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Letter

Examining current issues in education that highlight the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Highly Effective Teachers in Low Performing Urban Schools

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Professor

With gratitude to The John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation of Los Angeles who generously funded the four-year study.

For four years, our nine-member team¹ studied 31 highly effective teachers in nine low-performing urban elementary, middle and high schools in some of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in Los Angeles County².

The teachers were selected based on having had the highest percentage of students moving up a level on the English/Language Arts or Math subtests of the California Standards Test for 2-3 years compared to their peers teaching the same students in the same schools.

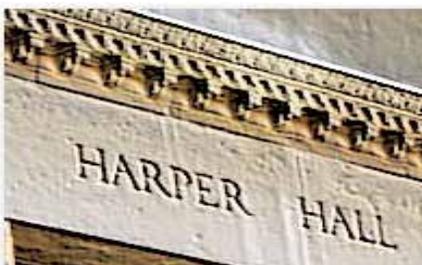
Our research team, all of whom were experienced in K-12 classroom instruction and teacher education/

development, began with three questions. Are there highly effective teachers inside low-performing urban schools? If so, what instructional strategies do they use? And what are their personal characteristics and beliefs?

Using grounded theory, each teacher was observed a minimum of ten days by a lead researcher at each site, as well as by the other members of the team. Most were observed again the first day of classes the following year. Near the conclusion of the study, we invited the teachers to join the research team for a day to critique and contribute to our findings.



There were indeed highly effective teachers inside these low-performing schools. The study's teachers included 24 women and 7 men; 24 taught English/Language Arts and 7 Math. There were 11 elementary, 9 middle, and 11 high school teachers. In the year in which we studied the teachers, their mean CST data revealed that 51% of their students



School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University

For more than 80 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

moved up a level, 34% maintained their levels and only 15% dropped a level. This was quantitatively different than their peers teaching in the same schools. Pat Pawlak (2009) in her dissertation calculated every teacher's achievement in three high schools and found disturbing data. Fifty percent of the English teachers and 60% of the math teachers had between 30 and 75% of their students dropping down a level in a single year. Sixty-five percent of the English teachers and 68% of the math teachers had the same or more students going down a level as going up.

Inside the Classrooms

Strict Discipline

The team was struck first by the strictness of the teachers, a strictness that was always inseparable from a grander purpose, even in students' minds. Like the second grader who admitted, "Ms. G kept me in the classroom to do my work. She is good hearted to me." High school math students were careful to define strictness: "I think Mrs. E is such an effective teacher because of her discipline. People might think she is mean, but she is really not. She is strict. There is a difference. She believes every student can learn." "Mrs. E has helped me learn the most. Though she is strict, it keeps me in check, and I learn more."

Teachers believed their strictness was necessary to teach effectively and establish a safe and respectful classroom. Students also saw their teacher's authority and strictness as serving larger purposes - "because she doesn't want us to get ripped off in life," "because she wants us to go to college," "because she wants us to be at the top of second grade," "because she wants us to be winners and not losers," and "because he has faith on us to succeed."

Traditional and Intense Instruction

The second most obvious instructional characteristic was that the teachers predominantly used traditional explicit methods of instruction. Their teaching was for the most part unabashedly and

unapologetically from the state standards and official curriculum materials.

There was rarely a moment when instruction was not going on. Teachers transitioned from one activity to another quickly and easily; many used timers and students were reminded of the time remaining. At one school, teachers met students in the hallway during the passing periods and visited with them; when the final bell rang teachers instructed students on exactly what should be on their desk when they sat down. As students entered, students were silent as they prepared for work. In some cases students first copied the daily agenda from the board in their notebooks - "in case your parents ask you what you learned today, I want you to be able to tell them."

Typically, teachers delivered instruction to the group using presentations and demonstrations interspersed with whole class discussions. During this time, students were often called on randomly and were required to present themselves strongly using full sentences and high-level vocabulary. Teachers always pushed students to do their best (a term used by teachers and students). Ms. P said to one young girl, "That is absolutely correct! Now, can you say that like a fifth grader."

There were few cooperative/collaborative learning activities, often limited to brief pair shares. When watching longer collaborative arrangements from the back of the room, many students appeared academically less focused and engaged than during explicit instruction (see also Kawell, 2008).

Teachers generally followed instruction and discussion with independent practice. Most likely the single most productive strategy, here the teachers began moving from desk to desk. One teacher said, "If I see two or three having trouble, I stop, go back and teach it another way." Another said it allowed her to "see how this kid's mind works." As they moved around from desk to desk teachers got feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction,

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"The faculty of the School of Educational Studies believes a socially just nation educates all its diverse citizenry through networks of effective and accountable organizations that interact responsibly with families and communities..."

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helped some students get started and stay focused, offered individual students extra instruction and encouragement, and even exchanged brief personal interactions - "Solomon, how's your mother today, is she better?"

This simple almost instinctive activity of walking around easily and naturally accomplished the goals of more complicated interventions - differentiated instruction, informal assessment, teacher reflection, teacher/student relationships, classroom management, and RTI. We rarely knew which students were classified as special education or English language learners because teachers' personal assistance helped masked this.

Exhorting Virtues and Future Vision

Teachers frequently encouraged their students to think about their future and to practice particular virtues. The top virtues were respecting self and others, working hard, being responsible, never giving up, doing excellent work, trying their best, being hopeful, thinking critically, being honest, and considering consequences. Respect was paramount and even a small infraction drew a quick rebuke.

Teachers always linked student character and achievement to going to college, getting good jobs, and supporting their future families. Even second graders knew this - "Ms. G is weird, strict, mean and crazy. This classroom is smart and nerdy because she wants you to go to college." As means of helping students think of their lives as adults, teachers often shared their own mistakes. Mrs. C told her students how missing one word on a spelling test lost her a job she desperately needed. One of Ms. P's students told us, "She has passed through some trouble in her life and does not want that to happen to us. So she is preparing us for troubles and telling us what is the best choice."

Strong and Respectful Relationships

The teachers had a profound respect for their students and were optimistic about their futures. They provided their students with a vision of their best

selves. Middle school teacher, Ms. P bent down at a student's desk and said, "Alejandro, I can see you are very good at math. I look forward to seeing what you will do in your life." Now Alejandro has heard from a respected adult outside his family that he is good at math and his future prospects are bright.

Respect for the students is a more accurate description of what we saw, than simply caring for their students. The teachers did not need their students to love them; they needed their students to achieve. Ms. B said, "I'm hard on my students but at the same time they know it is out of love. I've had to fail some students and these students when I see them in the hall, they still greet me. They tell me they wish they were back in my class - they say they know why they failed my class."

"Every one of my students are underperforming based on what I see as their potential. It is my responsibility to turn this around and I can do it!"

Who Are These High-Performing Teachers?

Though they shared some common traits and strategies, the teachers were quite diverse - 11 were African Americans, 9 European Americans, 7 Latino/a American, 3 Middle Eastern Americans, and 1 Asian American. Their ages ranged from 27 to 60 and years of experience from 3 to 33. Two-thirds of the teachers (23) were educated in non-traditional teacher education programs - teaching before they finished their credentials. Nearly half (14) were career changers. Almost one-third (9) were first generation immigrants. There was clearly an over representation of African American teachers which we believe is related to their authority, explicit instruction, and sense of urgency; all these have been noted by Lisa Delpit (2006). The first generation immigrant teachers most likely knew what it would take for their students to do well in the larger culture. While they were all

highly effective, few fit the definitions of highly qualified in terms of National Board Certification and degrees.

What Do They Believe?

If I were to sum up what they told us time and again it would be this: "Every one of my students are underperforming based on what I see as their potential. It is my responsibility to turn this around and I can do it!" Teachers did not use the student's background or neighborhood as an excuse for their not learning and yet they were not naïve about the challenges some of their students faced. They simply had confidence that what they did in the classroom made a difference.

Teachers had a pragmatic attitude about testing; several said, "it's required all your life." Mrs. C said of the district assessments, "I really like them, I like them a lot. I've been embarrassed by them a few times, but I am all for them." Ms. K said, "When students don't do well, I take it personally, I know I shouldn't but I think that that bothers me." These teachers neither taught to the tests nor ignored them; they were simply another resource.

Several additional incidents were instructive for those of us who work in teacher development, supervision and evaluation. First, not one of our teachers had any idea they were more successful than their colleagues teaching similar students. The student achievement data they had available to them at that time was not in any form to make relative comparisons.

The teachers respected their principals - they were the authority in their classrooms and they understood their principals were their authorities. However, they did not seem to be particularly close to them because they were more focused on the inside of their classroom than networking with their administrators. One teacher summarized, "We get along." In a couple of cases the principals were resistant to a particular teacher who emerged from the data as high performing urging us to observe a different teacher. However none of their nominations made the cut

when we rechecked the data.

Another incident is instructive here, leading us to suspect that nominations are not reliable. One day Ms. N was visibly shaken after a visit from a district teacher development specialist. She told our team member that she must be a terrible teacher and didn't think that she should be in the study. There were many teachers at her school that needed instructional interventions but to take a veteran teacher of 33 years who is high achieving year after year and shake her confidence in order to teach trendy "new" strategies is counter productive. This demonstrates the importance of knowing the achievement data before we target teachers for intervention. Teachers, who have demonstrated results, should be granted considerable freedom in determining their classroom instruction.

Why Use Achievement Data?

Some challenge our decision to define high-performing teachers by test scores and/or our decision to choose low performing schools; we did so intentionally. First, for all their flaws, achievement tests are still the most reliable and objective measures for tracking general academic progress. Success on tests help students gain access to college, better jobs and advantages in the larger culture. Second, previous studies of effective teachers had used nominations heavily (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Third, most studies of effectiveness in urban schools have been done on schools and districts that are high performing rather than on the effective classrooms. Given that many urban schools have not been transformed or do not stay transformed, we need more teachers whose can excel despite their school's current status.

Why So Much Explicit Instruction?

To be honest, I was surprised at the strictness and the amount of explicit instruction because of my preconceptions about what makes instruction effective. As university teacher educators, six of us had expected to see more social constructivist and cooperative/collaborative strategies. Indeed, our

concerns about the limitations of traditional explicit instruction may be unfounded. What we found were happy and engaged students obviously learning from committed, optimistic, disciplined teachers. In student surveys of why their teacher taught them so much one of students' major responses was that their teachers explained things over and over – "he doesn't get mad when we don't understand, he just explains it until we get it in our heads."

The emphasis on explicit instruction and repeated explanation followed their sense of urgency to help these students get ahead. Hirsch's (2006) emphasis on closing the knowledge-deficit and Delpit's (2006) admonition of the value of cultural capital are relevant here. It was obvious that students were constructing meanings as they were receiving instruction, participating in discussions and working independently under their teachers' watchful eyes. Mayer (2009), Kintsch (2009), and Kirschner (2009) raise the same issues when they suggest that constructivism may be more valid as a learning theory than as a pedagogy or prescription for learning.

Why So Little Multiculturalism?

Cloetta Veney (2008) conducted her dissertation on this question in two of our elementary schools; her work suggested that our teachers mirrored more the effective teacher research than the culturally proficient literature; however there is a good deal of overlap. Our gut sense is that the teachers were so focused on students as individuals that any issues of cultural or individual difference were addressed automatically in knowing and working together closely. In fact, even when asked to describe their class to a stranger, these teachers did not refer to the ethnicity of their students.

Why So Little Technology?

While teachers used some technology, overall use was quite limited except for in two classrooms – one used fairly advanced technology for math and the other used the Internet frequently. Elmo, power point, and

the overhead projector were more frequently used. Teachers did mention frequent technological failures and the need to share with other teachers but most of our teachers seemed to prefer the white board. It was always accessible and often used for demonstrations and supplemental explanations.

Summary

Basically these teachers were strong, no-nonsense, make-it-happen people who were optimistic for their students' futures, responsible, hard working, emotionally stable, organized, disciplined and clearly the authority in their classrooms. They were realistic; they did not set their goals too broadly (saving children) or too narrowly (passing the test).

One Latino fourth grader summed up much of what we discovered. "When I was in first grade and second grade and third grade, when I cried my teachers coddled me. But when I got to Mrs. T's room, she said, Suck it up and get to work. I think she's right I need to work harder." A high school math student told us, "It takes a certain integrity to teach, Mr. L possesses that integrity." "One thing for sure his attitude is always up, he never brings us down, but we all know he has faith on us to learn and succeed."



Notes (click to return to page 1)

1. John Rivera (policy director), Dena Durish, Linda Hoff, Sue Kawell, Pat Pawlak, Ivannia Soto-Hinman, Laura Strauss, Cloetta Veney and myself were members of the team.
2. The mean state decile ranking of the none schools in the study was 1.8 and the average API was 571; all the schools were in school improvement. The schools ranged in size from 476 students to 3533 with an average student body of 1868. The schools' students averaged 85% on free and reduced lunch; and their combined ethnicity included 83% Latino, 11% African American, 4% Asian American, and 2% Euro-American.

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From 2004 to 2009, Professor Mary Poplin was the principal investigator of a study of 31 highly effective teachers in low performing urban schools in Los Angeles. The study was funded by the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation and is the product of a nine-member research team. Prior to that, in 1992, she led a large yearlong study of four schools in southern California and produced a report, *Voices from Inside: A Report on Schooling from Inside the Classroom* that sold over 60,000 copies.

Professor Poplin teaches courses in pedagogy, learning theory, qualitative research, philosophy, and worldviews. She developed the current CGU Teacher Education Internship program from 1985-1995 increasing the candidates from 25 to 100 and the percentage of students of color from 6% to 50% and was first to require all candidates to have special expertise in ELL. She also led the revitalization of the program from 2000-2004 and was Dean of the School of Educational Studies from 2002-2004. She and John Rivera published an article on the re-visioning of the program in *Theory into Practice* in 2006. She developed and directs the Institute for Education in Transformation whose goal is to advance justice and accountability in the schools through relevant research and practice.

In 1996, Mary worked for two months with Mother Teresa in Calcutta to understand why she said their work was "religious work and not social work." Her book on this experience, *Finding Calcutta*, was published by InterVarsity Press in 2008 and is also available in Korean and Chinese. She is a frequent speaker in Veritas Forums, which began at Harvard, but has spread to over 60 universities around the world (www.veritas.org).

Current Research: Professor Mary Poplin's research and teaching focus on several areas in education:

- The transformation of schools and classrooms toward more just and accountable institutions The practices and beliefs of highly effective teachers in low performing urban schools
- The articulation of four major worldviews (scientific naturalism, secular humanism, pantheism and Judeo Christian thought) and their expression in the epistemologies of higher education.



School of Educational Studies

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Dissertations From the Study

Cloe Veney (2008)

The multicultural practices of highly effective teachers of African American and Latino students in urban schools

Many resources have been spent on school reform in attempts to close the achievement gap between white and minority students, especially African-American and Latino students. Educators have struggled to find ways to successfully educate minority students who live in urban areas and/or in poverty. There have been special programs, and changes to curricula, school structure, and teacher preparation requirements; yet the gap remains and continues to widen. However, there is evidence that some teachers who educate African-American and Latino students in high poverty urban areas are experiencing success. Scholars of multiculturalism insist that successful teachers of students of color must be culturally competent and teach from a multicultural perspective (Banks, 2001).

This study aimed to explore evidence of multicultural strategies used and not used by highly effective teachers in urban schools with students who are multiethnic and of low social economic status. The study sought to understand highly effective teachers' strategies that are different to those found in the literature, as well as identify strategies for multiculturalism recommended by the literature that effective teachers are and are not using. Through observation and interviews, the study explored how these highly effective teachers' practices compare to recommendations made by the literature for effective teaching.

This study's major finding was these teachers exhibited more effective teaching strategies than multicultural strategies. They addressed issues of multiculturalism differently than the literature suggests, by concentrating on the individual child and encouraging their students to be respectful because it is the humane thing to do. This leads to the questions: "Are we drawing teachers away from their natural tendency to focus on individual students by emphasizing their culture? Could their concentration on the individual be preventing cultural stereotyping?"

Sue Kawell (2008)

Successful teachers: What it takes to raise academic achievement of urban minority students.

Some research suggests that successful teachers of African American and Latino students hold high expectations, relate well to their students, know their subject well, and experience few classroom management problems due to their effective teaching (Badillo, 2006; Chenoweth, 2007; Delpit, 1995). According to Kunjufu (2002), successful teachers are master instructors holding high student expectations, and that effective teachers' race and gender do not impact academic achievement of African American students.

This study aimed to explore characteristics of ten successful teachers ranging from 4th to 12th grade, of various ethnicities teaching African American and Latino students in a large K-12 high poverty, low income urban school in Southern California. In addition, 736 students participated in the study. Teacher participation was based on teachers with the highest percentage in raising student test scores from below basic or basic to proficient or advanced on the yearly California Standardized Test (CST) from 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. Data was collected and analyzed based on classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student surveys.

Major findings from this study indicated that effective teachers: (1) generally used direct instruction rather than collaborative learning, (2) believed all students can learn and had high expectations for their students, (3) emphasized vocabulary and the use of academic language, and (4) relationally connected with their students and offered extra help to students outside of class. Other findings showed that most students described effective teachers simultaneously as strict, fun, and caring. This study also suggests that teachers' race and culture are not factor in their ability to raise achievement levels of at-risk African American and Latino students.

Pat Pawlak (2009)

Common characteristics and classroom practices of effective teachers of high-poverty and diverse students

Most teachers do not teach in high-performing schools, or in schools organized to best support teaching and learning at the classroom level. It is important, therefore, that all teachers be aware of what they can do in their classrooms to support student learning despite what may or may not be occurring at the school or district levels. This study identifies the characteristics and practices of teachers who are effectively teaching students of color and the poor in low-performing public high schools. Seven effective English and Mathematics teachers were identified by their quantitative disaggregated achievement data, using "value added" criteria. Data from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student surveys were used to determine the characteristics of these teachers and their classrooms.

Areas of agreement with previous research included teachers building caring, personal relationships with students, supporting students' self-image, relating instruction to real-life experiences, implementing effective classroom management systems, demonstrating respect for the students, and having and supporting high expectations for students. One area of mismatch was lack of evidence among study teachers of specific attention given to culture, the development of intercultural understanding, language diversity, or differences in communication styles.

This study identified eleven instructional strategies commonly used among its seven effective teachers. One of these, direct instruction, was used by every teacher in practically every observed lesson, though each teacher demonstrated a unique repertoire of strategies. The study teachers did not make regular use of cooperative learning, project-based learning, or even differentiation, except as one-on-one interactions with their students. Recommendations were made primarily to teacher preparation institutions, school districts, and site administrators, to ensure that they support teacher exposure to and development in various aspects of the four themes that emerged from this study: teacher beliefs, structures that frame the classroom experience for success, teacher-student relationships, and teaching strategies effective in supporting achievement for diverse students in low-income, low-achieving settings.