



POOR SCHOOLS POOR STUDENTS SUCCESSFUL TEACHERS

by Rebecca Swanson Gehrke

Facing the challenges of urban poor schools, some teachers defy the odds and achieve increases in student success. What do these teachers know and do?

Today, one out of four American children attends school in an urban district; one out of every six American children lives in poverty; and, in urban schools where

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most of the students are poor, two-thirds or more of the children fail to reach even the “basic” level of achievement on national tests. Urban schools are where most states face the greatest gap between their expectations for students and the reality in terms of resources, achievement, and teacher quality (Olson 2003).

Many complex factors impact the improvement of schools in the country’s most needy districts and the

equalization of education and opportunity for students. This article explores the unique challenges facing teachers in urban poor schools and provides insight into teacher characteristics and behaviors that increase opportunities for students to demonstrate academic achievement. Perhaps this information, gleaned from research and practice, can contribute to the preparation and retention of quality teachers in settings where they are needed the most.

The Urban School Context

Effective teaching, as defined by student outcomes and improvement, is a result of the right combinations of methods, materials, student characteristics, teacher characteristics, and the context in which teaching and learning occur. Those assigned or choosing to teach in urban schools, where not only students but also the schools themselves typically have fewer resources than suburban middle-class schools, face a challenge much different from other school environments and perhaps much different from their own schooling experiences. Recent descriptions of urban poor schools continue to include conditions of overcrowding, high turnover of faculty, limited resources, economic differences in salaries and supplies, and a greater number of students at risk for academic failure (Guyton 1994; Quartz 2003; Tredway 1999). Adequate time to address individual student needs is essential in all educational settings; however, the large number of students at risk of academic failure in urban poor schools places heavy demands on the individual teacher's time.

In addition to demands on time and resources in urban poor schools, a mismatch exists between the backgrounds of most teachers and the students for whom they are responsible. As in decades past, the preponderance of teachers in all American schools consists of European-American, middle-class females (Diffily and Perkins 2002; Olmedo 1997). Demographic changes and the increase in the diversity of learners, including in the area related to social class, have led to an increasing gap between the backgrounds of students and teachers (Zeichner 2003).

The need exists for teachers in urban schools to perform juggling acts with the realities of the context in which they teach or are preparing to teach. Just what is it that enables particular teachers to experience success in some of the nation's most difficult schools?

Successful Teachers

In reviewing recent research on successful teachers in urban poor schools, three characteristics appear to relate most directly to teachers being effective in those schools.

These characteristics are: knowing themselves, knowing the environment in which they teach, and maintaining high expectations.

Self Awareness and Self Reflection

Those teaching in urban poor schools must reconcile two factors: their desire to meet students' learning needs in an individual, personal manner; and a system that requires uniform conduct, treatment, and outcomes (Weiner 1993; 1999). The demand now is on the teacher to accommodate student diversity in a climate of standardized results. Knowing what works, but being bound by a system that limits the ability of individuals to make curriculum decisions, means that teachers must know themselves in terms of their levels of frustration and their coping capabilities (Weiner 2000). In addition, practicing teachers in urban schools repeatedly mention the need for teachers to be aware of what they believe about urban children's capabilities. Those personal values influence perceptions and ultimately affect teacher expectations and practices (Diffily and Perkins 2002).

Teachers need to reflect on their own belief systems and assumptions, especially in instances where their social backgrounds and experiences differ greatly from those of the students they teach (Weiner 1993; 1999). Olmedo (1997) described how teacher educators worked with preservice teachers during their field experiences in urban schools to bring their beliefs and assumptions to a level of self awareness. Activities that improved the preservice teachers' self awareness included journaling, composing essays that related readings to practice, and participating in weekly discussions focused on expectations and reflections. These activities helped prepare these preservice teachers to be able to analyze and reflect on the impact of their misconceptions of teaching and learning in an urban poor school and to increase their effectiveness later with their own students.

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Knowing one's own cultural and social identity also leads to a better understanding of students and their identities and experiences. Subsequently, with this understanding of the perspectives and situations of the

students, the teacher is able to establish connections that facilitate engagement. For instance, when students do not have resources available for writing and researching outside of the school environment, teachers can structure time within the school day for projects requiring such commitment. Or, for students whose lives may always be in a state of uncertainty, a classroom with consistent routines provides much welcomed security. Genuine learning takes place when the teacher is able to make education meaningful by having an awareness of the students' backgrounds (Diffily and Perkins 2002).

Strong Knowledge Base

Developing a knowledge base of issues particular to urban poor schools also is essential to being successful (Guyton 1994). Successful teachers in urban poor schools know that their resources and students may be unique and that different teacher behaviors may be required. Basic knowledge for the incoming and practicing teacher in an urban poor school includes: the effects of poverty on learning, awareness of the resources available in the school and community, and acknowledgment of the additional bureaucracy in large urban schools.

In describing what he termed "community teachers," Murrell (2001) suggested that the teacher in an urban setting needs to recognize and understand the myriad of factors that impact the learning and development of students. Those factors often include hunger, anger, fear, illness, conflict, and transience. Students who are hungry, tired, or afraid are not receptive to teaching and learning, regardless of materials or the methods employed. Students in urban poor schools may have gaps in their learning due merely to changing school districts or missing days of instruction. Urban teachers need information about the extent and effects of poverty because, as one subject in Guyton's (1994) research described, it was "poverty more than ethnic identity that shaped the urban school environment." In a broader sense, teachers in urban poor schools also require knowledge of the inequitable distribution of school resources and of how limited resources and time may affect student outcomes. The successful teacher realizes this relationship between pressures of accountability measures and the context of teaching in urban poor schools.

Teachers in urban poor schools can alleviate the impact of some of these factors by creating their own file of community, school, and neighborhood resources. Teachers should know what breakfast, lunch, and after-school programs are available to students and keep applications on hand. They should establish relationships with district and building counselors, social workers,

nurses, and truancy officers. To this, Honig, Kahne, and McLaughlin (2001) added that teaching can be enhanced by teachers becoming familiar with students' neighborhoods, families, and other venues for learning outside of school—for instance, where coaches, mentors, or youth counselors influence student learning.

An essential component of Haberman's (1995a) extensive research in predicting the success of teachers in urban and poverty settings included the ability of such teachers to perform the tasks concerning "the care and feeding of the bureaucracy." In large, urban school systems, teachers require the skills and knowledge to cope effectively with paperwork, rules and practice, numerous meetings, interruptions, inadequate materials, lack of time, large classes, and obsessive concern with test scores (Haberman 1995b). Specific desired teacher characteristics include the ability to adjust and cope with such demands, not only with organizational skills, but also with the knowledge of how to fulfill the minimum requirements of the bureaucracy and protect oneself from burnout. Creating a "must do" list as opposed to a "must do it all" list is imperative.

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High Expectations

In light of recent legislation, an essential characteristic of successful teachers in urban poor schools—high expectations—is particularly relevant for practicing teachers and teacher educators today. Successful teachers believe that all children can learn; therefore, they maintain high expectations for all students, regardless of where they teach or the backgrounds of their students. Effective teachers also believe that they, as the teachers, are responsible for teaching students successfully (Brophy 1999; Zeichner 2003).

Teachers in urban schools say that maintaining high expectations for students living in urban poor environments is critical. Feeling sorry for students because of their environments, and subsequently lowering

demands, does a disservice to the students (Diffily and Perkins 2002). Olmedo (1997) found that when European-American middle-class teachers entered the urban school, they visualized poverty as an overwhelming problem. Such a view led to lowering expectations for “students at risk” because of the social ills in those students’ homes and communities (Olmedo 1997). Beginning teachers in Guyton’s (1994) study did not let the home environments of the students affect their expectations. They realized that lowering expectations is not an effective means of working with children who live in poverty (Guyton 1994). When teachers lower expectations for students because of a belief that there is little that can be done given the students’ environments, student achievement lags and school reform is not possible (Warren 2002).

In Phoenix, Arizona, a foundation exists that rewards successful public school teachers in urban poor schools—schools where lack of student and building resources often results in labels of “underperforming” or “failing” (Kossan 2003). With success being defined in terms of achievement scores, these exemplary teachers consistently include maintaining high expectations for their students in their recipes for success. As one reward recipient stated (Dunlap 2004), “I have high expectations and students know there’s going to be consequences and rewards for what they do.” Another added (Sparks 2004), “You don’t settle. If you say a project has to be two or three pages, that’s how long it has to be. Then they take pride in their work and they raise the bar themselves.” Principals in these urban schools describe their successful teachers as those teachers who don’t let excuses like poverty, language barriers, or other socioeconomic factors interfere with the students’ learning.

Conclusion

In reviewing the past three decades of research on preparing teachers for urban schools, Weiner (1993; 2000) concluded that teachers are not necessarily effective in urban schools because they possess a prescribed list of qualities and attributes, but rather because their approach to the setting enables them to be successful. In these schools, successful teachers learn to live with bureaucracy and inequalities, and they understand the continual need to cope, adjust, and change.

A review of recent research, however, produces a number of characteristics of successful teachers in urban poor schools that relate directly to standards-based teaching and accountability testing. First, successful urban teachers are aware of their own personal beliefs and philosophies and how their background may be different

from those they teach. They are able to select strategies, methods, and materials that engage their learners, enable students to relate learning to their lives, and subsequently lead to increased achievement.

Second, successful teachers in urban poor schools need a strong knowledge base about teaching in schools in urban poor areas, the effects of poverty on growth and learning, and the lack of resources and services that form the basis for current legislation designed to remedy inequities in educational opportunities. Teacher education, both preservice and in-service, needs to include just such information.

Last, clear expectations are the result of an underlying pedagogy where successful teachers believe that all children can learn and that the environment is not an excuse to lower expectations. These teachers also are able to communicate that belief to their students. In today’s standards-based accountability environment, where schools are categorized as effective based on their test scores, it is even more critical that teachers in urban settings adhere to this premise.

These factors are key in teaching and in teacher education as researchers and educators continue to explore what makes successful teachers and what constitutes effective teaching in urban schools—schools in which poverty impacts not only the students as individuals but also the buildings in which they attend classes and the resources that staff and supply that school. ■

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