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Urban Teachers' Use of Culturally Responsive Management Strategies

Gaining students' cooperation in urban classrooms involves establishing an environment where teachers address students' cultural and ethnic needs, as well as their social, emotional, and cognitive needs. This article describes the management strategies of 13 1st- through 12th-grade urban teachers from seven cities throughout the United States. These educators' practices are compared to the literature on culturally responsive teaching. All 13 teachers use several culturally responsive strategies—including demonstrating care for students, acting with authority and assertiveness, and using congruent communication patterns to establish a productive learning environment for their diverse students.

I DIDN'T THINK I COULD make it through the year. It was so many things—including a new culture. I wondered what I was doing there; I wondered if I was making a difference; and, I wondered if this was good for me.[1]

These are the words of Jackie, an urban teacher, as she described her first year of teaching in Harlem in New York City. Jackie now has 15 years of urban teaching experience and is much more confident than she was that first year when the principal who hired her proclaimed during the interview, "Honey, we don't need missionaries in this school, we need teachers!" That sentiment is a powerful message clearly evoking teachers' responsibilities for impacting the academic growth and development of their students. Effective urban teachers play the role of "conductors" or "coaches" who assume responsibility for their students' academic development rather than playing the role of "custodians" who spend the day merely watching over students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 23). They explicitly establish a cooperative, business-like learning environment in which reasonable expectations for academic performance are clearly stated, and they provide the necessary tools for students to meet these expectations.

Establishing and maintaining reasonable learning expectations and conditions are often challenging propositions in urban classrooms. Several reasons exist for the challenges of managing urban classrooms. First, as Crosby (1999) suggested, "The new wave of immigrants of the past 25 years from Hispanic countries, from the Middle East, and from Asian countries has washed over the urban schools like a tidal wave bringing with it additional challenges, this time cultural and linguistic" (p. 104). Classroom management in urban schools is more difficult than in rural or suburban schools because gaining students' cooperation while ensuring their learning involves addressing students' cultural, ethnic, social,

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identity development, language, and safety needs, as well as their academic growth. This is a considerable responsibility if not an impossibility. Second, although many of these personal growth issues should be handled at home, the responsibilities fall on teachers when the resources and time are not forthcoming from urban youths' caretakers. Finally, the challenges for teachers are increased due to their inadequate knowledge of the strategies needed to connect to diverse students. As Crosby indicated, a high percentage of urban teachers will be and are inexperienced middle-class White European Americans:

> The teacher turnover rate in urban schools is much higher than in the suburban schools. . . . The result is that urban schools, especially those in the inner cities, are often staffed largely by newly hired or uncertified teachers. These teachers, who were trained to teach students from middle-class families and who often come from middle-class families themselves, now find themselves engulfed by minority students, immigrants, and other students from low-income families—students whose values and experiences are very different from their own. (p. 302)

Urban educators must be prepared to address the many differences that exist between their cultural and ethnic beliefs and those of their students if they are to engage urban children and adolescents in genuine learning.

Interviewing Urban Teachers

As a professor of a classroom management course, I was curious about how effective urban teachers developed a classroom management system that encouraged cooperation, addressed diverse students' ethnic, cultural, and social needs, and led to genuine learning. My curiosity led to the implementation of a qualitative study with 13 urban teachers from seven U.S. cities. All of the teachers were selected through identification by fellow colleagues or acquaintances, and all volunteered to be interviewed. The interviewees were from the following grade levels and cities:

- two middle school and two high school teachers from Philadelphia
- one primary teacher from New York City
- two teachers from Chicago, one primary and one high school
- two teachers from Los Angeles, one primary and one high school
- two intermediate teachers from San Francisco
- one middle school teacher from Minneapolis
- one high school teacher from Wichita

Nine of these teachers are European American, one is native Sri Lankan, one is African American, and two have Hispanic backgrounds. The teachers' experience ranges from 2 to 33 years with an average of 16 years as educators. Their students come from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Some of these teachers have refugee students and most have second language learners in their classrooms. All teach in economically impoverished communities.

I reviewed the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy prior to initiating the interviews (Brown, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Several factors within teachers' control affect their ability to make meaningful connections with ethnically and culturally diverse students, thus positively influencing their academic growth. Effective urban teaching involves implementing culturally responsive communication processes and instructional strategies, developing respectful student/teacher relationships, and recognizing, honoring, and responding to the many cultural and language differences that exist among students. Examination of teachers' responses to the extensive interview questions revealed the use of several management strategies that reflect the literature on culturally responsive teaching. Three primary themes that emerged from the interviews are described here.

Caring for Students

"You're there to teach kids—not subjects! We often forget this point." This response from Jeff, a high school English teacher in Wichita, Kansas, demonstrates a critical aspect of his philosophy of teaching—caring for students. Jeff confirmed this philosophy in describing how he initiated and cultivated out-of-class conversations with his students to get to know them personally: "I try to get to know as many kids as possible on a personal level. So when I see them in the hall, I can ask about their families. I try to see them in other settings outside of school." This is one strategy that reflects the importance of caring for students and thinking about their needs, which can be used for

planning and delivering instruction—similar to the coaching role Ladson-Billings (1994) described. All of the 13 teachers interviewed described actions that demonstrated genuine care for students.

Several researchers who have studied urban teaching and the characteristics of urban children and adolescents recognize care and psychological safety as critical components of urban classrooms. The personalized care children and adolescents need is sometimes missing from urban students' homes. Dryfoos (1998) noted that at-risk urban adolescents, "lack nurturance, attention, supervision, understanding, and caring," and may have inadequate communication processes with adults in their homes (p. 37). Students' need for care must be met at school if teachers expect students to focus on academic tasks during the day. Ladson-Billings (1994) described the classrooms of effective teachers of African American students: "Psychological safety is a hallmark of each of these classrooms. . . . The students feel comfortable and supported" (p. 73). Gordon (1999) added, "The best urban teachers show warmth and affection to their students and give priority to the development of their relationships with students as an avenue to student growth" (p. 305).

Brown (1999) interviewed African American urban middle school students who reported a desire to develop more meaningful personal relationships with teachers than the typical student-to-teacher roles. Howard (2001), through his interviews with urban African American elementary students, discovered that students preferred, "teachers who displayed caring bonds and attitudes toward them, and teachers who establish community- and family-type classroom environments" (p. 131).

Several interviewees' remarks demonstrated how they cared for their students. Pete is a Philadelphia high school ESL teacher who describes the importance of caring for students: "It doesn't matter what good content you have, or what good curriculum you have, or what exciting lessons you have; if you don't care about students and they know that, you don't have a chance to get to them." Several of Pete's students are refugees who experience the added stress of attempting to adapt to a hostile community and school environment in Philadelphia while living with the psychological scars of surviving a war in their native lands. Pete explains how he develops a classroom community: "I like to create a friendliness and kind of security and belonging that has been my focus above the academic stuff. The academic stuff is there, but that can't happen unless students feel safe, valued, and secure." Pete creates this safe place by spending the first few weeks of the school year engaging students in social games and establishing school-to-home relationships to build trust between the school and students' families.

Adrienne, a Los Angeles high school English teacher whose students are primarily African American, indicated, "I do a lot of hugs—I use body language. I rarely raise my voice. I treat them with respect. I'm friendly, but not their friend."

The importance these urban teachers placed on developing caring relationships demonstrates their willingness to respond in a manner that represents a cultural responsiveness to their students. From these teachers' views, the development of trusting and respectful relationships with their students was critical to successful urban teaching.

Being Assertive and Acting with Authority

> I think my strong personality comes through to my students, which says, "You're here to learn, and this is what you're going to do." If students don't seem to understand that, then I contact their parents right away and let them know I went to school here when I was a child. I'm not asking them [students] to fly out windows. I don't ask them to do anything I wouldn't ask my own children to do.

These comments are from Anita, a Philadelphia middle school teacher, who has taught in this school for the past 25 years. Anita identifies students' academic strengths and weaknesses, then demands the kind of effort she knows students can deliver. She acts with assertiveness, recognizing that many of her primarily African American students need this kind of guidance and support. Eleven of the thirteen urban teachers I interviewed described how the assertive behaviors they used were critical in establishing the authority they needed to maintain a business-like learning atmosphere.

The literature on culturally responsive teaching supports teachers adopting an assertive stance with urban students. Weiner (1999) explained that teachers in urban schools need to develop a *moral authority* to be successful:

> Urban teachers' primary source of control is their moral authority, which rests on the perception of students and parents that the teacher is knowledgeable about the subject matter, competent in pedagogy, and committed to helping all students succeed, in school and life. (p. 77)

Delpit's views (1995) support Weiner's beliefs in her description of the expectations of many African American students:

> Black people often view issues of power and authority differently than people from mainstream middle-class backgrounds. Many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics. In other words, "The authoritative person gets to be a teacher because she is authoritative." Some members of middle-class cultures, by contrast, expect one to achieve authority by the acquisition of an authoritative role. That is, "The teacher is the authority because she is the teacher." (p. 35)

Urban teachers must explicitly demonstrate assertiveness and establish authority through their verbal exchanges with students. Delpit (1995) noted that urban children expect more direct verbal commands than most suburban or rural students. She explained that urban students may ignore commands that are phrased and expressed like questions rather than as direct commands. Wilson and Corbett (2001) added that urban teachers should have expectations that are clearly stated, should accept no excuses from students, and should immediately deal with inappropriate behaviors.

The urban teachers I interviewed indicated a use of an assertive demeanor and acted with authority in the classroom. For instance, Polly, a Chicago teacher in a specialized high school for adolescents who have failed academically in their neighborhood schools, describes her management style as,

> Tough love—I use it with students and teachers. I tell students, "I'm here to help you. I'm not going to let you slide! You're not going to get away with acting the wrong way or not doing the work." We use very structured routines here. Students know what to expect down to every little detail.

Colette, from a Philadelphia high school, provides this advice for urban teachers:

> I think somebody that really wants to be an urban teacher has to have heart; but they have to have chutzpah, too. You can't come in here all soft-voiced and meek and mild. They're going to eat you up and spit you out. And those kids can sense whether you're afraid of them or not. I said in a joking manner, while I was wearing a Burger King crown one day, "I'm the queen in here!"

These urban teachers demonstrate assertiveness through establishing and making clear a set of academic expectations for students; enforcing rules, policies, and behavioral expectations; and contacting care givers as a strategy for garnering support for their efforts. Their assertive style of communicating with students also demonstrates their confidence in asking for and receiving students' cooperation.

Communicating Effectively with Students

Congruent communication between students and teachers is critical to the success of urban teachers in responding to students' cultural and ethnic needs. Urban educators must be aware of specific verbal and nonverbal communication styles that affect students' ability and motivation to engage in learning activities. Listening is one of the most powerful means of establishing effective communication patterns with students. Colette, from Philadelphia, frequently has students visit her room during their study halls and lunch periods to chat with her. She explains the interactions:

> I'll listen to them. A kid told me, "I can tell you anything." I don't have any children and these teenage males want to talk to me about personal stuff. Why are they telling me? Don't they have anyone at home to talk to? I think it's just another indicator that they feel comfortable. I think they know I care about them.

Differences in communication styles can affect the quality of relationships between teachers and African, Hispanic, and Native American students. Gay (2000) noted that some African Americans prefer a social interaction style referred to as "call response," in which students may speak out loud while the teacher is speaking as a response to her/his comments. These remarks are meant as acknowledgments of agreement or perhaps concerns about teachers' comments rather than as rude disruptions or demonstrations of disrespect. Gay explained,

> African Americans "gain the floor" or get participatory entry into conversations through personal assertiveness, the strength of the impulse to be involved, and the persuasive power of the point they wish to make, rather than waiting for an "authority" to grant permission. (p. 91)

Obidah and Manheim Teel (2001) explained that when educators react negatively to call response behaviors it may accentuate strained relationships between students and teachers. Adrienne describes how she responds to the oral discourse of her African American high school students from Los Angeles: "Conversation is their primary priority. It's so unconscious. They are from very verbal environments. I find that they can handle side discussions and engage in the main discussion at the same time. They're not talking to be disruptive." Recognizing this communication characteristic can help urban teachers develop instructional activities that build on these verbal interactions instead of being disrupted by them.

Recognizing other communication patterns among diverse learners is important for providing meaningful learning activities. Some nationalities of Asian American students, for example, may avoid correcting fellow students' verbal mistakes, or avoid responding in a competitive manner in class discussions or recitations. Gay (2000) explained that these students may be influenced by "traditional values and socialization that emphasize collectivism, saving face, maintaining harmony, filial piety, interdependence, modesty in self-preservation, and restraint in taking oppositional points of view" (p. 105). It is clear that the competitive instructional processes that often dominate American classrooms may be unsettling for many immigrants.

Second language learners who are recent immigrants tend to be relatively quiet during class as they attempt to learn English through listening to other conversations rather than by speaking themselves (Cary, 2000). This lack of response may be troubling for some teachers; however, an acceptance of this behavior combined with the use of student collaborative learning experiences may better fit the needs of urban students.

Several of the teachers I interviewed mentioned that immigrant students needed opportunities for socialization within instructional activities to promote and encourage the development of their English. Teachers of second language learners were particularly conscious of students' needs for student-to-student verbal interaction. For example, Lisa, a Los Angeles primary grades teacher, uses class time to permit her immigrant Mexican American students to settle disputes with their friends:

> They're always into arguments with each other. I use conversation to get them to think about their behavior and to learn to negotiate—even with me on certain issues. I expect them to talk. That's how they learn the language.

Pete, who teaches high school ESL students, describes an activity he implemented:

> When you're learning language, you have to allow students to speak it. This year we did a unit on fables, and the students wrote and illustrated them. Then we invited kindergarten students in as judges, and my students performed their fables in front of them.

Developing a mutually respectful relationship with students requires considerable knowledge of their communication styles—both verbal and nonverbal. Recognizing the differences, responding as a listener, and designing instructional activities that reflect students' needs are critical to a productive classroom learning environment.

Conclusion

Managing students in a way that creates a smoothly operating learning environment involves a series of highly fluid and dynamic teacher actions. The 13 teachers I interviewed demonstrate an awareness of several management principles required to create cooperative and academically productive classrooms in urban schools. The development of a comfortable learning environment for urban teachers often overpowers the use of effective curricular and instructional strategies in influencing students' growth. Wilson and Corbett (2001) identified the value of attending to these concerns: "Classroom environment differences had little to do with gradations of individuals' acquisition of knowledge or with nuances in the content covered; instead, environmental characteristics determined whether the majority of students learned anything at all" (p. 42).

In writing of culturally responsive teaching, educational theorists have provided educators with specific strategies for addressing the learning profiles and academic needs of diverse students (Brown, 2002; Cary, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Weiner, 1999). Urban student bodies reflect great variations in

culture, ethnicity, social and emotional health, and socioeconomic conditions. Attempting to meet urban students' needs requires that teachers develop an awareness of and explicitly respond to their ethnic, cultural, social, emotional, and cognitive characteristics.

These 13 urban teachers create caring classroom communities by showing a genuine interest in each student. They gain student cooperation by being assertive through the use of explicitly stated expectations for appropriate student behavior and academic growth. And these teachers demonstrate mutual respect for students through the use of congruent communication processes. These three principles are effective classroom management techniques that provide urban students with opportunities for academic success.

Note

1. Some of the data cited in this article are from the author's book, *Becoming a Successful Urban Teacher* (2002), published by Heinemann and the National Middle School Association.

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