Gangstas, Wankstas, and Ridas: defining, developing, and supporting effective teachers in urban schools

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Drawing from three years of research in the classrooms of four highly effective elementary and secondary teachers in South Los Angeles, this article considers theories of teaching in urban contexts by examining effective practices in urban classrooms. It outlines an original framework of five indicators of effective teaching in urban schools and uses examples from practice to illustrate those indicators and their relationship to increased achievement. Finally, it discusses possibilities for better preparation and development of teachers in these areas of their practice.

Introduction

In 2002, I was invited to Los Angeles to design, implement and study a three-year program that would develop and support urban teachers committed to issues of social justice. Drawing from this project, this article considers theories of teaching in urban contexts by examining the classrooms of four highly effective elementary and secondary teachers in South Los Angeles. It outlines an original framework of five indicators of effective teaching in urban schools and uses examples from practice to illustrate those indicators and their relationship to increased achievement. Finally, it discusses possibilities for better preparation and development of teachers in these areas of their practice.

The invitation to conduct this study was extended to me, in part, because of my reputation as an urban high school teacher and athletic coach that had successfully used principles of social justice in the Oakland (CA) public schools for over 10 years. My background as an urban educator guides the way I understand the state of urban schooling, and the classrooms and conversations I shared with the four teachers discussed in this article. I mention this because the perspective of classroom teachers

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is sorely absent from the educational research community, and other university researchers and classroom teachers should know it is possible and important to have the voice of practitioners be heard in discussions about effective teaching.

This idea of social justice pedagogy is broad and sometimes vague. In this article, social justice pedagogy means a set of teaching practices that aim to create equitable social and academic outcomes for students in urban schools. The distinction between an equal education and an equitable education is an important one for social justice educators (Secada, 1989). An equal education implies that everyone gets the same amount of the same thing and is often measured by things that can be counted (i.e. per pupil expenditures, class size, textbooks, percentage of credentialed teachers). Thus, an equal education attempts to provide the same education to everyone, which is not equitable.

An equitable education suggests resource allocation based on context, which would include attention to funding and teachers but in a manner that pays closer attention to the specific needs of a community. An equitable education is better defined as a culturally relevant education (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in that it is designed to address the material conditions of students' lives while maintaining a high level of intellectual rigor. At the same time, an equitable education encourages students to embrace the sociocultural richness of the community as a resource, rather than as a barrier to be overcome. The measurement of an equitable education would require significantly greater attention to qualitative assessments of schools and classrooms to determine the specific needs of the community and how those are being met, or not. As it stands, we have an almost exclusive commitment to quantitative 'equal' assessments through state and national testing and measurement of the allocation of human and monetary resources.

Project background

The project discussed here was designed to provide professional development and support to groups of 6–8 teachers committed to social justice pedagogy. The project began in 2002 with the development of three critical inquiry groups in South Central Los Angeles, two serving secondary (6–12) teachers, and one serving primary (K–5) teachers (see Duncan-Andrade, 2004, 2005, and 2007 for more detailed discussion of the critical inquiry groups). Two or three teachers at three different schools were chosen to participate based on recommendations made by local teacher educators and school leaders. I visited each of these teachers' classrooms to observe their practice and to discuss the possibility of their participation in the inquiry groups. All but one of the teachers agreed to participate. These teachers were then asked to invite 3–5 colleagues that they felt would contribute to and benefit from discussions of social justice pedagogy. Each of the critical inquiry group participants was asked to commit to the group for three years and was given a stipend each year for participating. Two of the three groups met weekly, and the third group met twice per month.

At the end of the second year, four of the participants had distinguished themselves as exceptional urban educators in all the ways we might measure excellent teaching.

Their students were high achievers by traditional standards (test scores, grades, college-going) and by the standards of critical pedagogy (critique of structural inequality and oppression, critical reading of the word and their world, individual and collective agency for social change). The classroom practice of each of these teachers was unique to his/her personality, but in each of their classrooms I consistently witnessed five principles of pedagogy that are the focus of this article.

The study

During the first two years of the project, I observed the practice of the participants through classroom visits, video lesson study, and group discussion. I videotaped and kept comprehensive field notes during inquiry group meetings and classroom visits. In the third year, I continued collecting data during inquiry group meetings and also visited classrooms of the focal teachers every week, kept field notes, collected lesson plans and student work samples, and facilitated debriefing discussions after the visits. Finally, each of the focal teachers participated in extensive formal interviews about his/her teaching practice. These interviews were transcribed and coded for their relationship to the five pillars of effective pedagogy that emerged during my observations of their teaching.

On the surface, these data-collection methods are traditional. However, it is important to note that they were connected to the larger project of supporting and developing the individual practice of over 20 teachers, while also building the reflective and supportive professional culture to sustain this improvement after the project ended (for more on the larger project, see Duncan-Andrade, 2005, 2007). This commitment to giving more to the research site than I took from it is fitting with my previous work that argues for the development of research methodologies that foreground the concept of cariño (Duncan-Andrade, 2006). Sadly, the concept of cariño (caring), which is articulated by Valenzuela (1999) as a central tenet of good teaching, seems to have shot wide of many education researchers working in poor and non-White urban schools. An approach to educational research that emphasizes cariño has also been called action research and described as an intervention for 'emancipatory change' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). The value of this type of critical research is its focus on empowering individuals as agents of meaningful, sustainable change. The direct aim is to positively impact on the material conditions of those involved with the study. By focusing more directly on improving the immediate circumstances, it de-emphasizes the traditional method of searching for empirical truths that can be implemented on a large scale. Instead, it seeks to democratize the tools of research and knowledge creation. This way, when researchers leave, there remains left behind a sense of hope and promise, one that is directly tied to the participants' sense of themselves as capable change agents. This kind of research also aims to leave behind research tools that can be used and reused to continually improve the conditions most in need of attention. This is unique, because traditional research methods leave these tools in the hands of the researchers; so when the researcher leaves, so do the tools to research and, to a large extent, so does the sense of agency.

Theoretical framework

Numerous studies have documented urban educational inequality (Oakes, 1985; Anyon, 1997; NCES, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Kozol, 2005) to which elected officials have responded with policies such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001). NCLB is yet another example of the unfulfilled promise that the public has the right to expect every classroom to be staffed by a 'highly qualified teacher'. Such an expectation is currently unattainable because of three major shortcomings in our dialogues concerning effective educators: (1) we have not clearly defined the core indicators of a highly qualified teacher; (2) we have not clearly established the significance of the urban social context for this definition; and (3) we have failed to develop effective professional supports, school cultures, pre-service training, and educational policies that reflect knowledge of effective pedagogy in urban contexts. These shortcomings offer a challenge and an opportunity for educational researchers to answer longstanding questions about effective teaching. That is, how is it possible that a few teachers are successful in schools where most are failing to reach their students? What are the identifiable strategies and conditions that make these teachers more highly qualified than their counterparts? How can other teachers learn from these successes to develop similarly effective practices?

   Discussions concerning the type of pedagogy that will improve achievement for low-income children of color have been on the rise. This attention to educational reform began to gain momentum in teacher education programs and district-level professional development in the 1980s and early 1990s with the multicultural education discussion (Gay, 1981; Nieto, 1992; Banks, 1994). That work spawned other important investigations into effective teaching practices with poor and non-White youth (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Those efforts have led to increased awareness about what it takes to be an effective educator and have helped teachers and teacher-educators name specific pedagogical theories that are the foundation of good teaching (authentic caring, critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, social justice pedagogy).

Why do some teachers fail where others succeed?

As we begin looking more closely at effective practices in urban schools, we must remember to pay more attention to the process and purpose behind a teacher's pedagogy than to the person carrying it out. An emphasis on people over process can contribute to myths about effective work with urban youth such as we see in popular films like *Freedom Writers*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Coach Carter*. These films have many troubling elements of which I will mention only one—they all feature a protagonist who is portrayed as accomplishing the impossible. Effective work in urban communities requires tremendous commitment and effort, but we must avoid notions that only exceptional people and circumstances allow for success. Rather than putting the work of highly effective urban educators on a pedestal, implying through their stories that they have some mystical gift that allows them to reach

the unreachable, we must work to understand their success. This happens by examining what they do, why they do it, and how they do it (the *purpose* and the *process*). Then, we can better recruit, prepare, and support others with similar commitments.

The teacher-as-hero films and urban-student-up-from-the-ghetto narratives (see Suskind, 1999; Corwin, 2000) rely on moving anecdotes to weave stories that confirm the existence of opportunity for those that have the least. However, they give us little insight into the purpose, process, and pedagogy that drive effective teaching in urban classrooms. The field of urban education lacks sufficient studies of effective pedagogy and its relationship to increased engagement, achievement, and student transformative agency (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). The field began paying closer attention to this gap in the literature in the 1980s, when more educational researchers turned their attention to the impact of culture on the teaching and learning of students of color. While earlier thinkers had pointed out the importance of cultural awareness (Woodson, 1933; Freire, 1970), the idea of a multicultural education movement has really only gained traction in schools of education and teacher training programs in the last two decades. This awareness has led to several in-depth research studies on the impact of the cultural disconnect between teachers and students in low-income and non-White communities (Akom, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). These three studies are particularly valuable because, in addition to their analysis of reasons for pedagogical failure, they also provide grounded examples of successful teaching practices.

In all of these studies, there are similarities between the teachers that are consistently effective. Likewise, there are similarities between the teachers that find themselves regularly facing cultural conflicts with students. Each of the researchers provides an important discussion of the reasons for these differentiated teacher–student relationships. Their work helps us to articulate more clearly a pedagogical theory for low-income youth of color.

Missing from this body of literature are comprehensive studies providing evidence that this pedagogy increases achievement while at the same time providing students with the tools to effectively navigate in and transform the larger society. Akom's (2003) study of the Nation of Islam's cultural and academic support for the seven students in his study provides some evidence of effective pedagogy, but would benefit from further examination of the process behind the effective pedagogy of the Nation of Islam. Delpit's (1995) and Valenzuela's (1999) studies of effective and ineffective teachers of students of color do better jobs of examining the process and application of effective pedagogy. However, they do not provide a clear set of principles across practices that take us beyond descriptions of effective individual teachers.

This article attempts to advance the foundation laid by these types of studies by identifying core principles across practices and linking them to individual student narratives as well as wider patterns of increased achievement. It endeavors to move beyond anecdotal discussions of what works in urban schools by doing an in-depth examination of those pedagogical strategies that work and documenting the social and academic impact they have on students over time. This deeper examination of success is intended to give urban educators and urban teacher-educators more strategic

assistance, as well as to respond to federal policy calling for a definitive position on highly qualified teachers.

The Gangsta, Wanksta, Rida paradigm

Every year policy-makers, university theorists, and educational consultants generate new programs and policies aimed at addressing the struggles of urban schools. They span the spectrum of educational rhetoric from 'back to basics' to 'empowering education'. Many of them are theoretically profound and most of them are severely under-funded. To date, none of them has hit the bull's-eye of educational equity that they set their sights on.

Operating inside of this milieu of urban school reform are three types of teachers: Gangstas, Wankstas, and Ridas. The presence of these three types of teachers maintains a consistent balance in the adult culture of most urban schools. This balance is what I call the Gangsta, Wanksta, Rida paradigm and the maintenance of this paradigm is the reason that achievement results for virtually every urban school serving poor and non-White children can be predicted even before the school year begins. There are rare exceptions to this paradigm, but they are far too rare.

This paradigm describes three types of teachers in schools where failure seems intractable. If we picture school as a balance scale, then on one side of the scale sit the Gangstas. These are teachers that have a deep resentment for most parents, students, and community members and are generally dissatisfied with their job, the school, and the broader community. They aggressively advocate for ineffective and repressive school policies such as sweeping remediation, zero-tolerance discipline policies, and tracking. In staff meetings, these teachers deliberately sidetrack or bully forthright discussions of racism, structural inequalities, and social and economic justice. Gangstas are the worst of our time-honored profession and they are present in virtually every school where students are suffering. Fortunately, they are not the majority of urban teachers.

The second group is the Wankstas. These are the majority of the teachers in urban schools. The expression is a popular cultural reference to a term usually attributed to hip-hop artist 50 Cent. He describes the Wanksta as the person that is always talking about what he/she is going to do, but never delivers. In my paradigm the term is not as disparaging. Wankstas are the result of a natural human instinct: self-protection. Most teachers come to the urban classroom with the full intention of becoming an effective educator. It does not take long before they realize they have been poorly prepared and that they will be poorly supported as a professional if they continue to work in urban schools. This professional disrespect impacts on their belief that they will improve as teachers. The little hope that they maintain resides in their relationships with students. When students are disinterested and sometimes blatantly disrespectful, the majority of teachers begin to lose faith. They find it increasingly difficult to rationalize being hurt—and sometimes humiliated—by youth, while also enduring professional disrespect. They stop believing that they signed up for a lifelong mission to be an agent of change, and they start finding reasons to disinvest and excuses for

their inability to create classrooms where every student learns. They are Wankstas, and not Gangstas, because they still talk about wanting to be able to educate all their students. They are not emotionally invested like Gangstas who spend significant amounts of energy disliking students and the community. Wankstas sit on the middle of the metaphorical balance scale (the fence) and do not tip the school in either direction. Rather than risk caring unconditionally for students who may not return that care, these teachers become emotionally detached from their calling and the outcome of their work. They avoid the emotional risks accompanying the critical self-reflection required of teachers who want to make a concerted effort to change their practice. Instead, they end up blindly following the latest curriculum reforms and student discipline fads. Wankstas, although deeply troubling at one level, also hold promise because they can and will improve if the conditions that support that growth present themselves in a compelling and accessible way (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, 2005).

I refer to the third group of teachers in this paradigm as Ridas. 'Rida' is a popular cultural term that refers to people who can be counted on during times of extreme duress. The term is often referenced in hip-hop with the expression, 'ride or die', meaning that Ridas are people who would sooner die than let their people down. There are almost always a few Ridas in schools where students are suffering but, like Gangstas, they are the exception, not the rule. Ridas are consistently successful with a broad range of students. They risk deep emotional involvement with the great majority of their students and they are sometimes hurt because of those investments. The depth of their relationships with students allows them to challenge students and get notable effort and achievement. Ridas are often uncommitted to the larger school structure because they perceive it as morally bankrupt and hesitate to take on any challenge that would mean time away from their direct service to students. It is often the case that Ridas remain at 'failing' schools because it is the only logical path that they see to work with the young people they care so deeply about while still being able to pay their own bills. Given the right conditions, Ridas hold promise for improving the practice of Wankstas (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, 2005, 2007), and in so doing, for tipping the balance of a school by pulling others off the fence.

The Ridas

Steven Lapu.[1]   Lapu was kicked out of the Los Angeles public schools when he was in high school. A Pilipino man, he grew up active in gang life and experienced many of the social and economic challenges that confront his students. After several years as a teacher's aide in urban elementary schools in Los Angeles, he found a program for ex-gang members that allowed him to enroll as an undergraduate student at California State University, Los Angeles, which ultimately led him to pursue his teaching credential. He had been teaching for six years at Crenshaw High School in South Central Los Angeles when this study began.

Lisa Cross.   Lisa grew up in an upper-middle class family on the East Coast. A White woman from a well-educated family, Lisa had the benefit of a first rate education and

is a graduate of Columbia University. She came to Los Angeles with the intention of using her privilege to disrupt racial and social inequality in the educational system. She had been teaching for four years as a high school English teacher in Lynwood (a city bordering Watts and Compton in South Central Los Angeles) when I asked her to participate in this study.

Erika Truth.   Erika spent much of her childhood in East Palo Alto (EPA), California. During her time there, EPA was reputed to be the murder capital of the country. Erika, a Black woman, found her way into the classroom because of her commitment to social change in Black and Latino communities. A single mother, with a son whp attended the school where she taught, she was acutely aware of the challenges facing children and parents in urban schools. She had been teaching for nine years, and was a fourth-grade teacher at Power Elementary School in Watts (South Central Los Angeles) during this study.

Andre Veracruz.   Andre grew up on the urban fringe of San Diego, attending schools that were heavily populated by recent Mexican immigrants, Pilipinos, and Chicanos. The son of Pilipino immigrants, Andre is the middle child of three. He was a successful student but as a young person often found himself on the margins because he was heavily involved in graffiti art. His ongoing love of 'graf-art' and hip-hop were points of common interest with many of his students, and frequently endeared him to some of his most marginalized students. Andre had been teaching for six years, and during this study he was a fifth-grade teacher at Power Elementary School in Watts (South Central Los Angeles).

Five pillars of effective practice in the Ridas' classrooms

When I began this work, I had an archetypal image of the highly effective urban educator. That image was based largely on my own success as a teacher in urban schools and the fact that many of my colleagues with similar success over the years fit that model. To my great surprise and pleasure, my work with these four teachers in the Los Angeles study expanded my understanding of what works in urban schools and refined my understanding of why it works. I now take the position that there are a variety of people that can be and are effective in urban schools. I also believe that despite the fact that effective teachers can come from various backgrounds (racial, social, economic), they are bound by a set of common principles. In my three years working with the teachers discussed here, I saw five characteristics that were present in all their practices. I explain these characteristics as five core pillars of effective practice. These pillars were in the ideologies and pedagogies of all four of these teachers, but manifested themselves somewhat differently in each person's classroom practice.

What follows is a description of each of the five pillars of effective practice, an example of each pillar from a teacher's practice, and an explanation of the significance of that pillar to the teacher's effectiveness with students.

Pillar No. 1: Critically conscious purpose

The first question I usually ask teachers that I am working with is: 'Why do you teach?' Most teachers respond in one of two ways: (1) I teach because I love kids, or (2) I teach because I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. In separate interviews, these four teachers all responded to this question differently than most teachers, yet their answers were remarkably similar to each other. They said that they teach because they believe their students, specifically low-income children of color, are the group most likely to change the world. They explained this belief by saying that the children most disenfranchised from society are the ones with the least to lose, and thus are the most likely to be willing to take the risks necessary to change a society. This belief that they are teaching young people destined to change the world is vital to the level of seriousness with which they approach their jobs.

I call this a critically conscious purpose because their perspectives were not guided by some romantic vision of changing the world. Instead, they recognized that the students most likely to change the world were also the ones most likely to struggle in a typical classroom environment. They would not be the favorite student, but the bane of the teacher's existence; the agent of change would not be prone to follow the rules, but rather to test the boundaries. To prepare fertile ground for all their students to succeed, particularly the students that would be risk takers, these teachers worked at understanding the history of the communities where they worked and the people that lived there. They had studied, and several had lived, various forms of oppression that helped them formulate critical awareness and analyses of structural and material inequities. This understanding led them away from efforts to create a classroom that mirrored middle-class education. Instead, they worked to develop teaching practices that responded to the needs of poor and working-class children of color. They did this through specific curriculum choices, modes of delivery of that curriculum, and the underlying messages they used to motivate students.

One example evident across their practices was their pedagogical strategy of redefining success for their students. They talked to students about using school as a way to return to their communities, rather than as a strategy for escaping them. They developed curriculum that reflected this possibility. This strategy led to improved learning outcomes measured by traditional means (increased test scores and grades). It also led to student work (writing, presentations, projects) that reflected critical thinking, and a sense of hope and purpose that they could be critical agents of change in their communities.

In Mr Veracruz's fifth-grade class in Watts, he was mandated to use Open Court, a scripted literacy program. Many teachers feel trapped by scripted programs, arguing that it stifles their ability to be creative with curriculum. Mr Veracruz was critical of scripted programs, but felt that too many of his colleagues used them as an excuse to stop planning their lessons creatively. He said:

> Scripted programs are a problem and they should be eliminated, but they are here and I'm tired of hearing teachers use them as an excuse for being uncreative in their lesson planning. Scripted programs are like anything else in this culture of testing, they are either a

crutch for not teaching or they are a set of rules and guidelines that you can manipulate. I don't really have a problem with the key concepts that the scripted curriculum tells me to teach, just like I don't really have a problem with most of the standards I'm supposed to teach. The problem comes when you stop coming up with ways to make those things relevant to kids' lives.

Mr Veracruz's approach to scripted programs reflected his critically conscious purpose for teaching. He expected his students to be able to read and write as well as any student in the country, but he recognized that scripted programs like Open Court are often not designed to reflect the lived experiences of low-income students of color. His response was to remake the assignments so that they taught the same literacy standards while using activities that reflected the lives and needs of his students.

An example of this came when Mr Veracruz was teaching the Open Court unit on persuasive letter writing. The prompt in the scripted program asked students to write a letter which convinced the reader that students should be allowed to pick their own teams at recess. Although this might be an issue of immediate relevance to students, the prompt did not reflect the critical literacy skills that Mr Veracruz hoped to develop in his students. He believed literacy training should prepare students to combat the injustices of their present lives as school-aged children in Watts, and the likely injustices they would confront as they grew older. In place of the Open Court prompt, Mr Veracruz created an assignment that had students write a persuasive letter to the principal. The project called for each student to identify an issue of concern at the school and to write a persuasive letter to the principal explaining the problem and how fixing it would improve the quality of education at the school. As part of their letter, students were also required to provide possible solutions that the principal could pursue to solve the problem that the student had identified—some of the suggestions regarding school protocol for substitute teachers were implemented by the principal.

This may seem like a small modification to a very traditional writing assignment, but it is significant. Over time, these modifications set the tone for the classroom culture that Mr Veracruz was building, one which reflected a critically conscious purpose for teaching. It developed a classroom culture that normalized attention to historical and persistent suffering and injustices in the lives of his students, the Watts community, and other communities locally and around the world. Beyond that, it built a culture of responsibility whereby students were prepared to understand that their education was training them to respond to injustice.

The impact of this training was revealed just a few days after students had turned in final drafts of their persuasive letters to the principal. Mr Veracruz was pulled out of his class to do some Open Court training with other faculty members. A substitute teacher was assigned to his class and the experience was so negative for the students that several of them reported back to Mr Veracruz that they intended to write letters expressing their displeasure with the substitutes at the school and the fact that their teacher was pulled out during instructional time.

Mr Veracruz agreed to support their project and asked the students if they thought other students around the district experienced similar frustrations. Students concurred

that the problem was bigger than just their school and decided to address their letters to the superintendent, whom they called 'the boss of the whole district'. Almost every member of the entire class wrote letters to the superintendent. One student, Anna,[2] was selected by the class to represent their interests at a statewide Californians For Justice (CFJ) rally for educational justice that was held in Los Angeles. Speaking to a rally of several hundred people, she read the following letter:

> Good Morning. I am ---, and I am from ---. I am a student body Vice President, and today I am going to stand up for my community. Today, I am here to talk about one of the issues of not only my school but in other schools in my community where I live. I am from Watts located in South Central Los Angeles.
>
> A major problem in our school is our substitutes. We have lots of bad subs in our class. Subs disrespect us students all the time. They have called us animals and shout at us. They say we don't have privileges and make us write standards. I am sorry to use this as an example but one of the subs told us girls that if we behaved bad our dad would touch and hit our privates. Why is it that there aren't any good subs at our school? I believe that they think this is a bad area and that we don't behave good. They always shout at us because they don't have patience and respect for us. We always get subs because my teacher gets pulled away every Tuesday and more. I think good subs are afraid to come to our school.
>
> Finally, at our school the focus is on taking tests like the CAT6 and on Open Court. Programs like Open Court are boring, but the school makes us do it. We do not have other types of subjects like art, science, music, and dance. I think they should let us learn different things for example we should learn more arts. Without having good teachers, school would not be fun to come to.
>
> These are only a few of the problems that happen in our school and schools like us. We kids deserve better and that's why I am here today. Thank you for listening to me.

Perhaps the most important question students ask teachers is, 'Why do I have to learn this?' Far too many of us fall back on stock responses like 'Because I said so' or 'Because it will give you a better future'. Over time, our inability to answer this question meaningfully must take its toll on the faith of most students that what they are learning matters in the larger scheme of things. Ridas, such as Mr Veracruz, are able to answer this question in more profound ways. They explain to students that what they offer is part of a path to freedom—if they learn the skills they are being taught, they will be in a better position to think and act critically for themselves and for their community, two essential components of freedom. This does not mean that the teachers ignore the potential of these skills to provide access to college and other opportunities in the future, but they do not rest the relevance of their lessons on the false rhetoric of the bootstrap theory. Neither do they pretend that their teaching is politically neutral, nor do they act as if they have a panacea for ending injustice. Instead, Ridas build intellectually rigorous lessons that are relevant to the real and immediate conditions of their students' lives so that students can think and respond critically for themselves. They share with students their hope that they will become the agents of change that are too few today. This kind of teaching purpose, hopeful but not naive, is likely to produce well-educated young people prepared to fight for a more just world.

Pillar No. 2: Duty

The second trait I saw across the practices of these teachers was a distinctive sense of duty to students and the community. Their sense of duty reflected Carter G. Woodson's (1933) distinction between persons that fashion themselves as leaders and persons that perceive themselves as responsible for serving the community. Woodson writes:

> You cannot serve people by giving them orders as to what to do. The real servant of the people must live among them, think with them, feel for them, and die for them…. The servant of the people, unlike the leader, is not on a high horse trying to carry the people to some designated point to which he would like to go for his own advantage. The servant of the people is down among them, living as they live, doing what they do and enjoying what they enjoy. He may be a little better informed than some of the other members of the group; it may be that he has had some experience they have not had, but in spite of this advantage he should have more humility than those whom he serves. (p. 131)

Similar to Woodson's 'servant of the people' these teachers had a level of commitment to their teaching that reflected the fact that they saw themselves as members of the communities where they taught. This often led them to invest in students that many other teachers had already written off as hopeless because they saw those students as members of their community that they could not simply disregard.

There was nothing extraordinary about how these teachers' sense of duty played itself out. These teachers were not miracle workers. Simply put, they found success with a broad range of students because they were willing to grind it out with them. This was reflected in the following series of traits that I saw in each of one of them:

- They jumped at the chance to work with 'challenging' students.
- They were risk-takers with students, with their curriculum, and with their pedagogy.
- They described their access to students as a privilege, rather than as a 'right' of their profession.
- They genuinely wanted to be at the school and with students, even when their school attacked them personally or the broader society belittled their profession.
- They were not afraid of the community and consequently built relationships with parents, siblings, families, and the broader community.
- They described teaching in urban schools as 'a way of life' rather than as a job.
- They associated their teaching with 'the struggle' for human dignity and justice.
- They described being a teacher as 'who I am, not what I do'.

In an interview about their experiences with teachers, John and Michelle, two of Mr Lapu's twelfth-grade students, referenced his commitment to being a part of the community. They contended that this gave him a level of understanding of his students' lives that differentiated him from most teachers. When these two students were asked what teachers should do to be more effective with students, they consistently referred to Mr. Lapu's practice as a model:

John: I feel that teachers need to talk about more realistic things, rather than just going by what the book tells you to teach us. Because most of the time these

teachers are up there talking about all that other stuff … you'll be in a zone thinking about your own problems that's happening out in the streets while they're talking about some stuff that doesn't really concern you. But when a teacher hops on your level then you can really open up, like 'dang', like get stuff off your chest. It might help solve problems that you're going through.

Michelle: Yeah, like Mr Lapu, he asks us questions, like: 'what's going on in you guys's life, or what happened to you guys, or do you have any experiences that can relate to our lesson?'

J: But, most teachers don't even try to do that though. Most of these teachers, they livin' way out here in Beverly Hills and the Valley. Keep it real, Mr Lapu is the only person I know that stay in the 'hood, where I done been walkin' down the street and just seen Mr Lapu and it's just like 'hey, what's up?' So he knows what goes on around here.

M: Yeah, a lot of our other teachers teach us about out here through their stereotypes. So, it's hard for us to respect them because they lookin' at it negatively and we lookin' like well I live here and it's not as bad as you think it is. And once we find out that they don't live out here, or they live in a 'better' area, then I can't honor the things that you're saying. Because number one you're down talkin' me and you're down talkin' my environment, which means you're basically disrespecting my whole history because everybody that I know has been living out here. That causes a major problem as well.

Only Mr Lapu lived in the community where he taught. However, two of the other teachers were saving money to purchase a home in the communities where they taught, and the fourth lived in a community with a similar demographic to the one where she taught.

The choice to live in the community does not guarantee success for teachers but, as John noted, it does help teachers to 'know what goes on' and can create an added dimension to their connection with the students and their families. Regardless of whether they lived in the community or not, all of these teachers were committed to a consistent presence in the school community and in the lives of the students and their families. They made deliberate efforts to stay late in the community on school nights, to attend community events on weekends and in the summers, to know where their students lived, and to know the parents of their students. They described their decision to become members of the communities where they taught as part of a commitment to solidarity with their students, as opposed to empathy. In that sense they reflected a sense of duty compatible with Woodson's argument that to truly serve people one must remain connected to them and humble among them.

Pillar No. 3: Preparation

The four teachers discussed here were always at, or near, the top of their schools in traditional measures of student success, despite having (and many times accepting in mid-year) students that their colleagues had forced out of their classrooms. Even though these achievement patterns suggest they were already excellent pedagogues, each of these teachers spent a tremendous amount of time preparing for their classes. I mention this because of the not-uncommon notion that good teachers can put it on

autopilot because they have their curriculum and classroom management mastered. These teachers dispelled that myth. They were constantly preparing for their practice. Their intense commitment to preparation gave them expectations of success that are rare in schools where achievement is so low. The time they spent preparing their lessons and units fostered a contagious level of excitement, passion, and belief in the curriculum when they delivered it to students.

When I asked them about the amount of time they spent preparing for their teaching, none of them could quantify it. They commented on the fact that they could not really identify a time when they were not preparing for their teaching in some way or another. They each recounted stories about stumbling upon a film, book, artifact, or teaching technique that they collected for later use, even during time they had marked out as 'time away from teaching'. This constant preparation to improve their practice harkens back to their comments about their sense of duty to the profession: 'teacher is who I am, not what I do'.

When I asked from where their commitment had come, several of them referenced teachers in their past that had modeled this same professionalism. They noted how those teachers stood out among their colleagues because of the quality of the material that they taught, the care with which they related it to the lives of their students, and the passion with which they presented it. Ms Truth mentioned the fact that these teachers had taught her that 'the profession of teaching was an art, a time-honored craft that demanded the respect of the teacher and the students.'

After spending three years with these teachers, I came to realize that there was virtually no part of their teaching that was not subject to revision or total discard. Regardless of whether they were teaching the same grade or subject the next year, they would rethink curriculum units from top to bottom before re-teaching them. They also constantly sought professional development opportunities to expand their knowledge, particularly in areas where they felt they were lacking, and regularly solicited new pedagogical tools from colleagues.

One example of the intensity with which even the most mundane elements drew their attention is the bookmark that Ms Cross developed for her ninth-grade English class. Her class, labeled as a part of the 'regular' track, comprised nearly 60% second-language students, several of whom were new immigrants. Among a variety of pedagogical strategies for teaching literacy, Ms Cross developed a bookmark that accomplished three important things: (1) it permitted students to learn key literary and analytical terms, (2) it allowed them to read at a pace that they could successfully maintain, and (3) it allowed her to monitor each student's progress and continually raise the bar on them. She had developed a literacy tool to address one of the most fundamental and ignored principles of teaching and learning: students benefit most from pedagogy that permits some level of an individualized educational plan (see Vygotsky, 1978).

Ms Cross's approach should not be confused with remedial programming that permits success through the lowering of expectations. The bookmark she developed allowed each student to start from, and progress through, their actual ability level rather than some predetermined age-based standard. To accompany the use of the

bookmark, Ms Cross developed what she called a 'modified literature circle' whereby students chose and purchased their own books (she paid for them herself when her students could not afford to do so). She made books with a range of difficulty available for each theme they were studying. Each student was allowed to choose a book he/she deemed appropriate for his/her reading level (sometimes after some prodding to 'choose more wisely') and then students used the pacing section of their bookmark to set reading goals for themselves. Some students would have to complete the entire book by the end of the unit in order to receive an 'A', while other students might only need to complete half their book to receive the same grade. She pulled this off without rebellion, in large part, because she paid special attention to developing a class culture that challenged schooling norms that reward students for competing against their fellow students. Instead, she fostered a culture that normalized education as a process whereby you compete only against yourself. What remained the same for every student was the list of vocabulary and literary terms they were exposed to and were expected to connect to the reading and their lives.

The list of literary terms was extensive and could be found in any Advanced Placement preparation guide—terms like foreshadowing, protagonist and personification.

When I pressed Ms Cross on how she was able to get students to learn these terms when so many of her colleagues, even those working with eleventh- and twelfth-grade students, argued that such terms were beyond the ability level of this group of students, she replied:

> Terms are not difficult to teach. The question, really, is will you take the time to make the things you teach relevant to students? The terms I teach are present in students' lives every day. But, most people try to teach them strictly by using textbooks, worksheets, or the literature. I teach them using life and then it's much easier for students to connect them to what they are reading.

In all, Ms Cross developed a four-panel (three-page) bookmark that included literary terms (antagonist, setting), aesthetic criticism terms (simile, metaphor), social criticism terms (hegemony, exploitation), active reading guidelines (directions for highlighting and using post-it notes) reader's checklist (student's pacing guide for reading), and self-evaluation (student's reflection on his/her growth as a reader). The bookmark worked for most of her students. All her students, even those who struggled mightily, left the class stronger as readers and writers, and well prepared for tenth-grade English. This was not the case in the majority of other ninth-grade English classes around the city. Still, each year Ms Cross modified the bookmark and the literary circles based on student feedback, self-critique, and feedback from colleagues.

Pillar No. 4: Socratic sensibility

Socrates is often credited with having said that the wise person knows that he/she knows nothing. What he meant, of course, is that the wise person recognizes that he/she always has more to learn. Cornel West (2001) has argued for the development of this lifelong commitment to learning through the development of what he calls a

'Socratic sensibility'. West describes the person with this sensibility as someone that understands both Socrates' statement that 'the unexamined life is not worth living' (Plato, 1966, p. 38a) and Malcolm X's statement that the 'examined life is painful' (West, 2001).

The teachers in this study lived out this Socratic sensibility by striking a delicate balance between confidence in their ability as teachers and frequent self-critique. As with Ms Cross and her bookmark, these teachers were constantly reflecting on their daily practice and their relationships with students in an effort to get a little bit better each day. To aid in this process, they encouraged all types of visitors (parents, teachers, future teachers, and university professors) to their classrooms. They were particularly open to those that were willing to give them critical feedback about their practice. However, it is important to note that this self-critique did not come across as self-doubt. As Mr Veracruz put it, 'most of the criticisms I get from observers in my class are critiques I have already made of myself. So, I welcome that reminder that although I'm good at what I do, I need to get better. That is what keeps me on top of my game.'

This self-analysis came about, in large part, due to their Socratic sensibility. They understood the challenge implicit in Socrates' advice that 'all great undertakings are risky, and, as they say, what is worth while is always difficult' (Plato, 2003, p. 220). They also understood that to truly embrace the great challenges of teaching in urban schools they had to face the painful part of the examined life to which Malcolm X refers. That is, they understood their duty to connect their pedagogy to the harsh realities of poor, urban communities. An email to me from Ms Truth reveals the great undertaking required of educators who aim to respond to the reality of the conditions of urban life, and the pain that sometimes accompanies self-reflection on that response. She wrote:

> Today was an almost unbearably sad day at school … according to my students (all of which were SOBBING) two young men (black) were sitting in a car yesterday afternoon … some men in a car rolled up, got out and shot one in the eye (his head exploded) there was a 3-month old in the back seat (she was left 'unharmed') the other got out and ran (they call him 'baby' Marcus) the guys ran after him and shot him in the back and then more when he fell … both men dead, the perpetrators got away … the nephew of one is in my class, the brother of the other is in Mr [Randall's] class. This is a close community so word spread pretty rapidly yesterday. For an hour and a half [this morning] the kids all just talked and cried. I felt ill-equipped to handle a crisis like this but, we got through it.… I said as little as possible, I cried with the kids, we all consoled each other, and others began sharing different stories of violence and loss … in the end, I did what I thought (and hope) was best … tried to empower them with the belief that they must work to become the warriors who combat the senseless violence and madness on the streets. I also gave them some 'street lessons': walk against traffic, don't sit in parked cars chillin' with your friends, be vigilant, check your surroundings. We're making cards, and going to send a little money to the families … and the kids all seem to feel a little better … how would you handle this? It looks as if many teachers didn't say or do much … feeling a bit weary today.

Ms Truth's class collected over one hundred dollars for the family. She delivered the money along with several cards expressing their condolences at the funeral of one of

the murdered young men. In most urban schools, there is no formal structure to prepare or support teachers to handle such tragic events. The result is, as Ms Truth mentions, that most teachers avoid or ignore tragedies that go on in the community—these teachers did not.

Pillar No. 5: Trust

The fifth trait I saw while studying these teachers was a distinct commitment to building trust with their students. The fact that trust is important in a teacher–student relationship should not be surprising to anyone. However, it was the unique way that these teachers talked about trust that struck me. During interviews with me, they each described trust similarly to Mr Lapu, who said:

> Many of the teachers I have been around can't understand why students don't trust them. They think of trust as something that is automatic for teachers, like students are just going to trust them because they are in the position of teacher. But, it doesn't work like that. You have to earn it [trust] every day out here. Just because you have a bond with a student today doesn't guarantee that that bond will be there tomorrow if you don't keep working on it. That's just ahistorical. Let's be real here. I represent an institution that represents the state that represents a history of colonialism and repression. Why *would* [emphasis in speech] students trust me? Every day I have to fight against that history. Sure I'm mad about that, but it's not the students' fault and it's not my fault, so I don't take it personally. But, I do recognize that trust is easier to lose than to get.

These teachers understood that government institutions, such as schools, have a negative history in poor and non-White communities. No matter how good their intentions, they were aware that as ambassadors of the institution of school they were connected to that history. This awareness allowed them to be conscious of this obstacle to building trust with students and the community, and also helped them to understand the importance of standing in opposition to school policies that were oppressive, racist, colonialist, and that perpetuate the cycles of inequality.

Evidence of their commitment to earn the trust of their students was clear in every aspect of their teaching, from their curriculum, to their grading, to their classroom management policies, to their pedagogy. However, it is probably best explained through the relationships that they built with their students. As with their sense of duty, their activities were driven by a long-haul commitment to their students and the community, one that did not permit them to give up on a student when his/her transformation was not as rapid as the teacher might like. Their perspective might best be described using one of Lisa Delpit's (1995) book titles; they saw their students as their children, not 'Other People's Children'. Darnell, one of Mr Lapu's students for two years, explained that this type of relationship was the result of pedagogy that prioritized the humanization of students above all else. He said:

> I want to refer to a text [that Mr Lapu had us read], Paulo Freire. I got the book in there [nods toward his bedroom]. I read it all the time. It's basically telling me how you have to educate yourself. A lot of teachers in the school system right now, they practice social reproduction. They catch you off guard because you trust them to teach you. So, I started

teaching myself by reading texts and things like that. In [Mr Lapu's] class we were bonded because we all gave each other a chance to humanize ourselves and let us know each other's stories. We were bonded because after that we looked at each other different.

[Frowning] When somebody looks at me, they say, 'oh, he's a gang-banger'. But, after I told my narrative, I humanized myself and then they looked at me like, 'oh, he's more than a gang-banger. [Darnell], yeah 'cuz smart on hood, but he's smart.' They stopped looking at me as just a gang-banger and they started looking at me as a smart Black man. Which is how I always wanted you to look at me. I don't want you to acknowledge me as a gang-banger, which happened. I want you to acknowledge me as [Darnell].

He [Mr Lapu] helped us humanize each other, and that's how it was. It was beautiful just knowing that my classmate that's sitting right next to me is fighting the same fight that I'm fighting. So, I got his back. That was beautiful, just knowing that we're going through the same shit. From the 'hood to school. When we walk to school, we gotta dodge a bullet like every day. Oh, that's your struggle? Oh, well that's my struggle too. Well let's just handle this right here, so we don't gotta go through this four years from now. We did this because we felt comfortable that he [Mr Lapu] had our back, and that's just all it is.

The construction of a classroom culture that fostered this type of trust among the students and between the teacher and the students was the result of many nuanced parts of their practice. However, in their own ways, they all demonstrated and articulated concrete understanding of two key factors that allowed trust to develop. First, they understood the distinction between being liked and being loved by their students. They did not coddle students, particularly those with whom they had built strong relationships. As Ms Truth explained:

Many of these teachers are so afraid that students won't like them if they discipline them that they end up letting students do things that they would never permit from their own children. They lower their standards and will take any old excuse from students for why they did not do their homework, or why they cannot sit still in class or do their work. Not me. You gotta work in my class. I can be unrelenting at times, probably even overbearing. Oh, I might give a student slack here or there, but most of the time I'm like, 'go tell it to someone else because I'm not trying to hear that from you right now. We've got work to do.'

The line between high expectations and unreasonable demands can be a slippery slope for teachers. But, so is the line between people that we love and people that we like. The people that we love can demand levels of commitment from us that defy even our own notions of what we are capable of. People that we like, but do not love, typically are not able to push the limits of our abilities. Nothing more clearly divides these two groups of people in our life than the level of trust we have in them.

In the case of these four teachers, the move from being liked to being loved did not happen because of the demands they made of students. It happened because of the love and support that accompanied those raised expectations. Sometimes this was simple encouragement, but many times it meant amplifying the personal support given to students. This support took many forms: after-school and weekend tutoring, countless meals, rides home, phone/text messaging/email/instant messaging sessions, and endless prodding, cajoling, and all-around positive harassment. These additional investments of time and money clarified for students that these expectations came with the teacher's recognition that everyone needs help along the way. And when that

help is from someone that loves you, in spite of your shortcomings, you learn to trust that person.

The development of these trusting relationships also resulted in these teachers being indignant about student failure. This was due largely to the fact that they saw the failure of a student as their own failure. At the same time, they never excused students from their responsibility. This seems to me much like the approach successful parents take with their children, and although the relationships will never quite measure up to those of strong parent–offspring bonds, they are remarkably similar.

Implications

The stories of these teachers are inspiring, but what about achievement? Do these pillars actually increase the academic performance of students? The answer is a resounding 'yes'. These teachers were at the top of their schools in many of the ways by which we traditionally measure success (test scores, literacy and mathematics acquisition, grades, attendance, graduation, and college enrollment). However, for me perhaps the most important realization was that they reached this achievement because they focused on raising the human element of educational attainment that most schools pay little attention to measuring—positive self-identity, purpose, and hope.

While NCLB and local educational policy have turned their sights onto quantitative measures of achievement, these teachers focused on the humanizing element of education. They recognized that of all the things we debate in education, there is one fact on which we have relative consensus. From child psychology to pedagogical theory to cognitive theory, our most basic understanding of the necessary conditions for learning suggest that positive self-identity, a sense of purpose, and hope are critical prerequisites for achievement. The test score fetish of the high-stakes era has turned us away from prioritizing these measures of effective teaching, even though gains in these areas are the key to raising test scores.

To be sure, it is much easier to develop a test preparation program in a corporate lab than to pinpoint the elements of pedagogy that humanize students. Developing effective urban educators is hard work and it is certainly not as cost-effective as scripted curriculums, test prep manuals and one-day trainings—as long as the students that have always failed under high-stakes testing continue to fail. The correlation between high parent income and success on achievement tests is well documented, as are the seemingly intractable relationships between race and test scores. It seems a plausible conclusion that no small part of those gaps is the result of the fact that most successful students enter school with a positive self-identity, a clear purpose for attending school, and a justifiable hope that school success will be rewarded in the larger society. For most low-income children, particularly low-income children of color, there is little in the history of school or the broader society that would concretely justify any of those three beliefs. There will always be exceptions, that young person who finds cause for hope in the system, and that is sadly all we find today in urban schools—exceptions.

I am confident that this study could have been done in any successful teacher's classroom with similar results. I find myself concluding that I have discovered nothing particularly groundbreaking about effective teaching in urban schools. It is hard work and there are no shortcuts. We will never develop some ideal instructional program that can be exported from classroom to classroom. In the end, programs that come out of boxes do not work. Great teaching will always be about relationships and programs do not build relationships, people do. The truth of the matter is that we have the know-how to make achievement in urban schools the norm, as it is in high-income communities. There are successful teachers in every school, even where failure is rampant. We should be spending more time figuring out who they are, and studying what they do and why it works. This research should guide teacher-credentialing programs and school-based professional support structures so that more teachers can develop those effective practices.

When I began this study I had been an urban classroom teacher for 10 years. At the outset, I was deeply pessimistic about the future of the profession and our ability to meet the challenges confronting us in urban schools. After this study, I am tentatively hopeful. This hope comes from the fact that almost every teacher that I worked with over those three years (over 150 teachers in all) demonstrated most, if not all, of these five pillars. Given the right professional support, the majority of these urban teachers have the potential to develop into exceptional teachers.

The well-documented changing of the guard in teaching (NCTAF, 2003) will usher in upwards of one million new teachers, mostly into urban schools, within the current decade. This brings with it an unprecedented opportunity to swing the pendulum toward educational equity. We can, if we so desire, invest heavily in refocusing our efforts to recruit, train, and develop urban educators that are committed to being Ridas. Studies such as this one suggest that we can know what makes effective urban educators. We can name the characteristics of their practices. We can link those characteristics to increases in engagement and achievement. If we fail to significantly invest in the support and development of these characteristics in this new wave of teachers, as we have with their predecessors, we will almost certainly end up as the nation that James Baldwin foreshadowed over 45 years ago:

> What it comes to, finally, is that the nation has spent a large part of its time and energy looking away from one of the principal facts of its life…. Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began…. If we are not capable of this examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations. (Baldwin, 1961, p. 99)

And if we fail, let us be clear that it will not be for lack of know-how, but for the lack of determination to provide a quality education for all our young people.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
2. Pseudonyms are used for all students.

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