

Teaching in Urban Schools: Eleven Principles Toward Effective Outcomes

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For most of the past decade, we have been working on various research projects focused on the academic and behavioral success of urban learners, with a particular emphasis on reducing special education and disciplinary referrals for minority (especially African American male) students. With varying degrees of success, our work has led us to the observations articulated in this article. Although not novel and certainly expressed elsewhere in different forms by other authorities (e.g., Association for Effective Schools, 1996), we also decided to publish these principles as applied classroom strategies: *Teaching Urban Learners* (Cartledge & Lo, 2006). We described 11 elements we found to be true of those schools that are most effective in reducing special education and disciplinary referrals for urban learners.

1. School leaders are educational experts. We obtained the most favorable results in schools where leaders recognized what needed to be done to improve pupil learning and were resourceful in providing the requisite personnel, training, support, and materials. Student academic and social growth were given top priority by these leaders, who were fearless in regard to making changes.

2. The curriculum and instructional program reflect the needs of the targeted population. Some urban schools observe the same failure pattern year after year (e.g., 50-75 percent of students begin kindergarten without the literacy skills needed for reading success), yet the staff persist in teaching in the same way, thereby obtaining the same results (i.e., extensive student failure). A modest change in the kindergarten classroom curriculum, consisting of greater

emphasis on phonemic/phonological awareness with corresponding intensive instruction for those at greatest risk, made substantial differences in reading readiness for these learners.

3. Instructional staff are committed and well-prepared. Our experience convinced us that good urban teachers are well-prepared and confident; they maintain a “can do” attitude, they believe in the inherent worth of their students, and they help to develop a school community centered on the students’ needs. Committed teachers not only participate in professional development, they also permit themselves to be closely supervised and “coached” to develop requisite skills. We also found that paraprofessionals could be trained to deliver critical supplementary instruction to children with skill deficits.

4. Prevention is emphasized. Early learning is extremely important, and the failure to intervene at the earliest grades may result in lost opportunities that cannot be recaptured, even with later interventions. Every effort needs to be taken to make sure that kindergarteners and first graders are provided with a rigorous instructional program with the most qualified teachers and staff. Prevention efforts also need to continue through the later grades, making certain that learning and behavior problems do not develop and that disciplinary or special education referrals are minimized. Our preliminary findings support the position that efforts made toward prevention in the early years are most likely to pay off later on.

5. Teaching has a sense of urgency. Urban students who begin school in the deficit position, with limited literacy experiences, are not likely to have the same learning advantages as more privileged learners; hence, the ever widening achievement gap. Time is of the essence for these students. Instruction needs to be intensified at the earliest grades, and this pace needs to be maintained to ensure that students are at or above grade level by the end of each grade. Students must be taught directly, they must be taught immediately, and they must be taught more, not less.

6. *Academic interventions are effective and produce high academic engagement.* We heartily endorse the importance of well-researched and validated teaching methods that produce high rates of student academic engagement. We emphasized active student response and progress monitoring in our reading and behavior interventions, with resulting improvements in both academic and social behaviors. For reading, we trained school personnel to effectively deliver “*secondary interventions*” such as phonemic awareness instruction, sight word peer tutoring, and repeated readings to supplement the classroom reading instruction as a means to prevent or minimize reading disabilities. Built into these strategies were high rates of pupil responding, often using a peer-mediated format, so that students were constantly responding correctly to the material being taught. Pupil performance measures were collected daily or weekly so that student progress was monitored continuously and instructional adjustments made accordingly. Interventions for social behaviors involved (a) teacher training in classroom management, (b) small group social skill training, and (c) use of functional assessments to implement individualized behavior plans. Similarly, students received ample practice with the targeted skills and close supervision/monitoring of their skill performance.

7. *Instructional decisions in urban schools need to evolve from data based on urban students.* Good instructional programs for urban learners should be derived from data showing the effectiveness of these practices. Ongoing student performance data should be utilized to guide instructional decisions. It was not uncommon for us to observe teachers exercising practices that produce little effect on students’ academic and social skills over time. Too often, teachers were willing to reject strategies, even with supporting research data derived from their own students, simply because the strategies did not support their own preconceived notions of classroom teaching. In every case we used progress monitoring, single-subject designs, or group

designs to show that students benefited from the interventions. These data also were used to adjust interventions for stronger applications. It is imperative that urban educators learn to recognize, value, and implement evidence-based instructional practices.

8. Expectations are high. This is essential for good teaching and learning within urban schools. If teachers and schools have high academic and behavioral expectations of their students, instructional activities will be programmed accordingly. For example, the teacher who specifies that students in his or her first grade class will read and comprehend at least 60 words per minute by the end of the school year will ensure that the curriculum comprises ample oral reading, fluency, and comprehension activities, in order to reach this goal. To maximize pupil learning outcomes, classroom instruction is driven by the goal (i.e., high expectations) rather than dictated by traditional classroom activities.

9. Behavioral interventions are effective. A pervasive and major concern in urban schools is obtaining orderly, socially appropriate behavior. School personnel need to commit to *creating* disciplined environments by implementing approaches that teach children how they are to behave and then reward them accordingly. The emphasis is not on control but rather on helping students grow and become socially competent. Rules are clearly stated, posted, taught, and uniformly reinforced. Behavior management is proactive rather than reactive, catching students' good behavior rather than chasing after inappropriate behaviors. Students feel safe and valued within these schools. We found it just as critical to teach teachers sound principles of behavior as to teach children social skills.

10. Positive collaborative relationships with families exist. Families play a major role in the education of their children, but it must be recognized that impoverished families are at a distinct disadvantage compared to wealthier families. The onus for children's learning must not

weigh heavily on poor families. Families with limited skills or resources will not be as effective in preparing their children for school or in assisting their children in their schoolwork as more affluent parents. Children from impoverished backgrounds come to school with far fewer language/readiness skills than their more affluent counterparts (Hart & Risley, 1999). In our work we found cases of parents (a) who had very limited skills and many who did not read or write in any language (especially English language learners parents), (b) who were too encumbered with daily survival to devote time to teaching academic skills, or (c) who were unaware of how they might foster the readiness/academic skills in their children. Parents who cannot read, for example, are not going to teach their children to read. Urban schools will have to bridge that gap. Teachers must work to improve the options for poor children by providing secondary and tertiary *effective* interventions such as those noted in item 6 and described in our text. Additionally, school personnel should launch effective home-school collaborative projects so that parents can become more active partners in the schooling of their children. Schools will enjoy more respect and responsiveness from urban families as these families see their children making good academic and social progress.

11. Students are affirmed and nurtured. All children have their own strengths, talents, and special interests, and poor, urban students are no exception. Since they may not have many enrichment experiences at home or in their communities, it is important that schools make a deliberate effort to seek out these students from the point of school entry and to nurture their abilities. Teachers need to capitalize on these students' strengths and interests as a means of affirming and motivating them to remain engaged in school.

Urban learners, despite their challenges, can and deserve to learn well. Based on our decade-long research, we endorse the forth mentioned 11 principles as effective urban school

practices to promote the success of urban learners and to prevent and diminish their disproportionate representation in special education and disciplinary referrals. To summarize, important features of such urban schools include leaders as experts, curricula reflecting needs of urban populations, strongly committed personnel, prevention and teaching as top priorities, effective academic and behavioral interventions, high expectations, data-driven decision making, collaboration with families, and affirmation of students' strengths and interests.

References

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