RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

Talking Back to Dominant Narratives in a High School's Daily Morning Announcements

by Hannah Edber

OPPORTUNITY AGENDA GRAPHICS. NINA MONTENEGRO. JUST SEEDS OPEN ACCESS GRAPHICS COLLECTION.

In a leafy neighborhood outside Atlanta, surrounded by wide sidewalks and stately, multi-story homes, Suburban High School (SHS) enjoys a district-wide reputation for its impressive test scores, admirable graduation rate, and highly involved parent groups. The school's calendar brims with the stuff of White middle-class high schools from the movies–homecoming queens, spirit days, football rivalries, well-attended PTA meetings. Staff across the district recognize SHS, where I taught between 2020 and 2022, as a "good school" --a term that is often code for "White" (Wright, 2019).

The whitewashed public image of Suburban High, however, misses the fact that over 50% of the student body is not White. As opposed to their White peers, who walked or drove to school from the surrounding wealthy neighborhood, many of the Students of Color at Suburban High took school buses from immigrant and Spanish-speaking neighborhoods across an industrial corridor. Because buses arrived at 7:45 a.m. and departed right at the end of the school day, students who took buses were excluded from clubs, tutoring, and other extracurricular opportunities. And, in addition to the *de facto* divisions of geography and transportation, the student makeup of academic classes at Suburban High School also reflected a stark racial divide. Overwhelmingly, students in the Gifted, Accelerated, and/or Advanced Placement (AP) courses were White and from the neighborhood, while students in the on-level "College Prep" or remedial courses tended to be Students of Color from the areas further from school. As elsewhere in the country, discipline data at SHS showed similar discrepancies between the experiences of White students and those of Students of Color: in 2021, half of all student discipline issues at Suburban High School involved Latino/a students, and 47.4% of Latino/a students had been involved in a discipline incident—in a school where only about a third of students were Latino/a (K12 Discipline Dashboard, 2021).

I arrived as an English and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teacher in fall 2020, a recent transplant to the South from the California Bay Area. I taught both on-level 12th grade Multicultural Literature and Gifted/Accelerated 9th and 10th grade Composition. As a White woman who is queer and Jewish, I am interested in how subject positions and identities are reflected, negated, uplifted, and/or subsumed in school cultures. And because I was new to the school and to the South, and because I taught students from a range of race and class positions–in separate classes–I was curious why and how my experience at SHS felt so catered to White, upper-middle-class students. Was it that Students of Color generally lived farther away? That the bus schedule they relied on caused them to miss after-school activities? That the signs and posters in the hallways were only written in English? How was culture and belonging shaped by the individual students and staff, and how was it produced by the structure of the school day itself?

As I learned the rhythms of the day at SHS–the particular sounds of the tardy bell, the smells by the cafeteria, the swells of energy and emotion around a pep rally–I grew attentive to the feel and sound of daily announcements, given over the loudspeaker every morning at the end of second period. Suburban High's administration had adjusted the daily bell schedule to include eight additional minutes for these announcements before students were released into the halls, which created an odd emphasis on their importance and content. While most of my students spent this time reuniting with their phones–scrolling and taking bored-looking selfies while slumped in their seats, hands on their backpacks and ready to spring out of class as soon as the bell sounded–some of us tuned in to what was being said, listening closely whenever the crackle of the classroom loudspeaker came alive. In the announcements that followed, I heard an overwhelming emphasis on male sports, a financial expectation for participating in extracurricular activities and a view of success as individualized, achievement-focused, and college-bound. The announcements also emphasized a culture of discipline and punishment that framed rule-breaking students as deviant; this finding, in the context of the school discipline data described above, is accompanied by raced and classed dynamics of belonging and alienation. Finally, non-White racial identities were overwhelmingly situated as "others" in need of service and action.

Taken together, the announcements messaged the school's priority: protecting a status quo of power, privilege, and wealth. Students were acknowledged only for their academic or athletic achievements; they were warned and threatened for participation in school events outside what was officially sanctioned or made possible by cultural or financial capital. The announcements created a sense that school was for those who already belong--those who are easily folded into clubs and teams via their race, gender, and class privileges. There is nothing wrong with celebrating students who are athletic, who have access to wealth, or who are White. But the announcements rarely, if ever, acknowledged students who did not fit into those categories—who had their own vibrant and important presence in my classroom every day. I grew curious about what interventions could be put in place to more broadly include student voice, identity, and experience.

Talking Back to the Dominant Narrative

Ladson-Billings's culturally responsive pedagogy calls for students to be able to critique "the existing social order" (1995, p. 474). Enacting this critique requires that students be included in a collaborative process, alongside school faculty, to consider who is made visible, and who is made invisible, not just by the morning announcements but by school-sanctioned activities and opportunities. Inspired by Ladson-Billings, I tried an experiment: using my position and access to invite student voices into these announcements. I created a survey, which I shared with my students via a QR code on my weekly PowerPoint, to invite students to share announcements and/or shout outs to highlight peers. I then used my access to the faculty announcement site to post the texts to be read out as announcements. Inviting students to participate in writing their own announcements did result in announcements that reflected not just a wider array of students at the school, but broader interpretations of what might

determine student success, beyond academic and athletic achievement. In addition, these student-generated announcements offered meaningful critique of school discipline policies and practices, and honored student mental health within larger social contexts for expected success.

The student-generated announcements offer a glimpse into some of the many youth sources of strength, connection, and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) not previously reflected by the school-generated announcements. Students used the space to "shout out" each other—not for academic accomplishments or athletic wins, but for under-recognized peer leadership ("answering our many art-related questions") or for sticking with a difficult, future-oriented process ("the very confusing and sleep-depriving process" of college applications). These announcements point to community and social capital characterized by an ethic of care shared among students seeking and offering encouragement. Notably, they refer to student experiences that many or most adults at school don't see: illness, sleeplessness, private worry. Hearing these announcements was a sometimes humbling reminder of the worlds students inhabit that teachers have little access to, and the wealth of student experiences and emotions that accompany them to school each day.

Student announcements sometimes suggested wry resistance to Suburban High School's student discipline policies, practices, and messaging. One student submitted an announcement with a straightforward message: "Detention for tardiness isn't gonna fix me." His words offered a rebuttal to a discourse that frames rule-breaking as indicative of something wrong with a student, and that collapses problematic behavior with moral or personal failures. His submission refers to his own experience with school discipline, and to the frequent school-generated reminders about tardiness, parking passes, and other infractions. His words showcase a humorous flex of resistance to both school discipline and to "school appropriate" syntax and grammar. This student submission "speaks back" to the scolding tone of the many reminders and rebukes for behavior infractions read aloud by the administration most days.

The student-generated announcements impacted school culture and student engagement to an uncertain degree. Some students began anticipating the announcements, and asking me when I thought their additions would be read out over the loudspeakers. Others reacted to hearing the announcements of their peers with the same level of enthusiasm they used to greet the school-generated announcements (that is, none). I wondered whether having student voice incorporated into school-sanctioned practices had the unintended consequence of coopting potentially resistant voices by absorbing them into dominant cultural practices.

Ultimately, the school's announcements were both a symptom and an element of how Suburban High School enacted cultural and material problems: worthy of attention, but also embedded in a network of other actors. By working with students to submit their own announcements, we created an opportunity for young people to audibly register their own ways of relating to school, and to each other, for all to hear.

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