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Impacts of Diversity in High School

When I entered my AP Language classroom and walked toward the left back corner of the U-shaped setup of the room, I sat down and scanned the board. Noticing that the day's objective concerned slavery, dread slowly crept in. My concern wasn't over learning about slavery, but concern over how others around me will respond to it. While my teacher began class and started covering the topic of slavery, I sat and watched as she panned her whole body from facing the front of the class to me. Feeling her eyes flick back to me, nearly making direct eye contact, I remembered I was the only Black person in the class. While this might not seem like a big deal to most, whether subconscious or not, whenever slavery becomes the topic of conversation I am always singled out. As if I should validate others' feelings of discomfort. Whether or not it is someone checking on me and asking if "I am alright" or assuming that I have ancestral ties to American slaves not knowing that I am a first-generation Kenyan American; the lack of diversity in education and class population when growing up, specifically in high school, allows this ignorance to persist. At least as I have seen in Predominantly White Institutions. Although I know the lack of diversity negatively impacts me, how does it impact other students?

The first participant I interviewed was C. Jackson. Jackson is a Mixed student who attended a Predominantly White High school in a more rural, country area. Jackson's perspective is different from mine because I grew up in an area with an internationally diverse overall population. However, the schools within my area are somewhat segregated in terms of racial

population per school. The area where Jackson grew up is relatively White inside and outside of the school environment. Jackson is also Black and White and has to deal with a whole other variable of intersectionality; as he is a part of both the majority or minority depending on the scenario. As he fiddled with his hands, Jackson expressed how he felt, “*more in touch with my White side than my Black side...but I always felt like I didn't belong either*”. Feeling like you do not have a place in the classroom down the line can lead to a longer line of identity crisis or just insecurities in one's identity. Whether subconsciously or not, high school is one of our most important formative years. If we do not achieve a sense of belonging or just self-confidence in certain parts of our identity, especially race, it can lead to larger problems in life. Some miss out on opportunities as well if they aren't able to accept or learn different parts of their identity. Learning about one's identity is heavily influenced by our peers, especially in the area where we spend the most time, the classroom.

However, when asked if having more or fewer people who look like him in the classroom, Jackson felt his experience would be, “*about the same*”. Jackson constantly jokes about acting too White which reveals his underlying insecurities of not knowing which race group he identifies with so I can understand how he feels more comfortable within his White side as that is the demographic he was surrounded by growing up. Jackson's perspective challenges my research question because I believe more diversity in the student population would make a difference, even if subconsciously. If there were more Black students in my high school, lessons would not have to be taught directly in presentations or surveys that aren't digested well by most students, but by learning from those around you. However, it is interesting to see how some believe changes in classroom diversity wouldn't make a difference.

Although we might have certain differing perspectives, Jackson has a similar perspective to mine concerning having Black teachers, as he believes that, “*it just feels like I have someone that's looking out for me [and]... [he] feel[s] more comfortable with Black teachers*”. Having a Black teacher is a special bond that one rarely sees especially when the percentage of Black staff not a part of the supporting staff in Predominantly White schools is low. Throughout my Elementary through High School experience, I had one Black teacher who changed my standards of comfort within a classroom, Mr. James. Mr. James began the year by being vulnerable with us and explaining how he faced discrimination as a Black male teacher. As his eyes teared up recalling how he still has to code switch (changing his personality in front of different groups) like cutting his dreads and covering up his tattoos so he could avoid being labeled as the intimidating Black teacher, I realized that the lack of diversity in student population not only impacts students but the staff as well. Mr. James’ vulnerability created relatability. This relatability establishes an understanding environment and opens the floor for conversation knowing that he truly wants to hear and validate our concerns. This comfort and privilege that comes with having a Black teacher, exposed me to the possibility of not working ten times harder to prove my worth in the classroom. Having that one teacher who gets you and represents you ultimately shifts the environment in the classroom and creates an indescribable feeling.

Just recently, as my Intro to African American Studies class began and I walked toward my seat, slightly weary as the lights were dimmed, my teacher began with a libation. A tribute and “pouring one out” for the lives lost during the Atlantic Slave trade. With one hand strongly in the air, the passion in his voice, and the pain that tugged on his eyebrows as they scrunched together, I had no idea what was in store for me. After the libation, he began the class and established—as he made eye contact with all of us—that if he or we cry it is okay. Establishing

this vulnerability and space to go through the emotions of the topic of slavery was a feeling that I could not depict. However, it is not just the importance of having a teacher who looks like me, educating about slavery (which I have never experienced). I did not feel singled out in the classroom or discomfort from other students watching me. This was the first class I have ever had that was filled with other Black students. I became a part of the majority. Without that distraction, I was able to fully digest the extent of the violence that African American slaves endured. This somewhat gave me an understanding of what it would be like if I attended a Predominantly Black High school.

The second participant I interviewed was W. Ryles, a Black student who attended a Predominantly Black High school. I have not met that many people who went to a Predominantly Black High school and this perspective is much different from one I experienced at a Predominantly White High school. According to Ryles's responses, Black excellence was not surprising or seen in a few people, but a standard and expected of all students. Her eyes lit up as she explained how attending a Predominantly Black high school was, "*very inspiring and motivational... [and she] was Senior class President*". Growing up in that environment, fostering confidence in Black students helps validate and support their voices. Similar to most students of color at my school, I had to take the extra step and work that much harder to establish and prove that I was not going to slack off. In general, due to the opportunity gap that is present in most public schools in America, students of color have to work extra hard to get the same opportunities as White students.

I had to fight to be heard at my high school concerning discrimination, whether institutionalized or interpersonally. When someone heard me, for the most part, I felt like I could not see active change. Until I joined organizations actively seeking and uplifting students of

color's voices to higher powers and exposing us to opportunities like speaking at the National Education Association. Anyway, going to a Predominantly Black High school, the exigence concerning discrimination in their school is not as present as most are surrounded by people of color. Less discrimination creates an environment, *“like a safe place...[her]second home”* to not only Ryles but the majority of the population. However, what about the few White students? Then “diversity” brings up a contrasting perspective; now wouldn't the diversifying factor be White students, and diversifying the school in that sense? Or even other demographics of race; what about the Latinx community? Or the Asian community? It all leads to the bigger question of how we can equally diversify schools.

What steps have been taken to help target unbalanced racial diversity in primary through secondary schools in the United States? As for the next steps of my extended research, I will interview my high school principal, to see how my high school has attempted to tackle diversifying factors; like redlining, retention of diversity within the staff and student population, and content within the curriculum. Also, I will interview White students and other perspectives that could challenge my claim that diversity, or the lack of it, impacts primary through secondary students. Although I am now in college, I have a younger cousin who is about to enter high school and I want to be able to not only help him but other Black students so they do not have to go through my experiences.