

Leveling The Playing Field: The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm

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Abstract

We examined the practices, beliefs, and attitudes of secondary teachers in order to identify factors that led to success for non-dominant-group students. We found a unique paradigm among educators whose students of color and/or poverty showed no achievement gap. Rather than coming from a deficit perspective or one expecting assimilation, those teachers displayed an outlook and approach that positioned non-dominant group students as different rather than deficient. In fact, coming from this perspective, the educators recognized that while non-dominant students may be lacking in some typical student behaviors and skills, they bring other skills with them which can be harnessed and transferred into academic success. We call this unique paradigm the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm. The practices that the educators in this paradigm used to help non-dominant students to succeed included: sharing student culture; allowing students to lead; discerning hidden talents; and refraining from moral judgments.

Even within the same district or school, a significant gap often exists between the performance of students from the dominant cultural group and those from non-dominant groups. Central to the school reform discourse is closing that gap through efforts to bring all students up to the same academic skill level. However, this task is a complex one. The role of cultural capital transmitted through opportunities provided by advantaged parents is well documented (Cheadle 2008; De Graaf, de Graaf, & Kraaykamp 2000; Dumais 2002; Sullivan 2001; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede 2007). As a result, some researchers have pointed out that what is measured as academic per-

formance is sometimes more a measure of the system's appreciation for students' cultural capital. Researchers have, therefore, called for an examination of the relationship between the background of students and the norms and values of schools (Cummins, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 2010, 2013; Heath, 1983; Jacob & Linkow, 2011; McLaren, 1998; Phillips, 2011; Reardon, 2011; Rothstein, 2013). In that tradition, the study reported in this article examined the practices, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers in settings where success for all students was a reality. By doing so, we sought to identify key factors that could be adopted by other teachers to achieve similar outcomes.

The data for the study that is described in this article were culled from a larger study. That study compared the practices, values, and beliefs of educators at high-performing schools with a large population of high SES students with educators at schools with a majority of students of color and students of poverty that had moved from low-performing to high-performing status. The research questions that drove this part of the study were:

1. How do educators who are effective with non-dominant (and often marginalized) students differ in their approach from those who struggle to produce similar results?
2. What factors contribute to the success of those teachers and set them apart from their less efficacious peers?

Method

This two-year study used a grounded theory, qualitative research approach (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln (1998); Glesne (1998); and Merriam (1998, 2002). Using qualitative interviews and observations, this study investigated the conditions which contributed to educator success with non-dominant-group students. This paper utilizes only part of a much larger multi-year study looking at what attitudes, values, and beliefs may exist to hinder students' achievement in one setting and promote it in another. To capture data for the larger study, surveys, observation, and document review were employed as well as interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, administrators, and superintendents of multiple districts. Interview questions for the students included in this paper were developed to more fully examine how they made meaning-making from their academic experiences. This inquiry placed educator and student experiences at the center of the research and permitted participants to delve into their experiences in their own words. This 'experience as knowledge' concept positions these collective experiences as a revelation of their realities and ideas about the social world. This unearths insight that we otherwise wouldn't see without the lives of participants at the center of our work. This methodology provided the means to explore the principals' and teachers' interactions with the students on their campuses.

Setting

The data for this article were collected at Oxford Marshall High School (The campus, district, and participants represented here are pseudonyms). Oxford Marshall was the second newest of the five high schools in the Canyon Vista District and located on the outskirts of an affluent suburban bedroom community in the southwestern United States. It was a 10-12th grade school with an emphasis on International Baccalaureate (IB) and S.T.E.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

Oxford Marshall served 2,320 students, whose racial identification included 17% African American students, 32% Hispanic, 47% White, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and .3% Native American. Thirty-seven percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and 4% were classified as Limited English Proficient. Additionally, 37% of the students were considered at-risk. The faculty serving this population were 79% White, 3% African American, 13% Hispanic, 1% Native American, 1% Asian, 0% Pacific Islander, and 3% were bi-racial. The school's standardized test scores consistently revealed a sizeable achievement gap between dominant and non-dominant group students.

Participants

Although the sample size for the larger study was 10 administrators, 20 teachers, and 20 students, for this part of the study we chose two administrators, four teachers, and four students. Selection for the larger study was done purposefully, not randomly; that is, these particular principals, teachers and students exhibited characteristics of interest to the researchers (Merriam, 2002). Pseudonyms were assigned to identify all subjects. The data presented here for the purposes of this discussion were culled from the larger study during the analysis process.

Administrators. From the larger data collection, two administrators were chosen. During the period covered by the study, Mr. Ortega was in his first and second year as a high school principal, having been promoted from a single 9th grade level campus. Ortega publicly remarked on his childhood socioeconomic background as "poor." Further probing revealed he grew up in urban poverty and was a native to the area. The other administrator, Mr. Laroche, was in his third and fourth year as a campus administrator, but his first on a comprehensive high school campus. One of two African-American, male administrators on the campus, Laroche was from an upper middle class background.

Teachers. From the larger dataset, the experiences of four teachers were included here. Three of those teachers were White. Ms. Hall, who was in her fourth and fifth year of teaching, was new to the Canyon View Independent School District. Ms. Hall was raised by a single mother from a middle class background, who was a teacher herself. Her students consistently showed no

racial or class gap in achievement on state tests. Ms. Byrne was in her first year of teaching in the District. From a middle class background, Ms. Byrne came to teaching late in her career from the private, non-profit sector. Ms. Gifford, who was in her fifth and sixth year of teaching, came to teaching in her 40s from a variety of upper level corporate positions. Gifford was from an upper middle class background. Ms. Carrasquillo was in her tenth and eleventh year teaching. A native Puerto Rican New Yorker, Carrasquillo came from an upper-middle class background. Ms. Gifford and Ms. Carrasquillo taught both AP classes and general classes in their discipline, and stated a preference for teaching AP students.

Students. All of the student participants for this study were from low-income households and were in their sophomore and junior years of high school. Students were identified with the input of participating campus teachers and based upon the following criteria: (a) from low-income households and/or, (b) non-dominant group racial classification, (c) consistently performing well in the recommending teacher's class, and (d) willingness to participate in the study. Often the recommended students were performing well in the recommending teacher's class, but not well in other classes. This phenomenon was of specific interest to the researchers.

Flavio's mediocre academic performance hid a bright problem-solver. Kenya's below-grade-level reading skills and subpar grades marked her academic career, despite her highly developed critical thinking skills. Despite being a hard worker, Marisol's below-grade-level reading and math skills plagued her ability to pass the state test. In contrast, Gabrielle's above average performance on the test buoyed her school experience as she wandered in and out of extra-curricular activities trying to find her place. The selection of these students emerged during the analysis of the data from the larger study.

Data Collection

Data gathering was accomplished through a combination of participant observation and interviews. Participant observation involved researchers methodically experiencing and intentionally recording in detail the many facets of a situation while continuously analyzing their observations for both meaning and personal bias (Glense & Peshkin, 1992). The observation data used in this study were collected in both social and academic settings. The students, teachers, and principals were observed in academic classes, elective classes, the cafeteria, the school library, the gymnasium, and the school corridors as students passed between classes.

In-depth interviews were conducted on campus after school with each of the teachers, students, and principals featured in this article. Open-ended questions were used in semi-structured interviews, which were designed to investigate the manner in which the participants interpreted aspects of their

experiences (Stringer, 2007) and allowed a picture of the participants' perceptions to emerge. Participants were interviewed three times individually. These interviews and focus groups were audio-taped with two tape recorders and notes were taken during each. A journal was used to record all relevant events discovered during the study. Member checking was utilized with each subject's transcript. After an interview was transcribed, it was sent to the subject, who read and approved the transcript. If the subject requested additions, clarification, or modification of their transcript, appropriate changes were made.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory guided this study. In that approach to qualitative research, the participants' words must guide the theory creation during coding. This is a critical piece of the data analysis process. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) explained, "words are the way more people come to understand their situations; we create our world with words; we explain ourselves with words; we defend and hide ourselves with words" (p. 18). Thus, the process of categorizing and coding the data is significant since the researchers' entire mission is to discern "patterns within those words and present those patterns for others to inspect while at the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it" (p. 18).

Contrary to quantitative methodology, in qualitative data collection, the interview transcript data are not organized within pre-defined categories. Rather, the categories, their relationship to one another, and their meaning emerge from the data. During the collection and coding, salient categories emerge, which permits the incorporation of perspectives into a theoretical model to explain the social process under investigation.

The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Key points were marked with a code that was then used to group similar ideas and concepts. To accomplish this, the researchers concurrently coded and analyzed data to discern concepts (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The relationship of the concepts was explored through the process of contrasting incidents emerging from the data. From these accumulated codes, we developed themes or categories. Out of these categories, we formed a reverse-engineered explanation concerning what had actually happened. Thus, this method required that the researchers not begin with a theory explaining the events or how the participants would perceive them. Rather, we permitted the data itself to form the theory of the events and circumstances under study.

Findings

The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm

Based on the analysis of the data, we developed a model for understanding how teachers can facilitate optimal performance from their non-dominant group students. We call this model the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm. The name refers to a belief system that recognizes that students of color and students from homes of poverty are not unteachable and that they do not harbor inherent deficits that limit their success. Instead, people who embrace the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm see the achievement gap between students of the dominant culture and students of color and students who live in poverty as the result of different backgrounds of experiences. These educators realize that non-dominant-group students often possess a set of experiences that the dominant-class students do not possess. This unique experience base, moreover, can inform and serve the students through critical-thinking skills and problem-solving ability. The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm has four components: sharing student culture; allowing students to lead; discerning hidden talents; and refraining from moral judgments.

Sharing Student Culture

Educators often expect non-dominant-group students to assimilate by adjusting to and adopting the dominant group culture. Ms. Hall had a different approach to her students. Frequent conversations could be overheard between her and students regarding popular music, movies, and television shows. Often, at the conclusion of these talks, Hall would recommend a book to the student based on their shared appreciation of this pop cultural material. Frequently, the student wrote down the name of the book or borrowed Hall's own copy from her shelf. When asked about the shared love of pop culture, Hall explained:

It's important for me to be someone they can identify with, and to have that shared point of conversation. I pay attention to what they're into and use it as a conversation piece. True, I do like popular music, hip hop and rap included, but I'd make the effort even if I didn't because the payoff is immense. A kid comes in before or after school, I have on music they like. They're always surprised, and see me differently and it opens doors to talk about other things.

We also observed Ms. Hall in conversations with students in which she allowed them to teach her a popular dance, or complicated handshakes, as well as how to use their slang correctly. As she stood in her doorway between classes, students would occasionally raise their chins in greeting

and throw up two fingers turned to the side (called 'throwing the deuces'). Without missing a beat or seeming uncomfortable, Hall returned the gesture.

Not everyone in the building appreciated Ms. Hall's assimilation to her students. For example, Ms. Gifford dismissed the behavior:

Yeah, the kids love her. She's a big cut-up, so I can see her doing something like that. We all figure that's how she works with those kids. A campus counselor expanded on that thought: "Hall is the teacher I turn to in order to place difficult students. You know, a kid comes back from [the alternative high school] or juvie, or they can't get along with another teacher, I'll put them with Hall. I don't know how she does it, but nine times out of ten, they'll buy into her class and things will be smooth. So, we overlook her eccentric behavior. She's kind of avant-garde like that.

Ms. Hall also participated in a sort of verbal sparring with some of the students, most of them male. To the observer, it appeared to be a witty exchange involving one-upmanship. However, both sides were quick to acknowledge when the other party used a very clever line. Hall more often than not, won, and the boys seemed to respect her for it. Flavio spoke about it:

Oh, now, you don't challenge Miss. You may do it for play, but won't nobody flat get into with her. She quick and she smart." When asked why that was important, Flavio laughed, "Cause you gotta be able to talk smack or you got no cred at all. Miss can talk it like she grew up doin' it.

Hall explained her unconventional behavior: "They come to school, and I ask them to conform in a lot of ways. I ask them to write using proper English and use conventions, right? So, it seems fair and right that I show that I can bend and learn, too. Plus, think about it: they need to be able to see that it is possible to be bi-cultural, so to speak. I show them, 'Hey, I can wade into your world convincingly. And then I can be my professional self when needed. You can do the same thing. You can cross over and back when you need to as well.' They need to know that."

In direct contrast to her hip exchanges with the students, Hall began every class with a very dominant-group ritual. All of her students formed a line outside the classroom door, waiting to enter the classroom, which could be accomplished only after appropriately greeting and shaking hands with Hall as they passed through the door. This was not a perfunctory exercise. As needed, she would remind students to look her in the eye and give a firm handshake. Students who offered a limp hand or failed to make eye contact were held at the door and asked to repeat the exercise.

None of the students waiting in the hallway for entry to the class seemed bothered or surprised by the wait. It was clear this was a routine exercise in her class. When a student mastered the technique, she'd give them praise as well. Hall expounded on the ritual:

These kids have to go out into the real world and approach adults who look like me for jobs. They need to feel comfortable and confident shaking hands and looking people in the eye, not mumbling while they speak. These are important social skills. We practice them every time I see them.

When asked about Hall's dual personality, Kenya laughed,

She's something. Little White girl gotta little slang. Man, I love when she talkin' and she bust out with that. But she use it right. She know her stuff. But another teacher or a principal come in, she straighten up and talk proper to them. Funny to watch.

Hall employed her own assimilation to demonstrate that she understood and valued her students' cultures before asking them to value and understand the dominant group culture. She didn't ask the kids to travel a one-way street, but instead traveled the road herself as well. Further, it communicated that she respected and understood where they came from and saw it as a key piece of their identity. Too often students reported teachers denigrating their cultural practices, which did not inspire the students to make the attempt to take on the behaviors that teacher expected. By contrast, Hall not only gave lip service to understanding the purpose, weight, and importance of her students' cultural behaviors.

Ms. Hall demonstrated that through taking them on in her interactions with the students. She allowed them to teach her their cultural artifacts and practices (their dances, handshakes, slang terms) which opened the door for them to accept her instruction on dominant group artifacts and practices. Her willingness to embrace their practices and immerse herself within their world made it easier for them to trust her and to trust that they could try on dominant group behaviors without losing themselves within them.

Daring to Allow Students to Lead

During the second year of the study, Hall became the Student Council Sponsor taking the post in response to her former students' pleas. Gabrielle begged her: "I told her I wanted to be in it to put it on my college applications, but I felt too uncomfortable because it was only White kids in there. I begged and begged until she said she would." In her role as Sponsor, Hall worked closely with LaRoche, who was the administrator in charge. He recalled their initial conversation regarding working with the Council.

I told her to think it over really hard before she agreed because I wanted to see Student Council become the 800-pound gorilla on campus, reflecting the demographics of the campus. When she took it, it was ten White AP students. I hoped she'd take it on because her students talk to me about her all the time. I thought she'd have the chops to get the job done.

Hall began transforming the Student Council by first asking every current and former student she saw in the hall or in class to come and join. At the first meeting with Hall as sponsor, 100 students attended; most of them were students of color and students of poverty.

Although LaRoche was thrilled with the new representative Student Council, and so was Oretga (who gave the original mandate for the shift in the Council), Hall got pushback from other people who didn't agree with the change. Gifford and Carrasquillo had conflicts with Hall on numerous occasions regarding the new Council. Gifford explained her issue with the shift:

In the past, we have only let those kids who were the academic best run the Council. They never did much: homecoming dance was really it. Kids got to put it on their resumes for college and it was never very taxing as an activity so they could spend their time studying.

Carrasquillo echoed the sentiment: "The kids who were in Student Council were exactly what you would expect. You were never shocked to find out they were in STUCO." Hall countered that position:

Why should a club that is supposed to represent the entire school's interests be run by only ten kids, who are not at all the typical student? The homecoming dance was not well attended, in part because those kids had no idea what the other kids would want.

Hall gave out duties irrespective of title, but based instead on talent and responsibility. Two students who quickly emerged as unofficial leaders were Flavio and Kenya. Kenya described her experience:

Man, we was Road Dogs! We'd come to Miss with an idea and she'd say, 'Okay, so go do it!' We wanted a carnival. She said, 'Go find out who would come and what they would want to see and do.' We did. Miss told us that people call that 'field research.' That wasn't even hard! We just talked to people.

When asked about what some saw as her controversial choice to put two non-dominant group students in such autonomous, visible (if unofficial) positions, Hall scoffed, "Yeah, it's just so crazy to choose the two kids all the

other kids listen to, who are down to earth, problem-solvers, who can get things done without supervision. I know... nuts, right?"

With Flavio and Kenya as the unofficial leaders, Student Council held a record number of events, raised substantially more money, and students reported an increase in student unity and morale on the survey Student Council conducted at year's end, an idea brought to Hall by Kenya and Flavio. Flavio described the impact of Hall's trust:

To have someone like her trust us like she did... That's something. I mean, as long as we showed her that the students supported it and would attend, she found a way for us to do it. And, man, I seen teachers come to her room and give her what for about how 'this isn't how things are done,' and Miss just gave it right back to them, real professional like she does, but she never backed down. Everything we did, she made us do all the work. At the end, you stand back and say, 'Man, I did that! I feel like I could do anything!

In April, at officer election time, which Hall made open to the whole student body instead of internal elections as the previous sponsor had done, Flavio and Kenya were elected president and vice president respectively. They were the first non-dominant group officers of Student Council in the school's history. Kenya summed it up:

I told her, 'Miss, I got big love for ya. Ain't nobody else gonna let a loud Black girl and a little Mexican kid run stuff like you did.' She had us calling adults, businesses. She taught me how, but I had to call. I think I'ma open my own club when I'm grown. I can do it.

Ms. Hall's philosophy on student autonomy was not limited to Student Council. Hall explained that in her own classroom she gave students a lot of autonomy as well.

I am here to facilitate and answer questions they cannot answer for themselves. But I teach them to find their own answers when possible. I also treat them like adults. They can get their own handouts. They don't need permission to go to the bathroom. They know not to go while I'm lecturing or they're working in groups or partners; there's been no abuse of that privilege. They can handle it.

While running the Student Council, Ms. Hall clearly transferred that philosophy. Kenya said, "She let us do everything. She knew what was goin' down though. But she didn't hold no hands. You had to get it done or she'd let you know you messed up. And don't nobody want to disappoint Miss." The original ten Student Council members had difficulty adjusting to the new world order. Hall explained:

"They had never been given autonomy. So they did one step, sometimes correctly, but only if they had done it before. And then they couldn't take any initiative to move beyond that. The new kids had to be responsible for siblings at home, getting their own homework, cooking family meals, etc. So they have a lot of experiential capital they can apply to real world situations, planning and figuring out what to do next. As long as they knew I trusted them, they would step up to the plate."

Discerning Hidden Talents

Ms. Hall saw talent in students who juggled a lot of responsibilities and wore a lot of hats. She could see beyond their social personas and lackluster engagement in their classes. She summed it up, "When kids have a lot of responsibility at home, you'd be surprised how those skills can transfer to other things at school." Hall explained that while both Flavio and Kenya may not have seemed like obvious choices to most, Hall could easily see that Kenya "had a well of energy waiting to be channeled."

Ms. Gifford dismissed Kenya as "loud, obnoxious, you always know when she's in the hall. Not the kind of kid you want representing Student Council." Hall shook her head:

You know she's in the hall, and so do the students. Watch her sometime. She knows everyone. Always has a smile. She's like a politician around here. She has tons of social capital, and no enemies. Sure, she's loud, but she's a natural hustler. She's always doing things to earn money, and she takes care of her little brother in the evenings for her parents. But she is always at school, never misses. She's responsible and ambitious. It just looks different on her.

Mr. Carrasquillo disapproved of Flavio. "He's not an A student. I don't see him as a serious student. There is nothing special there." Hall countered, "Flavio is bright, capable, and responsible. He has a lot of vision and drive. If you watch him in class, he's the kid the other kids ask for advice. He's quieter and not as flashy as Kenya, but he's a thinker. He is contemplative and trustworthy."

Ms. Hall's ability to recognize talent within Flavio and Kenya sets her apart from many of her coworkers, who marveled at how well Student Council did despite being run by students who, in their eyes, were wild card choices. By paying attention to student behavior outside of instruction and practice time as well, Hall was able to tap into skills and talents her students possessed and to show them how to transfer those skills to be successful academically and in their roles in Student Council. Had she formed her estimation of her students based solely on their contributions during class and

their written assignments, she would have missed out on the many skills they had that could be used to help bridge the gap between where they were performing when they came to her and where she wanted them to perform academically.

Refraining from Moral Judgments

Due to the cultural disconnect between many teachers and non-dominant-group students, moral opprobrium often runs high in response to details about the students' lives outside of school and their home lives. This is a result of teachers applying the dominant group norms, mores, and standards they use to guide their own behavior to their students' behavior. This can be especially true among teachers who are very invested in making a difference in students' lives. Many teachers feel a marker of their success as instructors is producing students who experience a change in the material conditions of their lives as a result of their education. Often students' decisions seem antithetical to that goal. Teachers may not realize, however, that when they use their own yardstick to measure someone else's behavior, their criticism not only falls on deaf ears, but can also alienate the teacher from the student. Once that relationship is harmed, it often cannot be repaired.

Flavio and Ms. Byrne had established a very good rapport early in their first year of association, which was Flavio's sophomore year. Flavio described Ms. Byrne, "She cool. I like going to her class every day." Byrne described Flavio as an "insightful, problem-solver and critical thinker with a lot on the ball." Although Flavio didn't particularly enjoy school, he made an effort in Byrne's class. They developed an easy camaraderie, obvious to the observer. During Flavio's junior year, he got a serious girlfriend with whom he was inseparable. They planned to marry as soon as they graduated college. Prior to this relationship, Flavio had spoken of medical school. Byrne explained,

Because he doesn't like school, I didn't really think he'd become a doctor. But I figured if he aimed high, then he might miss and hit something close. Like maybe he becomes a P.A. or a nurse, or a lab tech at minimum.

Once Flavio got a girlfriend, he soon began talking to Byrne, whose room was his de facto after-school spot during his junior year, about schools for mechanics. When Byrne's response was to remind him of his original goal of medical school, he avoided discussing either plan with her. When the researcher asked why he stopped talking to her about it, he explained, "It was the way she asked. Like her voice got all high and you can just tell she's sitting on a freak out, right? And then she brought up my girl. So I knew there was gonna be friction."

Future career plans became an off-limits topic between the two. Each time Byrne tried to broach it, Flavio shut down. Eventually, he would leave

if she brought it up. His once daily visits after school grew less frequent. When Flavio's girlfriend announced her pregnancy in early April, it was the girlfriend who broke the news to Byrne, not Flavio himself. Byrne was visibly upset.

Here she was, expecting me to be excited and happy for her, to behave as though it was a good thing and all I could think of was how this girl and this baby would pull Flavio into a hole from which he'd never be able to crawl out of.

When Flavio saw Byrne, she didn't hold her tongue. She broached the topic of abortion. Flavio recounted their conversation.

She started talking all this mess about how I didn't have to be weighed down. We could just get an abortion. I didn't say nothing to her. She knows I'm Catholic. Man, my mom knows my girl is pregnant. She'd killed me if we ever killed our baby. She yammering how no one would ever know what we did. Uh, everyone knows you having a kid, then suddenly you ain't having one? People know. They ain't stupid.

Ms. Byrne was one of the last to know of the pregnancy due in part to her display of her own yardstick of what was okay and what was not okay. Byrne had internalized Flavio's aspirations and began acting as though they were written in stone, despite the fact that Flavio didn't like school, had underdeveloped literacy skills, poor grades in science, and was still in remedial math courses as a junior. Whether or not looking into mechanic school was a pragmatic choice for Flavio, it was ultimately Flavio's choice. Flavio loved cars, worked on his friends' cars for pocket change, and enjoyed hands-on tasks. Considering mechanics as a possible path was not astonishing given Flavio's interest and situation. Byrne's reaction revealed her disappointment to Flavio, who shied away from her thereafter. Although his girlfriend ultimately lost the baby six weeks later after she began hemorrhaging in the school cafeteria, Flavio and Byrne never regained their previous closeness.

Contrasted to Ms. Byrne and Flavio is Ms. Hall and Marisol. Marisol was in Hall's sophomore English class, which required a daily writing assignment. The warm-up was a quote to which students were to respond. Hall explained her choice, "I don't teach like they're taking the state minimal skills test in April. I teach like they're taking the SAT or ACT in April. I want them to feel ready for that if they decide to try it." In an early daily writing assignment, Marisol revealed her living situation to Hall. She'd kept the assignment complete with Hall's comments and showed it to us. Marisol wrote: "My fiancé lives with us, me and my parents. I know you think it's weird, but that's my culture. Engaged couples live with the girl's parents to make sure

the boy will treat her well." In the margin, Hall responded: "What is strange and what's weird? Everyone's family is different. How great that your family is so close and your future husband will always feel comfortable around your parents. Thank you for sharing with me."

When Marisol got married in the spring, Ms. Hall gave her a congratulations card. Marisol wrote her a thank you. Hall took flak from Gifford and others in her department, who said she was encouraging Marisol to get married. Gifford explained, "I told [Hall], every time I have an engaged girl, I set them down and tell them what's what. They know what I think." When asked if any of the girls ever broke off their engagements, Gifford admitted they had not. Hall defended her stance to the researchers:

I took heat for my reaction, but the thing is: who am I to go against what her parents have concluded is appropriate? I'm guaranteed a short term relationship with my students. While they're in my class, the best way to make sure that's all I ever am to them is to tell them they need to do, what I'd do. Am I thrilled about a kid marrying this young? No. But we each get to run our own lives and our own children's for a period. It's not my place to tell them what to do or to tell their parents. At least this way, maybe she'll feel that she can come to me if she ever needs an ear or some help down the road.

Marisol was deeply moved by Ms. Hall's response to her revelation. "Miss cares about us. She really reads our papers and writes notes back to us on them. She asks how my husband is. No one else does that." Prior to coming to Hall, Marisol had not passed the state minimum skills test in English. However, she made tremendous gains her sophomore year and passed the test that year. Before her exit-level state tests (required to graduate) her junior year, Marisol came back to Hall for tutoring after school. (Hall was not obligated to tutor juniors as a sophomore English teacher, yet her twice weekly tutorials were standing-room only. Former students and their friends, who had never been Hall's student, often populated them as well.) Marisol also successfully passed her exit-level test.

Because Hall embraced and accepted Marisol's situation and her lack of control and input into her student's lives, and instead celebrated what they saw as good, her relationship with her students didn't suffer. Hall explained, "Even if I'm unhappy with the idea of what they're doing, I have just resolved to celebrate their happiness. That's the key. I can celebrate your happiness without agreeing with your choices." Although it can be difficult to respond positively to a student's announcement of a circumstance an educator believes will ultimately be limiting, expressing discontent or opposition creates barriers. Hall opted instead to respond in kind to the students' response to their situation. By doing so, she endeared herself as an ally and a resource.

Discussion

The Normed-Opportunity paradigm separated Ms. Hall's practice from that of her peers. However, it produced results. Hall's students consistently performed well on the state test. Students who had previously not passed the test openly shed tears when Hall shared their passing results for the year. Many students were observed hugging Hall while waving their test results in the air, thrilled to finally have passed the test. But beyond the state test, Hall's students performed at levels they had not previously believed they could perform. Even those who questioned Hall's practices and presentation agreed that her methods were successful with her students.

The perspective from which Ms. Hall approached her students permitted both of them to work together to bridge the distance between their level of performance when they arrived in her class and where they needed to perform. Demonstrating a grasp of where her students were and what they valued created a foundation upon which both student and teacher could begin to build. Her unorthodox approach earned her students' respect, which paved the way to garnering her students' motivation and effort in the classroom. Through first 'speaking their language,' sometimes literally with their slang and sometimes figuratively through gestures, Hall positioned herself as someone who understood and respected her students.

Ms. Hall communicated volumes to her students through her practice of expecting her students to lead. Hall established an expectation that her students were capable, but made herself available as a resource. She tapped into her students' existing strengths and then created scenarios where they could develop new skills. In the classroom, the autonomous culture communicated respect and high expectations to students. Discerning the existing talents of her students rather than focusing on their skill deficits, skill gaps, and lack of typical experiences helped create an environment where students felt empowered.

By refraining from making moral judgments about their lives and instead choosing to share in their happiness and excitement, Hall positioned herself as an ally. This practice also avoided the pitfall of having a student's personal life interfere with their academic experience. Rather than reacting from a dominant position of disapproval, Hall pragmatically responded in kind to the student's emotional reaction. Thus, the student's decision to share the news with her turned into another opportunity to build a relationship. That relationship translated to a better learning environment.

An important factor to consider in this study is that Ms. Hall could not have been successful without the backing and support of the administrators on her campus. The tactics she employed were not only tolerated by her administration, they were valued. The counselor validated the view of the administration, which recognized that Ms. Hall's 'eccentricity' and 'avant garde' manner was effective with non-dominant group students. Without the

support of administration, a teacher using the Normed-Opportunity paradigm may not enjoy the level of success Ms. Hall did. A common adage in education is 'it takes a village.' While a classroom is typically run by a single teacher, she does not operate in a vacuum. She relies on the support of her administration. In Hall's case, her tactics isolated her from her peers on campus. She reported her professional life as a lonely one. Her role as Sponsor placed her in open conflict with other teachers on campus. As a result, Hall reported that on days with no students, Oxford Marshall was a place of social isolation for her. She admitted that without the support of administration, whom she perceived as truly believing in what she was doing, Hall would have left the campus and sought employment elsewhere.

Conclusion

The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm is a belief system acknowledging the experiential capital non-dominant-group students bring to school. It's a paradigm holding that students of color and students from homes of disadvantage are not inherently lacking in academic potential. Instead, it recognizes that many of the lacks these students present in the classroom are the direct result of a lack of *opportunities*.

The educational system often runs on an assumption of shared cultural experiences and norms. We assume students live in a home where families take summer vacations. So in September, we assign a "What I did on my summer vacation" essay. We present literature and ask questions predicated on these shared norms, and when students fail to possess the context to correctly respond, we often problematize the student.

The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm is a recognition that much of what we praise in classroom settings is predicated on these "normed-experiences," touchstone incidents often shared by members of the dominant group. Some examples are holidays with extended family, intact families at home, parents who are home at night (as opposed to working night shifts), internet access at home, regular trips to the library, a parent available to help assemble a diorama, etc. However, if your life lacks these "normed experiences," you can look and feel very out of place. Further, they can prevent you from being able to fully contribute or even to produce a correct response to an assignment.

In contrast, the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm sees that inability to produce the expected response in a particular situation is not a reflection of a lack of skill, talent, or ability. It is a lack of opportunity to have these shared experiences. Thus, these "normed-experiences" that may seem to be universal are, in reality, dominant group opportunities that many non-dominant-group members do not have access to. So, many times the real lack non-dominant group students have in the academic setting is a lack of normed-opportunities, rather than a lack of ability.

The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm goes further to recognize that while many non-dominant group students lack these common, universal opportunities and experiences, they have had alternate experiences and opportunities that many dominant group students have not, for example, being responsible at an early age for the care of a sibling and themselves, *needing to* work a job to contribute to their family, or handling adult responsibilities such as negotiating with a landlord. These unusual experiences and opportunities uniquely position them to have skills that many dominant group students do not possess, such as highly developed critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and negotiation skills. Again, this fact does not position dominant group students as inherently lacking skills, abilities, and talents. They have not yet been placed in situations giving them the opportunity to develop them. The skills many non-dominant-group students have acquired can be harnessed, and students can learn how to transfer these skills to academic situations and beyond.

The Normed-Opportunity paradigm allows educators to more accurately view their students and to correctly locate shortfalls to a lack of experience, rather than cultural explanations. This is important for numerous reasons, but a primary one is addressing differences. Schools have largely been normed on White, middle class norms. Thus, when those institutions address differences, it is through the lens of pointing out what students lack because they come from non-dominant backgrounds.

Many American people, as well as many educators across the United States, believe that family background and home environment are the principle causes of the quality of student performance in school. In fact, no notion about schooling is more prevalent than the notion that family background is somehow the principal determinant of whether or not children will be successful in school. The Normed-Opportunity paradigm posits that it is time to place the onus of responsibility on the lack of congruence between the culture of schools and that of its students. That is the source of the cultural mismatch between students and teachers. This mismatch can sometimes lead to closed-off ways of perceiving our students and can ultimately inhibit our most well-intentioned goals of helping all students reach their full potential.

How do educators ensure that they are able to connect with students so that they are able to reinforce their students' academic self-concept? How can they support their student's educational aspirations, so as to lead them to greater academic achievement? This is exactly what Ms. Hall was able to achieve through employing the Normed-Opportunity paradigm. Because her perception of her students was different than many of her peers, her ways of being with her students was different. And this difference could be felt and appreciated by her students, who internalized the way she saw them.

The way Ms. Hall saw them then became how they saw themselves: valuable, competent, and skilled. Further, she positioned their knowledge as just as privileged and valued as hers. She also role modeled code-switch-

ing for her students, which permitted them to begin to conceive of a future and reality where they themselves could both retain their identity and forge another possible self, one who is academic, skilled, and professional. This outlook and approach permitted Ms. Hall to connect with and engage her students, as well as to act as a role model because she demonstrated investment in both them and their culture. Most importantly, it allowed her to meet her students where they were and begin to build a bridge connecting what they already knew to what they needed to know.

The Normed-Opportunity paradigm makes the difference between an educator gaining access to a student's inner life and trust, and going on to make an impact on their lives, or simply being yet another in a long line of public school educators they encounter and quickly forget. Rather than asking students to simply adjust to the system, Hall employed this paradigm and demonstrated that the street ran both ways. If she could step in and out of their culture, then they could begin to learn and feel comfortable stepping in and out of the dominant culture. The value of this paradigm is in its inherent effect on true, authentic, lasting relationship building.

One of the most important things that Ms. Hall was able to do was to acknowledge the positive attributes of her students. She was able to help her students seek a cause for success and failure that had nothing to do with their background, who their parents were, or their socio-economic status. Education must be a fluid, changing practice so as to meet the ever-changing needs of its students and prepare them for an ever-expanding world. It is critically important for educators to embrace the Normed-Opportunity paradigm rather than cling to our current perspectives which too often find fault with students and families.

In order to operationalize the Normed-Opportunity paradigm, further research is warranted. Follow-up studies of teachers successfully working with non-dominant students may reveal that the practices of the Normed-Opportunity paradigm are, in fact, widespread and efficacious. But more inquiry is needed to confirm that the paradigm can be put into practice by more teachers.

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