

THEY ONLY LIKE ME WHEN I PLAY BALL

BELONGING & OTHERING: A TALE OF TWO CLASSROOMS

Sam, a bright, inquisitive student and aspiring basketball player, takes the city bus to school each day. The way Sam gets to school marks a difference between her and most of her peers. She's one of the few students in her school that uses public transportation to get to school; most other students are dropped off by private car. That difference does not go unnoticed by Sam or her peers. Sam is a Black girl in a majority-white private Catholic high school. Ninety-five percent of her peers are white and upper middle class. Sam attends the school on scholarship, a switch she made from her public school to "get a better education". Changing schools in sophomore year is a choice that Sam viewed as a trade-off – trading what she and her mom see as a stronger academic environment and path to college for what Sam shrugs off as a *better education with a side of everyday casual racism*. When prompted, she looks off:

“ They only like me when I play ball.”

Sam liked the classes at her new school – “well, at least four of the six,” she laughed. Sam reported running into trouble in two of her classes – religion and math.

“ I feel like I get kicked out of those classes every other week. I've lost count. I do fine in my other classes, but I don't understand the teachers in those two classes – what they are saying, what they want from me...and they don't understand me.”

Sam talked about getting kicked out of class, something that had occurred a half dozen times in her first semester between the two classes.

“ I sit in the back in one of the classes, and the teacher just seems to stare through me, watching me for something I'm about to do wrong. I don't feel welcomed. I try to pay attention, but this is not even my religion and the teacher knows it. So, it just goes over my head and then the teacher calls me out for not paying attention. I'm embarrassed and the teacher is so disrespectful in his tone. So, I just say that I don't like that, and we get into it.”

That interaction – and several subsequent ones – resulted in Sam being sent to the principal's office, and to a school counselor who worked with her on behavior management strategies. A similar dynamic cropped up with a math teacher. The other classes? “They're cool,” Sam summarized.

Asked to reflect on the difference, Sam shrugged as she made an assessment.

“ The other teachers, I think, know I’m one of the only Black students here and they just make more space for who I am. They also take the time to break things down. They don’t assume or call you out for not knowing, but they also don’t talk down, and they keep the discussion interesting. I think I feel normal, less different, in those classes. So, I stay in them with no problem.”

Sam’s informal assessment of the difference in classroom engagement was spot-on. In one set of classes, she understood and felt understood; the classroom allowed for positive rapport between students and teacher, and the presentation of ideas was engaging. In another set of classes, Sam felt alienated and othered¹, and a growing sense that she was neither welcomed nor competent in those spaces with no clear bridges to a more positive experience.

Sam’s mood and motivation would vary throughout the day, sometimes period by period. This resulted in academic trouble for Sam, just as basketball season was getting started, and what was emerging as a revolving door through the principal’s office. Further, the faculty of the small, 500-student school was divided on the “Sam issue” – with some teachers advocating for Sam and others suggesting that she “be counseled out” and go back to her neighborhood school.

But the issue was not just the up and down experience of success or failure from one class to the next. Sam also shared that she felt alienated at the school in general. Her race, her family income, and her communication style were all “picked on.” Microaggressions were common. Being liked “only for basketball” quickly settled in as a defining narrative for her experience in the hallways and in the classroom. By the end of the semester, a patchwork of classroom experiences and a conditional sense of belonging on the court prompted Sam to state she wanted to “go back to her old school...or maybe drop out.”

Alignment to Research

What Sam recounted as her experience is also named in the research literature. Quality varies between classrooms as widely as it might vary between schools, and student performance rises or falls relative to student-teacher relationship quality. This can be exacerbated for Black students, negatively affecting both academic performance and social emotional well-being, particularly when racial bias is strongly at play and inadequately addressed as a school-wide commitment and value.



One of the school counselors took an interest in problem-solving with Sam. Sam had spent several periods in which she was kicked out of class in Mr. Barra’s office, finishing homework or just trying to calm down. Calls home resulted in less, not more, direct support, and often, to Sam’s embarrassment, heated responses from her mom and further breakdown in communications between home and school.

A few months in, Sam made a casual mention of a supportive adult in her life during one of her visits to the counselor’s office.

¹ We derive an understanding of belonging and othering from the work of John A. Powell, founder of the Othering & Belonging Institute at University of California Berkeley. Othering is a generalized set of common processes that deny someone full humanity based on perception and treatment as less than and/or a threat to the favored group.

“ If I could just react in a calmer manner – kind of have a coach in the moment to say, ‘Even if the teacher is wrong, you don’t have to get into it with them,’ I think I could make it through this year. My aunt knows how to do that, she always calms things down. But she’s not right here with me.”

The “aunt,” Sheila, was actually a former neighbor and family friend who had kept up ties with Sam and knew her entire family well. The counselor reached out, developing a relationship with this supportive, extra-familial adult who had insight and influence, and could serve as a credible messenger because she herself as a Black woman had once navigated a similar majority-white high school experience.

Sheila also happened to be a professional social worker and was positioned to help in several critically instrumental ways. First, Sheila knew Sam well and could provide insight into “trouble spots,” often offering Sam a “reset” to manage anxiety and stress and provide coaching for how to handle conflicts before they arose. Just as importantly, Sheila had deep and positive relationships with the family, including Sam’s mother with whom the school had developed a fractious relationship. Lastly, Sheila provided a cultural bridge – something far beyond “cultural competence.” She had immediate insights into how the school climate affected not just Sam, but also dynamics that seemed to affect all Black students at the school. She could skillfully support both Sam and the counselor in identifying structural issues – “pain points” in the school environment – **and** hold Sam accountable for her role in respectful interactions.

“ Look – am I trying to keep you *in* this school or helping you to successfully transition out?” Sheila asked Sam directly as she took on a more regular role of coaching Sam on how to navigate school and agreeing, with Sam’s mom’s permission, to serve as a regular contact with the school.

“I guess I’m in,” Sam texted back (a regular mode of talking between them, especially when Sheila wants to elicit an honest answer).

“I like the basketball coach and my teammates are turning out to be alright. You can’t get me out of religion and math, right?” Sheila confirmed no, but “I know this environment and I can help you get an ‘A’ in navigating all-white schools, and maybe we can help change some stuff, too.”

“Navigate an all-white school? Alright, bet,” Sam texted back.

With Sheila added to the support team, Sam’s ups and downs got smoother and the out-of-classroom incidents were fewer and farther between. Sam got interested in changing the school climate that was devoid of positive Black cultural messages and regularly asked Sheila’s advice on how to effectively push back on the “we don’t see race” ethos that the school crafted its organizational identity around. Sam took on the lack of a Black History Month celebration and had success in getting Black alumni of the school, who affirmed her experiences of race, interested in pushing for programming together.

The school, without a single Black faculty member on staff, contracted with a Black, female mental health counselor to meet with Sam with some strategic urging from Sheila once the “support team” identified that Sam really needed ongoing mental health supports. A few other students of color also began meeting with this counselor. A committee of board members, Black alumni, and staff formed to begin a more regular and systematic look at issues of diversity and inclusion. Sam wouldn’t characterize her school experience as “perfect.” She reflected:

““ They still have a long way to go on making Black students really feel like it’s their school too.”

By senior year, Sam was an adroit analyzer of her learning environment, sounding like an educational advocate made wiser by her experiences. If Sam’s first semester at the Catholic school was an early indicator, she would have predicted disengagement and even dropping out. (She is the first in her family to graduate high school.) But by the time she reached senior year, Sam credited a critical adult actor for helping her to bridge a gulf and empowering her to “choose to stay,” while changing the narrative on being a “problem student.”

That year, Sam also met a personal goal: she had always wanted to be on TV. She was named “player of the week” and was interviewed on the local news – an honor given to outstanding students who have maintained good grades.

““ For something positive, not negative. And, honestly, that doesn’t happen that often when the news focuses on people from my community, even though there’s a lot of good people there.”

Sam reflected with both a sense of accomplishment and growing analysis on the pervasiveness of racialized bias, inside of schools and in the wider society. It would have been easier to disengage Sam acknowledged, but then the senior honor roll student and season MVP smiled widely.

““ My team probably wouldn’t have made it to state semi-finals in my senior year!”



Sam is currently a second-year college student-athlete majoring in social work. She was selected for the national college All-American team in her division.

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