

Autoethnography: The development of respect in K-5 education

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Who do you think seemed to be in control? Was it the parents, the teachers, the PTA, administration? ”Definitely the teachers and followed by administration.”

(C. Quijano, personal communication, April 5, 2020).

Though a conspicuous goal of K-5 education is to teach its students fundamental subjects such as reading, math, science, and social studies, an enduring and often indirect goal of education is to teach social goals, as theorized by Joel Spring (Spring, 2018). Social goals include rules and lessons on character and behavior taught within the classroom and after school through extracurricular activities. I argue that one of the social goals in education is respect, particularly respect for authority (teachers and administration). However, children occupy a complex position: though they are taught to have respect for their teachers and administration, it is difficult for them to negotiate situations where respect is not reciprocated. Through a combination of publicly available data, existing literature, and my personal experiences as an elementary school student and observer, I examine the development of respect in K-5 education, particularly in how respect is held and in what context it is held. I argue that tensions are created between the students, their families, and the education system as a result of unilateral power dynamics in and out of the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Lisa Delpit (1988) discusses five aspects of the “culture of power” in an educational environment; I will focus on the first four: Issues of power are enacted in classrooms, there are codes or rules for participating in power or a “culture of power”, the rules of the culture of power reflect the rules of the culture of those who have power, and for those who are not participants in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes it easier to acquire power. The issue of power in the classroom that I will examine is the power of the teacher over

students; I will also extend this argument to people in positions of authority outside of the classroom. Further, I will scrutinize the codes within the culture of power, including the ways of writing and the ways of interacting. I argue that the use of these codes may result in success or failure in receiving respect depending on the identity of the individual who uses these codes. Additionally, I evaluate my own identity as a source of privilege in gaining respect from my teacher, as the rules of power were communicated in ways that fit with my home environment.

I grew up in Paramus, New Jersey, a typical suburban middle class and upper-middle class neighborhood. One unique feature of the community is that many of the families are immigrant families; either one or both of the guardians of the children were immigrants, mostly from Europe and Asia. Both of my parents were born and raised in the Philippines, and as a result, my home culture was noticeably different from my predominately white school environment. One piece of advice that was emphasized was “Respect your elders!”, a value stressed in Filipino culture that has influence from Christian traditions and deference to older family members. Robin Boylorn describes a similar concept in African American culture called “sayin’s”, language that is a product of the African American experience and its oral tradition (Boylorn, 2016). Respect usually manifests in not “talking back” to my elders and in “blessing”, or bringing the hand of my grandparents and aunts and uncles to my forehead when I went to a family event. But I also exhibited respect conceptually in the classroom. Even if I did not receive respect from my peers and my teacher, when I was young, I still gave them my respect. I have always valued giving my full attention to other students and my teacher, and even today, I feel uncomfortable when other students don’t share or practice those same values.

One of my most transformative school experiences was in Mrs. Miller’s class in the fourth grade. Throughout elementary school, I thought of myself as just another student in the

crowd, but in Mrs. Miller' class, I felt publicly noticed. She had a jar at the front of the room, and if a student did something exceptional or worthy of praise, she would give that student a marble to place in the jar. Once the jar filled up, we would have a class party for part of the day. I felt incentivized to perform well and speak up in class, and she frequently gave me marbles to put in the jar, often calling me a "smart cookie" afterward.

While I was publicly praised for "being smart" in the classroom, Mrs. Miller didn't shy away from making an example of students for undesired behavior. She stressed the importance of cleanliness and neatness, warning us at the beginning of the year that she would punish us if our desks were not. I wasn't explicitly taught to be clean at home (my family is quite disorganized), but I knew that it was important to listen to my teacher, so I made sure to keep a tidy desk. However, some of my peers were messier than others—and were dealt with as such. Mrs. Miller would stop at one of my (male) classmates' desks, which were arranged in a circle. She would then dump out his desk in the middle of the room and would tell him angrily, "Clean it up." My classmate would immediately reorganize his desk; we would wait until he was finished to resume class. One day, Mrs. Miller noticed that one of her frequently messy students had a disorganized desk once again. Without warning, she picked up his desk, left the room, and threw the desk in the hallway. This time, we didn't wait for him to finish cleaning it up and we were silent when he squeaked his desk back into the classroom.

Though Mrs. Miller' behavior was clearly out of line, I don't remember any students who spoke up during and following the incident. Luis Urrieta describes the concept of "space of authoring", or the "ability of people to self/sense-make through multiple internal dialogues" (Urrieta, 2007). He explains that when people are identified by others, they are "offered positions that they must accept, reject, or negotiate" (Urrieta, 2007). My classmate was targeted as a

disobedient student; his non-response was his acceptance of his position. However, I argue that this response may have been the only one available to him; he may have not been cognizant of his ability to reject or negotiate his positionality and/or he may have feared the repercussions if he didn't accept his positionality. In discussions with my friends, they either interpreted the event as funny or something he "deserved" as a consequence of not following the rules. I felt resistant to say anything to Mrs. Miller as I feared that I would lose my position as a good and bright student and thus could potentially lose the praise and reciprocated respect I had received. At the time, I didn't have the skills to navigate the conversation to advocate for my messy classmate; I was honestly scared that I would be publicly shamed as well. It worked in her favor; I conformed to her world view of what a good student was: obedient, smart, and neat.

Further, a part of me wasn't aware that other people could be in control—Mrs. Miller seemed to be the one who set the rules for the class to follow, so I believed that it was up to her to use her discretion in punishment for students who didn't follow the rules. I realize that my heritage was a source of privilege for me to succeed in the classroom, as I had been taught to respect the decisions of people who were older than me, no questions asked. On the other hand, I do believe that the leadership of my elementary school should have been responsible for communicating to students that they are encouraged to talk to other teachers, the principal, and their guardians if they recognize that a teacher is not treating his or her students with respect or doing something wrong in general. They should also make clear that students should feel assured that if they stand up for a student when he or she is being treated unfairly, administration will listen to their claims. Students can feel powerless due to their age and education level; they may not be able to fully explain what was wrong with a situation, one of the problems I experienced. At a visit to Clear Lake Elementary in a southeastern state, other students and I witnessed a

teacher publicly shame a student for speaking when she wasn't supposed to in the classroom.

The teacher threatened to bring the student to the principal's office and threatened to embarrass the student in front of us, "the guests". The student deferred to the teacher; it can be difficult for children to voice their concerns due to their age, even if the injustice was salient to us as observers. Buffy Smith (2014) explains the concept of the hidden curriculum: values and lessons that can be used to succeed in the classroom, capital typically held by the dominant culture. One of the aspects she discusses is building social capital with faculty, who could have been a source of guidance in handling the situation. Leaders in my school and other elementary schools have a responsibility to protect students from being placed in this uncomfortable position. I recommend that educators and administrators should recognize the unequal power dynamic in the classroom and work to make transparent and accessible channels for students and their families to discuss events that occur in the classroom. However, it is important to bring up the conflict of interest that administrators may have; in an interview with my father, he mentioned the impressiveness of my teachers at my elementary school as they had roughly ten to eighteen years of experience in teaching. This is in accordance with public data from the Asbury Park Press, which reports teacher experience and salaries; Mrs. Miller had twenty-two years of experience at the time I was in her class and may have qualified for tenure (Asbury Park Press, October 2017). Therefore, even if there were channels for students to bring their grievances to people in positions of power, their complaints may be in vain.

In the interview with my father, he revealed a secret that he had not told me and my younger sister. When my sister was a student, she and many of the other students in her class were performing poorly on exams. At first, my father thought that it was a problem with a few students, but then realized that it was a larger issue. He took the time to find the percentages of

students who were passing or failing an exam and by how close to failing the students who were passing were, and later presented this information and his concerns to the principal in an email. My father emphasized the idea that he was explaining the issue in an “polite and objective fashion.” However, upon receiving the email, my father reported that the principal questioned who my father was more than the information he presented; the principal wrote back, “Who are you, anyway?” My father was confused as to why the principal responded in this way, stating, “I couldn’t be any more objective. As far as I could recall, I sent the email in such an objective fashion that there was no question about it.”

My father employed the use of codes within the culture of power, specifically that speaking or writing objectively, in contrast to subjectively and emotionally, will lead to successful negotiation. While this hidden curriculum may have worked for him in other environments, ironically, the principal responded to my father’s objectivity with disrespectful subjectivity. It is possible that the principal positioned my father as a hyper-involved guardian who was questioning the way he was running the school. Yet in further conversations with the principal, my father attempted to negotiate his positionality; he asserted that he didn’t intend for offense when drafting the email; he wanted to address a concern that was affecting his daughter and other students in the class. I argue that my principal, someone who was in one of the higher positions of authority, was able to modify the rules of respect because of his identity. This alteration of the rules resulted in my father’s failure even though he was aware of and employed the code of the culture of power. This is in contrast to my experience in the classroom; when I employed the code, though I was not in a position of power, I was able to navigate and succeed in Mrs. Miller’ class. Because I was implementing the code in a way that I was conforming to Mrs. Miller’ idea of a good student and a tidy desk, I had reciprocated respect in the classroom.

As my father was using the code in a way that did not conform to my principal's idea of a guardian of a student, he did not receive reciprocated respect.

While the principal's behavior may have gone without notice, his actions may have impacted the success of future students in the teacher's class. The role of data should be of high value to educators, and there are ways for data to be inspected without immediately rejecting a claim. It is imperative for administrators in higher positions of power to define the mission, vision, and goals for their district and for an individual school so that administrators like my principal are able to discern whether concerns that arise from guardians of students are valid or not. Administrators could also go through training in how to address guardians that bring allegations to them; in that way, educators are able to improve upon the current system and prevent individuals from feeling invisible and unheard. Moreover, administrators can also make alternative channels for guardians and students to bring their claims more explicit and accessible in the case that they believe their concerns were not appropriately addressed. Again, there may be conflicts of interest; administrators in my district had more years of experience than the state average throughout my time at the school (New Jersey Department of Education, 2006-2010).

Respect is enforced in the classroom and in educational environments in general, but the reciprocation of respect is contingent on the power dynamics between stakeholders in the environment. Within the classroom, students are frequently unable to negotiate their positionality in a situation, allowing teachers to give or take away respect for their students at their discretion. Outside of the classroom, the codes of the culture of power used by guardians may not result in respect, permitting administrators to silence voices that may improve the current system. All of these issues perpetuate a skewed teaching of the social goal of respect in schools. Without intervention such as creating more transparent channels to circumvent unilateral power dynamics

and guaranteed support to students and guardians by administrators, students and their families may exit early education with a distorted idea of respect and/or may feel alienated from the education system.

Methods & Analytical Strategy

I conducted an interview with my father to provide another perspective on and insight into the K-5 school that I attended. Additionally, I categorized respect as an additional goal of Spring's (2018) "social goals of education". I used Boylorn's (2016) notion of "sayin's" to describe the advice I had received in my upbringing, as well as Smith's (2014) concept of the "hidden curriculum" to emphasize the importance of faculty as a source of power. Further, I used Urrieta's (2007) notion of the "space of authoring" to illustrate the different positions individuals hold in the classroom. I employed publicly available data from the New Jersey Department of Education (2006-2010) and the Asbury Park Press (2017) to describe the level of experience of my teacher and administration.

In addition to these sources, I generated data from my education autobiography, which I used to reflect on my K-5 school experience. Other data sources that I used were a written account of my memory of my fourth-grade experience and my visit to Clear Lake Elementary. I then proceeded to code these data sources to generate the theme of how respect is held and in what context it is held. To structure my autoethnography, I used Delpit's (1988) "culture of power" construct and notion of "codes" as analytic tools.

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