

Taking Off Ideological Blinders: Lessons from the Start of a Study on Effective Teachers in High-Poverty Schools

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For the fifty years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, educators have been trying to improve the education of children of color and children of the poor. Literally hundreds of programs and processes have been applied in schools. These programs have largely been evaluated by fidelity to implementation processes and procedures rather than by actual achievement results. Over the past ten years, several individuals, organizations, and laws have signaled an end to the era of process evaluation by concentrating on measuring results directly. We would count as one of these paradigm-changing events the publication of Lisa Delpit's book, *Other People's Children* (1995), which questioned the results of certain progressive educational methods with African-American children. Organizations such as the Education Trust, Just for Kids, and the National Center for Educational Accountability, and the standards movement have also coalesced to press for more data-driven accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has begun to put the teeth into the accountability movement. It seeks to close the achievement gap by monitoring achievement results.

When looking at the research on high-performing, high-poverty schools and national and state results, we had a question about the inside of the classroom. What are the characteristics of teachers and classrooms with high proportions of children of color and poverty who perform well? We were awarded a grant by the Haynes Foundation to look at teachers who had the highest student performance inside high-poverty schools that were not yet high-performing. The

study is still under way. We are currently looking at 18 teachers in six schools (two elementary, two middle, two high schools), half of which have a high concentration of Latino students and half of which have a high concentration of African-American students.

We chose schools by analyzing achievement test scores (California Standards Test, or CST) of students by teacher over the past three years and creating a ranked list of teachers whose students had achieved the highest results. The study relies on grounded theory and will use observation and interviews to describe the classrooms and the skills and attitudes of the most successful teachers in these schools. While there are a number of studies of high-performing, high-poverty schools there are no studies to our knowledge of high-performing teachers in high-poverty schools that are still low performing.

The first of the six schools in our study is located in a high-poverty community that has had rising achievement test scores over the past few years but, like all schools in our study, still ranks as a low-achieving, high-poverty school. Before we arrived at the school for our first visit, the principal had been informed of the list of the teachers we wanted to see. Upon arrival, we learned that he had informed all but one of them that we would be observing classrooms. With regard to the teacher he had not informed, he said, "You may not want to include her." She had the highest scores of all.

As we went from room to room, the principal recommended another teacher, not on our list, who he believed was one of his best. We agreed to see her and to recheck our calculations. She was, by observational accounts, a very good teacher, but later we found that her scores were significantly lower than our "high-performing" teachers. When we again asked to see the teacher with the highest scores, the principal agreed and told us where to find her room. The teacher ran a tight ship with a lot of fast-paced, direct instruction and questioning strategies. She was very respectful of the students in the classroom, but demanding.

When we got to the car, we immediately began to share our opinions and observations. One of us commented that one of the

teacher's rooms seemed more chaotic than the others and that several students in the room were not on task. The other commented that one teacher didn't leave enough wait time after asking questions. We discussed the principal's hesitance to let us observe his highest performing teacher, until we realized that we were applying our own teaching preferences to our observations just as much as, if not more than, the principal. Even though he had not shared any details as to why he preferred one teacher over another, his favorite was clearly more relational and process-oriented than the highest-scoring teacher. It was then that we decided that we would have to work much harder and more conscientiously to lay aside our own ideological preferences and previous training.

At the next school, we experienced the same phenomenon. The principal hesitated to let us observe the highest-scoring teacher. Aware that she was the highest scorer, he commented that he just didn't know how this was possible, but he agreed to let us see her. This principal made clear to us that his preference was for teachers who embraced a constructivist as opposed to a behavioral approach. Upon observation, it was clear that this teacher was also running a tight ship, using direct instruction, and clearly following the district-required materials. We talked again of our own biases upon leaving and agreed, not only to set them aside consciously, but also to be careful to encourage our entire research team to do the same.

A few weeks later one of us, Poplin, had the opportunity to speak to a group of teacher educators in the state. Two things provoked the ire of a number of the teacher educators. First, teachers wanted to know why we had labeled teachers as "successful" based on student achievement scores. Did we think that education was the same as some standardized test score? Were we going to turn education over to ETS? Isn't it the relationship a teacher has with his or her students that best defines success?

The second set of consternations became apparent as I described the high-achieving teachers in our study as those who use a great deal of direct instruction and appear comfortable with using district-

required materials. These early findings appeared to challenge the ideology that all successful teachers are constructivists, which seems to be the dominant view in the academy, and provoked further consternation among the teacher educators. Dr. Hinman and I must admit, given our own work in education, these preliminary observations are disconcerting to us as well, as can be seen from an overview of our own writings and teachings.

We have learned several lessons from these early experiences in our two-year grant. Though we do not yet know what we ultimately will find, we do know what many people do not want us to find: anything that challenges the current favored ideologies and biases of the academy and most of the profession—namely constructivism and resistance to testing (especially to NCLB). Is it that our own and others' favored ideologies (e.g., process and project approaches to learning, emphases on relationships, and students working cooperatively to solve problems) are not producing the kind of results that will close the achievement gap and thus open up many other opportunities to students who currently live in poverty?

Second, we are left with disturbing questions regarding why middle-class educators so strongly resist achievement measures as a marker for success for "other people's children." These are the same tests that their own children do quite well on. Even if their children and grandchildren did not do well on them, they would find a way to have them privately tutored until they did. None of these educators want their own children not to do well on the SAT. Perhaps the best definition of social justice and accountability in education should be like the golden rule—social justice is when you want for other people's children what you want for your own.

Reference

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children*. New York: The Free Press.

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