

ON CULTURE, RACE AND BEING EXPLICIT IN MATHEMATICS TEACHING

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This paper comes out of my work as a secondary math teacher in urban schools for the past ten years and is based on interviews with four students enrolled in my senior math courses, three of whom identify themselves as "African-American" and one who identifies herself as "from Haiti." The study attempts to explore the tensions inherent in being a White teacher trying to implement a 'constructivist' pedagogy and curriculum with students most of whom are children of color. While investigating race, culture and pedagogy as they interact in one mathematics classroom, this study seeks to raise broader questions about equity in mathematics education. My interest in these questions was heightened through strong messages I was receiving from my students, who seemed to be asking me to move away from being a facilitator and toward doing more explicit telling, and by theorists who explore the complicated interactions of pedagogy and culture in the classroom. In framing the 'skills vs. process' debate, for example, Lisa Delpit (1987) describes, "Writing process advocates who often give the impression that they view the direct teaching of skills to be restrictive... at best, and at worst, politically repressive to students already oppressed by a racist educational system. Black teachers, on the other hand, see the teaching of skills to be essential to their students' survival."

The interviews focused on students' experiences as learners and students, both in math class and more generally. A number of themes emerged from the students' comments. One common point of view centered on the nature of mathematics, which students described as a "step-by-step" endeavor. They remarked that our curriculum was "not like basic math," that it was full of "problem solving (and) a whole bunch of words." One student described her father's reaction to the material, "How you gonna do this stuff? I'm used to math with numbers." Another student described the fact that it had taken her years to come to the point where she understood the importance of this kind of math, where she no longer saw it as "doing nothing for nothing." A second trend in the comments had to do with learning in other settings. Two students compared learning in church with learning in math class. One student claimed that, "Church is more interactive," describing it as an experience of sense-making that required her to engage actively in thinking and understanding the material, rather than simply accepting another's interpretation. Another student said, "After the service is done, I always go home and just think about what he (the Pastor) talked about." The students in this study raise and complicate a number of important questions, pushing us to rethink the nature of interpretation, the supposed dichotomy between direct instruction and constructivism, the roles and relationships of algorithms in mathematics learning, and the utility of mathematics in their lives.

References

Delpit, L. (1987). Skills and other dilemmas of a progressive Black educator. *Equity and Choice*, 3(2), 9-14.