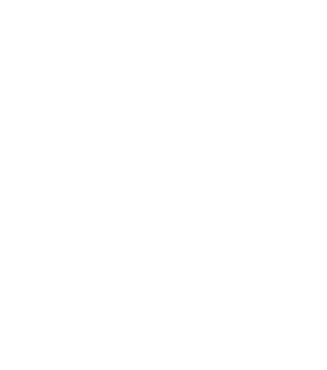
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The Special Education Referral and Decision-Making Process for English Language Learners: Child Study Team Meetings and Placement Conference

James S. Kaminsky
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Tagged Administration, Higher Education, Dog Training

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the special education referral and decision-making process for English language learners (ELLs), with a focus on Child Study Team (CST) meetings and placement conferences/multidisciplinary team meetings. We wished to learn how school personnel determined if ELLs who were struggling had disabilities, to what extent those involved in the process understood second language acquisition, and whether language issues were considered when determining special education eligibility. We observed CST meetings and placement conferences for 19 students who were considered ELLs when they were referred. Findings revealed that in practice, only cursory attention was given to prereferral strategies. Most students were pushed toward testing, based on an assumption that poor academic performance or behavioral difficulties had their origin within the child and indicated a need for special education. Although some school personnel were quite knowledgeable about language issues, many were not. There was tremendous variation in the quality of what transpired during meetings. These differences were influenced by the intentions, knowledge, skills, and commitment of CST or multidisciplinary team members. All the factors we describe point to aspects of the process that should be improved.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, universities in the United States awarded nearly 2,000 doctoral degrees to graduates in fields such as astronomy, environmental science, petroleum engineering, and plant genetics; African Americans received none of these. This is not surprising considering that, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000), the average science scores of thirteen-year-old African American students are lower than the average scores of nine-year-old White students. Such data illustrate both the lack of an African American presence in science and technology professions and the systemic failure of schools to insure the science learning of African American students (Key, 2003). Moreover, this persistent gap in academic achievement in science, along with the lack of access to science careers, indicates that poor science preparation of African American students holds severe consequences for their life trajectories and supports Tate's assertion that "[u]rban science education is a civil rights issue" (2001, p. 1015).

Many reasons have been offered for the failure of most schools, particularly urban schools, to adequately prepare and engage African American students in science. However, most attempts to alter this pattern have relied on an increasing emphasis on standardized science curricula and testing. These explanations and reform efforts largely fail to acknowledge the relationship between the social, cultural, economic, and historical positions of the students, and how these factors influence classroom interactions and access to learning inside of school (Seiler, 2001). In addressing this gap in our understanding, we draw on both psychological and sociological theories in our study of urban science teaching and learning, since we believe that these perspectives afford new insights into important social and cultural aspects of participation in school science.

COMMUNALISM AS A CULTURAL DISPOSITION

We inform our search for deeper understandings of past and present failures in educating African American youth in science with the theoretical work of Boykin and his colleagues. This literature enumerates dimensions of African American culture emerging from roots in West Africa and molded by the experiences of slavery and oppression in the United States. Like Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003), we suggest these dimensions as "proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities" (p. 19) and not as static traits ascribed to groups of people. Within this article, we focus on one of these dimensions, communalism, which can be described as "a commitment to social connectedness which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privileges" (Boykin, 1986, p. 61).

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Specifically, in this paper, we focus on understanding how communalism, even when engaged in ways that do not appear to be useful to learning, actually contributes to the accumulation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1992) and the generation of positive emotional energy in the classroom (Collins, 2004), and thus, may enhance

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IS THERE A PLACE FOR COMMUNALISM IN SCIENCE CLASS?

The ideology that underscores most schools and curricula is not neutral (Nieto, 2004) and school science in many ways opposes central aspects of culture held by many African Americans in communities of economic disadvantage (Lemke, 1990; Barton, 1998). We argue that a commitment to social connections is often perceived in opposition to the interaction patterns and academic goals most common to science classrooms. For example, according to Lemke (1990), a frequent activity structure in science lessons is teacher-led questioning, which by nature inhibits student-to-student interactions and promotes competitive pursuits to individually develop a "correct" response for the teacher. With teacher-led questioning, students receive individual recognition for their answers, valuing separateness and competition over collaboration and community. Thus, in-school science interactions most often truncate the expression of a core African American cultural dimension, namely communalism, and contribute to the perpetuation of the status quo in which most African American students remain unsuccessful in science classes and marginalized in society.

We consider the role of cultural dispositions such as communalism to have salience to all areas of schooling; in fact, we expect that classes in history, mathematics, English, and other subjects are impacted in similar ways. However, we contend that the disposition of communalism has particular significance in science for several reasons. The lack of achievement of African American students in science has dire consequences for their success in school and in life, given that science courses often serve as gatekeepers and maintainers of the status quo. Since participation in a science community is a social process (Lemke, 1990), the appearance and usage of communal orientations in science classrooms should be welcomed and cultivated in efforts to improve students' science learning. These two points considered, we argue that if we can find ways to meld the social nature of science with the communal aspects of African American urban youth culture, we can create opportunities for African American youth to learn science that are currently missing in our schools. Thus, in the remainder of this article, we present analyses of communal dispositions appearing during interactions within a biology classroom as well as in fields outside of school. In doing so, we seek to elucidate both the failure of schools to enable these students to be academically successful and the role that communalism could play in affording greater success in science.

STUDYING CULTURAL DISPOSITIONS ACROSS MICRO-, MESO-, AND MACRO- LEVELS

At the macro-level, we are concerned with the reproductive nature of schooling and the persistent academic failure of many African American students. While recognizing the complexity of the issues connected with this lack of achievement, we attempt to understand it by studying the link between school performance and students' cultural orientations. Most other studies examining cultural mismatch have attempted to understand the gap by studying its instantiations at the meso-level, that is, by analyzing events in real time through ethnographic study of classrooms and schools (e.g., Ferguson, 2001; MacLeod, 1987); through analysis of verbal interactions (e.g., Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981); or through the use of designed tasks and conditions that are congruent with cultural themes (e.g., Boykin et al., 2004). We remain cognizant of the macro societal concerns that drive our research, as we employ different lenses for moving across levels to study cultural dispositions at the micro-, as well as the meso-level.

The foundation of our research lies in video and audio recordings of teachers and students interacting in urban science classrooms and in student-produced film projects such as Shakeem's video-ethnography described in a subsequent section. Important themes and events evidenced in the tapes are identified at the meso-level through the use of particular theoretical lenses of cultural dispositions (Boykin, 1986), the sociology of emotions (Collins, 2004), and the generation of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The relevant vignettes (such as the previous one on nerve impulses) are studied more closely, leading to transcription and analysis at the micro-level. Micro-analysis entails viewing shorter videotape segments across a range of speeds, from slow motion to frame by frame. This type of analysis often reveals occurrences that are not easily identified at normal speed, such as peripheral events, fleeting actions, and subtle movements. We believe that this focus on the details of nonverbal as well as verbal interactions during times of cultural enactment and production provides a window into developing deeper understandings of real-time, meso-level classroom workings. Using meso- and micro-analysis, we show how discourse and nonverbal communication such as body movement, direction of gaze, and use of material resources illuminate instances where students unconsciously and consciously employ communal practices while doing or learning science. In the next sections, we traverse these levels of analysis to disclose evidence of the generation of capital and positive emotional energy connected with communalism.

COMMUNALISM GENERATING POSITIVE EMOTIONAL ENERGY AROUND SCIENCE

The communal interaction between Cedric and Shakeem in the nerve impulse vignette is not an anomaly. Rather, extensive data sources collected in their biology classroom revealed that Cedric and Shakeem often worked together in class, and when they did, their "tight" relationship was usually evident. In the following vignette, the idea of "taking up for someone," which is a common theme and important occurrence among inner-city African American youth (Anderson, 1999), unfolds in the classroom and provides an additional example of communalism emerging in science classrooms in ways that may not appear to be directly, but are ultimately, linked to goals of science learning.

STD RESEARCH AND REPRESENTATION

In the biology class, pairs of students were asked to research a sexually transmitted disease (STD) of their choice and then to design a poster conveying information regarding the condition. Cedric and Shakeem worked together on this project and invested significant effort in the design of their poster. For example, they included drawings, whereas other students did not. When the co-teachers hung the posters around the room so that students could circulate, read the posters, and gather information (e.g., symptoms, cause, and treatment of the STDs) in order to complete a handout, Cedric and Shakeem's poster was placed near the back of the room.⁹ Initially, Cedric did not even see their poster, and when he did, he took the location of their poster to be a sign of disrespect for their efforts and questioned Mr. Ryan, one of the co-teachers, about the location of their poster. A portion of the discourse that ensued is transcribed below along with a description of the movements of the participants. It begins as Cedric is seated at a lab table, and Shakeem and Mr. Ryan are close by and to Cedric's left.

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Endnotes

¹ Data were obtained from four different locations in the nation. For further detail regarding these sites, please see Abedi, Leon, and Mircshad (2003).

About the Author

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JANETTE K. KLINGNER is an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She was a bilingual special education teacher for 10 years in California and Florida. One research focus is the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. In 2004, she received the American Educational Research Association's Early Career Award.

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The purpose of this study was to examine the special education referral and decision-making process for English language learners (ELLs), with a focus on Child Study Team (CST) meetings and placement conferences/multidisciplinary team meetings. We wished to learn how school personnel determined if ELLs who were struggling had disabilities, to what extent those involved in the process understood second language acquisition, and whether language issues were considered when determining special education eligibility. We observed CST meetings and placement conferences for 19 students who were considered ELLs when they were referred. Findings revealed that in practice, only cursory attention was given to prereferral strategies. Most students were pushed toward testing, based on an assumption that poor academic performance or behavioral

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