She's Strict for a Good Reason
Highly Effective Teachers in Low-Performing Urban Schools

Studying the work of highly effective teachers can help us better understand what really works to improve student learning and help us avoid practices that are complicated, trendy, and expensive.

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For four years, we studied 31 highly effective teachers in nine low-performing urban schools in some of the most economically depressed neighborhoods in Los Angeles County, Calif. The first thing that struck us was how strict the teachers were. But it was a strictness that always was inseparable from a grander purpose, even in students’ minds. For example, a 2nd grader admitted, “Ms. G kept me in the classroom to do my work. She is good-hearted to me.” A high school math student wrote, “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.”

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Are there highly effective teachers in low-performing urban schools?

If so, what instructional strategies do they use?

What are their personal characteristics?

The teachers we studied had the highest percentage of students moving up a level on the English/language arts or math subtests of the California Standards Test (CST) for two to three years. Toward the end of the school year, we asked their students why they thought their teacher taught them so much. One Latino 4th grader summed up much of what we discovered: “When I was in 1st grade and 2nd grade and 3rd 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.”

We began our study with three questions: Are there highly effective teachers in low-performing urban schools? If so, what instructional strategies do they use? And what are their personal characteristics?

There are highly effective teachers in these schools, and we chose 31 of them for our study. They included 24 women and seven men; 24 taught English/language arts, and seven taught math; 11 taught in elementary schools, nine in middle schools, and 11 in high schools. In the year they were observed, these teachers’ CST data revealed that 51% of their students moved up a level, 34% maintained their levels, and only 15% dropped a level.

These results were very different from those of their peers teaching in the same schools. For example, in three high schools, we calculated every teacher’s achievement and found disheartening data. Fifty percent of the English teachers and 60% of the math teachers had between 30% and 75% of their
students dropping a level in a single year. Sixty-five percent of the English teachers and 68% of the math teachers had the same number or more students going down a level as going up.

Clearly, the highly effective teachers were different. What was happening in their classrooms? Who were these high performers?

THE CLASSROOM

Strictness. These teachers believed their strictness was necessary for effective teaching and learning and for safety and respect. Students also saw their teacher's strictness as serving larger purposes. Students explained that their teacher was strict "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 2nd grade," "because she wants us to be winners and not losers," and "because he has faith in us to succeed."

Instructional intensity. The second most obvious characteristic was the intensity of academic work. There was rarely a time when instruction wasn't going on. Our first visit to the only elementary teacher identified for mathematics gains found Ms. N marching her 1st graders to the playground as they chanted, "3, 6, 9, 12, 15...30." As the year progressed, they learned to march by 2's through 9's; by May her "almost 2nd graders" could multiply. She told us that she appreciated the standards as guides — "to know what I'm responsible for teaching" — and that she always tried to "push the students just a little bit into 2nd grade."

The teachers transitioned from one activity to another quickly and easily. Many of them used timers, and students often were reminded of the time remaining for a particular activity. At one school, teachers met students in the hallway during the passing periods and talked with them. When the final bell rang, these teachers instructed students on exactly what should be on their desk when they sat down: "When you get inside the door, take your jacket off; get out your book, pencil, and notebooks; then put everything else in your backpack and under your desks." As students entered, conversations ended and students prepared for work.

Most teachers began with an overview of the day. In some cases, students were required to copy the daily agenda in their notebooks — "In case your parents ask you what you learned today, I want you to be able to tell them."

Movement. Perhaps the single most productive practice of most of these teachers was their frequent movement around the classroom to assist individual students. The time spent at students' desks provided feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction, kept students on track and focused, offered individual students extra instruction and encouragement, and even allowed for brief personal interactions between teachers and students. This simple, almost instinctive activity of walking around accomplished scores of purposes naturally — individualized and differentiated instruction, informal assessments, teacher reflection, teacher/student relationships, response to intervention (RTI), and classroom management. By walking around, teachers came to know their students. For example, Mrs. M asked a middle school student whose head was on his desk what was wrong. He replied, "I don't feel so good." She headed toward him, proclaiming, "Remember what I always tell you, you'll feel much better when you get your work done. Here, let me help you." She stayed by his side until he had a good start on his work. We rarely knew which students were classified as special education or English language learners because teachers' personal assistance helped mask this.

Traditional instruction. Traditional, explicit, teacher-directed instruction was by far the most dominant instructional practice. We were constantly reminded of Madeline Hunter's sequences — anticipatory set, input, modeling, checking for understanding, guided practice, monitoring, closure, independent practice, and review. Instruction was, for the most part, unabashedly and unapologetically from the state standards and official curriculum materials. Ms. N told us, "Open Court is very helpful and gives you good pacing." This surprised the team, as there had been a good deal of contention in Los Angeles over requiring this series.

Typically, following energetic content presentations and demonstrations, teachers entered into whole-class discussions. Students were called on randomly and had to use full sentences and high-level vocabulary. Teachers always pushed students (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 5th grader?" At one elementary school,
When we asked teachers to describe their classrooms to a stranger, not one of the 31 used race, class, or ethnic terms. Teachers required students to reference the previous student’s comment before offering their own; this encouraged students to pay attention to one another. Teachers followed instruction and discussion with independent practice. At this stage, they began moving around. One teacher said, “If I see two or three having trouble, I stop, go back, and teach it another way.”

What we saw least was also instructive. There were very few constructivist projects in their classrooms. The ones we saw were short-lived, and they often appeared to be used more as practice or a reward for learning than as a route to it. Cooperative and collaborative learning activities were also limited except in two classes. Most cooperative activities were brief pair-shares. Some of our teachers were adamantly opposed to it. High school teacher Mr. Mc told us, “In school, I helped 500 students get a better grade, 495 of whom learned nothing from the experience.” His counterpart, Mr. T, said, “It’s not realistic.” From the back of the room, the team often observed that even the best cooperative activities allowed for a good deal of irrelevant socializing.

Though the teachers were from a variety of ethnic groups, we saw very little evidence of overtly planned activities that directly addressed culture unless it was built into curriculum materials. Cloetta Veney (2008) studied two of our elementary schools’ classrooms and concluded that they resembled those in the effective classroom literature of the 1980s more than today’s cultural proficiency models. When we asked teachers to describe their classrooms to a stranger, not one of the 31 used race, class, or ethnic terms.

Pat Pawlak (2009) found that the students of these teachers said — 60% more frequently than any other comment — that their teacher helped them because he or she explained things over and over. We consistently found that students expressed appreciation for explicit instruction with patience.

**Exhorting virtues.** Every few minutes, these teachers encouraged 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 quick rebuke and consequences.

Teachers always linked doing well in school to going to college and getting good jobs so that they could someday support their families and own houses and cars. Mrs. C told her students how missing one word on a spelling test lost her a job she desperately wanted and needed. Ms. P told of problems she had experienced in her life. One of her 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.”

These teachers focused less on making the work immediately relevant than on making the link to their futures. Even 2nd 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.”

**Strong and respectful relationships.** The teachers had a profound respect for students. There was a sense that teachers were genuinely optimistic for their students’ futures. Teachers often provided students with a vision of their best selves. Middle school teacher Ms. P told us, “All students need to know that you respect them and care for them. Fortunately, that is very easy. I try to make sure every so often that I have said something personal to each of them.” She 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 his math skills may play into his future.

Respect for students is a more accurate description of what we saw than simply caring for the students. The teachers did not need the students to love them; they needed to see their students 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.... 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.”

**The High-Performing Teachers**

Though they shared common strategies, the teachers were quite diverse — 11 were black, nine white, seven Latino, three Middle Eastern Americans, and one Asian-American. Their ages ranged...
from 27 to 60, and years of experience from three to 33. Two-thirds of the teachers (23) were educated in nontraditional teacher education programs — teaching before they finished their credentials. Nearly half (14) were career changers. Almost one-third (9) were first-generation immigrants. While they were all highly effective, few fit the definitions of highly qualified in terms of National Board certifications and degrees.

The teachers were strong, no-nonsense, make-it-happen people who were optimistic for students’ futures, responsible, hard working, emotionally stable, organized, and disciplined. They were also energetic, fit, trim, and appeared in good health. They were comfortable in their own skins and humorous. Ms. M told her high school students, “If you develop multiple personalities, you better assign one to do your homework.”

What do they believe? Their most central beliefs include:

1. Every one of my students has much more potential than they use;
2. They have not been pushed to use it;
3. It is my responsibility to turn this situation around;
4. I am able; and
5. I want to do this for them.

Ms. M said simply, “They can do and be so much more.”

Teachers didn’t use the students’ backgrounds as an excuse for not learning, and yet they were not naive about the challenges facing some students. They had confidence that what they did in the classroom would truly help students.

Teachers had a pragmatic attitude about testing. “It’s required all your life,” Mr. T told us. 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; tests 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 that they were more successful than their colleagues teaching similar students. The student achievement data that was available to them did not allow for such comparisons.

Second, in a couple of cases, the principals were resistant to a teacher who emerged from the data, urging us to observe a different teacher. However, none of the nominated teachers made the cut when we rechecked the data. To be honest, when we first entered our classrooms, we were also surprised because of our preconceptions about what effective instruction should and shouldn’t look like.

An incident is instructive here: 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. The researcher told her that she certainly wasn’t a bad teacher but, if she liked, the researcher could come back another day. This demonstrates the importance of knowing the achievement data before we target teachers for intervention. Many teachers in that school needed instructional interventions, but it is counter-productive to take a veteran teacher of 33 years who is highly effective year after year and to shake her confidence in order to make her use preferred strategies. Teachers who have demonstrated results should be granted considerable freedom in determining their classroom instruction.

The teachers respected their principals. The teachers were the authority in their classrooms, and their principals were their authorities. However, they did not seem to be particularly close to their principals because the teachers were more focused on the inside of their classrooms than on networking with administrators. One teacher summed up their relationships when she said, “We get along.”

CONCLUSION

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. These teachers were realistic; they did not set their goals too broadly (saving children) or too narrowly (passing the test). Their students were being taught that mathematics, reading, speaking, listening, writing, and the formation of character are necessary for life beyond their neighborhoods.

We need to be cautious about adopting complicated, trendy, and expensive practices. We need to re-evaluate our affection for cooperative/collaborative learning, extensive technology, project-based learning, and constructivism, as well as our disaffection with explicit direct instruction and strict discipline. These teachers were direct, strict, deeply committed, and respectful to students. Their students, in turn, respected them. Mr. L’s math students said it best: “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 in us to learn and succeed.”

REFERENCES

