

The Identity Transformation Process of the West Indian College Student

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Keywords: West Indian, Caribbean, immigrants, identity, Nigrescence theory

Abstract: This paper provides an alternative perspective of how West Indian students renegotiate their core identity given their subsequent displacement and lack of social networks by means of the Cross Nigrescence theoretical framework.

Introduction

West Indians have been migrating to the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. Migration provided economic stability, social mobility, and the pursuit of happiness. It was “a normal and expected part of the adult life cycle, a virtual rite of passage” (Alfred, 2003, p. 243). In the quest for a better life and economic stability higher education became the vehicle for social and economic mobility for many West Indians emerging from a history of colonization (Alfred, 2003). The tradition of migration continues today as West Indians flock to the shores of the United States in hope of obtaining economic stability and academic achievement. On arrival, to the United States West Indians tend to reside and attend colleges and universities in states with large West Indian communities. The states of Florida and New York have the largest tight knit West Indian communities in the United States. In New York the majority of West Indians reside in the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens located in the New York City area.

West Indian students attending U.S. colleges and universities enter the United States on F-1 or M-1 student visas. These visas allow students to stay in the United States for the duration of their student status. In 2006, The City University of New York ranked number one in the country with 10,787 active students of F-1 visa status, Columbia University ranked fifth with 4,439 active students and New York University is ninth with 3,863 active students. Of the 10,787 international students enrolled at The City University of New York approximately 3% originate from the West Indies according to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2008). However, in terms of actual numbers this percentage increases when students of West Indian descent who are permanent residents and naturalized citizens are considered.

Acceptance into an American college or university is a remarkable achievement for any West Indian national. It signifies the beginning of a better life for students and their families who reside in the islands. However, as students begin to navigate the American academic community their core identity is in a state of flux. Students develop feelings of not belonging as they struggle with their new learning environment which is different from the academic system of their home country. Other factors such as destabilizations and the American societal cultural systems also challenge students’ identities, creating emotional and psychological stress for many students. In spite of these challenges, failure is not an option for West Indian students as they are products of a culture that values hard work and the benefits of a sound education. To achieve success in the

American academic community students begin the process of transforming their core identity from a West Indian worldview to an American worldview to succeed in their new learning environment.

West Indian Student Academic Identity

The term identity denotes those core features of the self that accompanies individuals throughout their daily experiences providing a lens through which they view the world (London, 2005). Identity is an affiliation constructed from individuals' personal histories, cultural traditions, academic socialization and professional aspirations. It is grounded within one's cultural framework, history, cultural codes and continuous frames of reference. As a result, identity is not a fixed or stable construct, but is continuously reshaped by new experiences (Rizvi, 2005).

Education is a main facet of West Indian students' identity as it is the tool to achieve their future aspirations. West Indian students enter U.S. colleges and universities with certain beliefs regarding education, teaching, learning, and those attributes which allow one to succeed in the world of academia. However, these perspectives are shattered as students enter the American classroom and are presented with a different academic culture where "the power of voice [is use] in the construction, demonstration, and validation of knowledge" (Alfred, 2003, p. 253) rather than academic grades. In the West Indies students are academically socialized to be passive learners. Learning is communicated in a teacher-centered format where students are perceived as passive receptacles to be filled by the teacher's knowledge, without recognition of what they can contribute to the learning environment. Paulo Freire (1971) refers to this as the banking system of education where "education thus becomes the act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p.72). Mary V. Alfred (2003) states that students from the West Indies are socialized to be connected knowers (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule; Clinchy, 1996), in that they embraced new ideas and do not take adversarial position if they disagree with the information presented (Clinchy, 1996). As connected knowers, they value and respect the knowledge and authority and silently absorb and value such knowledge (Alfred, 2003, p. 252-253). However, this method of academic socialization causes students to become invisible and marginalized in the American classroom.

The conflicting messages students receive by way of the American academic culture initiate the process of identity transformation given the stress, coping, and adaptation factors that are pervasive (London, 2005). Students create a division between the host country academic and social tradition and that of their home country as their identity and identity roles are suddenly in conflict wherein an identity tug of war ensues. To assist with the culture shock and identity conflicts students begin to choose and discard those characteristics of their core identity to be successful in their new learning environment.

The Cross Nigrescence Framework

The identity model developed by William Cross (1991) offers a useful and untapped framework for exploring the identity transformation experience of West Indian students. It epitomizes a different perspective for the investigation of Black identity development of West Indian students accentuated with themes of biculturalism, multiculturalism with a focal point of Black diversity. The Cross model describes the process and struggle in which West Indian students come to terms with their subsequent displacement socially, culturally, and academically in their attempts to develop awareness that is centered on an American worldview versus a West

Indian worldview. The Cross identity model consists of four to five stages of identity transformation: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization and commitment.

Stage 1: Pre-encounter

In the pre-encounter stage students are functioning within a steady state of their core identity. Students identity is one in which they are products of their social, cultural, and academic heritage originating from their home country. At this stage students have low salience views towards race given their lived experience and Eurocentric cultural perspectives from the West Indies. They “do not deny they are Black, but this ‘physical’ fact is thought to plays an insignificant role in their everyday lives” (Cross, 1991, p.190) as in the West Indies students are bicultural socialized to appreciate both western and African expression giving credence to the Western perspective observed in students early academic socialization practices.

Stage 2: Encounter

In the encounter stage students experience a threat to their core identity. Cross (1991) states that the “encounter must work around, slip through, or even shatter the relevance of the person’s current identity and worldview, and at the same time provide some hint of the direction in which to point the person to be resocialized or transformed” (Cross, 1991, p.199). The power of voice, language, the cultural value of silence in addition to being ignored by faculty and peers in the classroom (Alfred, 2003) were threats to students’ identities shattering the current perspectives of teaching and learning. The feeling of “marginality, alienation and isolation, which [students] attributed partly to their Caribbean culture” (Alfred, 2003, p.256) compelled students to begin the process of transformation or resocialization of their current identities to become visible participants in the classroom and acculturate into the American academic culture.

Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion

This stage reflects a turning point in which students become aware of their conversion from the West Indian frame of reference to that of an American frame of reference given the events or series of events, which occurred in the encounter stage. The immersion-emersion stage consists of two phases; in the first stage students begin to set aside various aspects of their core identity to better navigate their new environment by immersing themselves in the world of American academic culture. For example, students begin to identify with the American academic culture whereby they become more vocal in class, value collaboration with peers on group projects, speaking slowly and clearly to be understood while embracing and being open to their new constructivist learning methods. The second stage establishes stability in students’ reconstructed identities facilitated by personal growth and certain roles of their identity development. This transition period is not an end state but the beginning of continual growth of the reconstructed identity. “During this period of the transition, the [student] begins to demolish the old perspective and simultaneously tries to construct what will become his or her new frame of reference” (Cross, 1991, p.202) while pursuing their studies in the United States.

Internalization

At this stage students attain a sense of self-confidence and security in their transformed identities. They resolved the conflicts between the West Indian and American academic worldviews. Students have a sense of belonging within their academic institution; a calmer more

relaxed disposition in addition, to an understanding of the American culture academically and socially. Students begin to identify with those aspects of the American academic culture that are acceptable such as speaking in class, open to new learning and teaching techniques while standing against those aspects which are West Indian in nature such as being connected knowers. However, “the ownership of the acceptable aspects of the American culture does not preclude or override the ownership of [student’s West Indian culture]” (Cross, 1991, p.213). In the end, students acquire a transnational frame of reference as they “straddle between the cultural worlds of the home and the host country” (Alfred, 2001, p.3).

Internalization-Commitment

This final stage of the Cross Nigrescence model involves a commitment to the new identity students have developed. However, most West Indian students never achieve this stage as they are constantly reconstructing their identity given new threats, events or experiences. Many West Indian students enter professional careers in the United States after graduating from college. Most students apply for Post-Completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services through the Office of International Student Services of their college or university. Once approved, students are permitted to hold full time employment for a maximum of 12 months. Employment within students’ fields of study is another transition period in students’ lives as they will have to transform their academic identity to allow for success on the job. Thus, students will recycle all the stages except the pre-encounter stage as new threats to students’ identity occur in different environments. Cross (1991) stated:

In recycling, a person searches for new answers and continued growth in his or her thinking about what it means to be [a member of the American society]. Depending on the nature and intensity of the new encounter, recycling may vary from a mild refocusing experience to passage through full-blown Encounter, Immerison-Emmersion, and Internalization stages (p.221).

Implications for Education

In the year 2010 the number of Black immigrants and children of Black immigrants is projected to reach 5 million, which is 12% of the U.S. Black population. This growing population of immigrant students will have significant implications for educational policy and schooling practices (Rong & Brown, 2002). Educators and schools located in urban areas populated by West Indian immigrants need to become culturally sensitive in order to serve this population better. Pierre Bourdieu states schools are institutions “specially contrived to conserve, transmit and inculcate the cultural canons of society” (Swartz, 1997, p.19) which function as sites for cultural and social reproduction while legitimizing the unconscious culture they create. Hence, faculty in higher education, teachers in K-12 school systems and peers in these schools should be culturally sensitive to students and aware of the symbolic violence they inflict on students. bell hooks (1994) states that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility” (p.12) in a school setting therefore a more inclusive learning environment for both teacher and student should be established. Learning environments should utilize student’s early academic socialization and new constructivist learning approaches where immigrant students can utilize their social and cultural capital in the classroom allowing students to thrive despite their countries of origin and immigration experiences (Alfred, 2001). Empowering students to participate in learning instead of being alienated or marginalize is an important implication for education.

Inclusive learning environments will allow teachers to help newly immigrated students understand the academic culture of American schools in addition to “the social stratification in America by providing Black immigrant children with historical and current knowledge and helping them understand race and Blackness in the United States” (Rong & Brown, 2002, p.265-266). Inclusive learning environments is of utmost importance as West Indian students come from a society, which is predominantly Black and have not experienced racism or discrimination. There is a considerable difference between reading and learning about discrimination than actually experiencing it. “By identifying the socialization factors for the organization and structuring of early achievement among children of English-speaking Caribbean immigrants, we may... establish important connections between the educational experiences in the institution of the family and home culture” with regards to school success (Roopnarine, Krishnakumar, Metindogan & Evans, 2006, p.250).

Conclusion

As a student socialized and educated via the West Indian educational model from primary to university level and currently attending a U.S. university I have experienced all of the above identity conflicts as have many other West Indian undergraduate and graduate students. As a student entering a U.S college I was unprepared for the intense conflict between my old core identity and my new reconstructed identity based on American worldview. This paper reflects issues such as silence, voice, language, and the learning environments that West Indian students struggle with as they transition into the American educational system. It is of utmost importance that West Indian students know they are not alone as they experience threats to their identity and marginalization in academic environments. In addition, educators will be aware of the acts of symbolic violence they inflict on West Indian students. Allowing a more inclusive and accommodating learning environments utilizing students’ early academic socialization along with students’ new constructivist learning approaches.

Researching immigrant student identity transformation in educational institutions will publicize important “knowledge about immigrant groups, their sociocultural histories, and their expectations of the new culture [while enhancing] the intercultural competencies necessary to build and manage a more inclusive learning environment” (Alfred, 2001, p.5). Learning will be a process of knowledge production and construction rather than knowledge control or rejection for immigrant students.

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