
I Never Promised You a Rose Garden

Andrea remembers the day it happened. "I was sitting in geography class. I was a sophomore. The day had started out really bad. My mother was on my case for my bad grades. My teacher was handing back our tests. When he got to me, he threw the test on the desk. All I saw were the red marks. 'Your kind,' he said, 'don't deserve a desk.' I didn't even hear what else he had to say. I snapped. Just snapped when I heard that 'your kind.' It was the last straw. I didn't say anything when he ignored my raised hand or all the times he pretended I wasn't there. When I snapped, I just glared and said in my meanest voice, 'Mr. Rossi, just what is it about me you can't teach?'"

THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN EDUCATION

Andrea's angry question brings into the open the issue central to teaching and learning in urban classrooms: the nature of what teachers bring with them in dealing with their diverse student populations. Teachers in the affluent suburban schools may have well-equipped classrooms and laboratories, extensive counseling, and tutorial services in place, up-to-date textbooks, community support programs, extensive extracurricular programs, and cutting-edge technology at their disposal. These are what contribute to giving suburban students the "achievement advantage" and contribute to their superior performance.

On the other hand, many urban teachers struggle to keep aging walls graffiti free, work with textbooks bound together with tape, and labor to keep students safe from wayward bullets and drug-dealing miscreants. More often than not, the urban

teacher who cares about making a difference buys her own supplies, counsels troubled children, resolves intense physical and verbal conflicts, and invents ways to include special challenge students for whom no other resources are provided. The urban students' lack of opportunity to have these resources contributes to their "achievement disadvantage" and the widening of the achievement gap. Working in an ER trauma center or air traffic control tower may seem like a dreamland compared to teaching and learning inside an urban classroom.

REFORM EFFORTS

Aided by the national reform movement begun with *A Nation at Risk*, there has been a plethora of organized reform efforts in urban school districts. Legislators, parents, teachers' organizations, professional educators' organizations, community agencies, and universities have joined the movement. From these efforts have come national standards, alternative and charter schools, site-based management, community service agency-school collaboration, public and parental engagement, teacher empowerment, choice plans, professional development schools, financial rewards for school-based improvement, lengthened school days, state takeovers, and privatization. In some cases, there even have been attempts to improve the resources available for teaching and learning that urban schools regularly lack.

This book is not about any of those efforts. It makes no judgment about which of these efforts help or don't help urban students. It also is not about the sociology of the urban students' community and its impact on student learning. These are givens that others address better than the material in this book. Rather, this book addresses the great, unforgotten, and often ignored issue of high-quality instruction in the urban classroom that can best attack the achievement gap and provide urban students with at least some of the means to share in the achievement advantages of their more affluent peers

Most effective teachers and most effective students are made, not born. Some students may be born with more natural ability than others to calculate, to read, to interact with others, or to excel at sports, but most learn how to succeed through the sweat of their brows and the sweat of their teachers' brows. In like manner, some teachers are born with more ability to motivate learning than others, but most improve how they teach through hard work and advanced study. Thus just as all children can learn to function in school more successfully through their own intense work and the skills of their teachers, so too all teachers can learn to teach more skillfully. Every basketball player is not Michael Jordan, but Michael Jordan didn't become a great player without developing his talents; every person who writes a poem is not a Maya Angelou, but Maya Angelou didn't become a great poet by neglecting her natural talent. Basic ability in children is not a limit, but a starting place. The same is true of teachers.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

This book focuses on research conducted in the last 20 years that shows what teachers can do to add new knowledge and skills to their repertoire of teaching talent so that they can help students increase their own talents and achievements.

What happens with instruction in the urban classroom does not negate the importance of those reform efforts, which in fact help make productive teaching more likely; good instruction alone will not save our schools. However, all of the reform efforts are tangential to the central issue: the need for 100 percent attention to, and improvement of, instruction. Instruction that is connected to a meaningful curriculum and sound assessment is the most essential ingredient. Without improvement in instruction, there will be no improvement in student achievement and no development of student talents.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS: MORE THAN WORDS

Most of the research on student achievement asserts that improvement begins with the expectations of the classroom teacher. This book is not addressed to teachers in urban classrooms who believe that there is nothing they can do to improve their students' learning performance. Please don't scoff at the seriousness of the issue. The fact that such beliefs permeate urban schools is not to be minimized. For instance, at a recent meeting of high school mathematics teachers from a large urban system, in a room dominated by a bulletin board imprinted with the motto "We Believe All Can Learn—So Go for It," the responses to the question "How do we get more than 60 percent of our students to pass the state finals?" illustrate how subtle and deep are the low expectations held by the teachers:

"Get their parents involved."

"Get them to do more homework."

"Weed them out sooner."

"You can't teach lazy folks."

"Most belong in special education."

"They can't think."

"It's a dead-end street."

"They don't care. They don't have important goals."

"They're not like the students we used to have."

These comments, delivered by a mixture of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian teachers, experienced and skilled in the teaching of mathematics, show frustration and the belief that nothing could be done for the 40 percent who were failing the test. These teachers' low expectations and ironclad vision—that students of the poor, students of color, students with special challenges, or students who speak other languages cannot learn—will continue to hold true. These students will not learn because they are not expected to learn, they are "excused" from learning, and they are instructed in ways that guarantee that they will not learn.

However, this book is addressed to teachers who do believe that all children can learn. Some of these teachers have great natural ability to teach all children, including urban children with diverse backgrounds, children with special challenges,

and children with little wealth. These teachers are the Michael Jordans, the Maya Angelous, and the Martin Luther King Jrs. of the teaching profession. Most teachers, however, know they must continue to develop their talents to find ways to put the words “All children can learn” into practice. Many perform well without being superstars; but they do want all children to learn. They work in districts with the poorest classroom resources spread thinly among many challenged youngsters; they often have the least opportunity for the professional development that will help them learn about “best practice,” the most recently discovered methods, and alternative instructional strategies. Their motto is, “Yeah, we do believe all children can learn”—their question is, “How?” Teaching in the modern urban classroom may be the most difficult challenge in the most difficult profession, but it also provides the greatest opportunity for a teacher to make a difference. Our focus here is on the knowledge that will help those committed to teaching all children who enter their classrooms.

In this book are many examples of practical strategies for immediate implementation. Some of the approaches to learning that are described here will require more practice and support over a longer period. These are balanced by sample lesson designs that delineate how to couple effective practices with course content and assessment in a lesson or unit design that will have the most impact on students. All of these are described in the context of research that shows how each approach is effective in urban classrooms. However, there is a “caveat,” a “beware.” All the instructional approaches are described with the forewarning that no single approach will help in every classroom every time. Each practice needs judicious decision making on the teacher’s part. The teacher will make the chosen strategy appropriate for the content, the students’ needs, and the situation. As the urban teachers select the appropriate strategy, they will make it an important part of their repertoire, their tool kit of approaches, that they will apply more and more skillfully as they grow in experience. With successful application of the tools will come the proof that indeed all children, including the much-maligned urban children, can learn because they, their teachers, have the tools, the talent, and the commitment to make it happen.

URBAN CHILDREN AND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

The development of a classroom teacher is a lifelong journey. An integral part of that journey is understanding the children in the classroom. As urban teachers progress on their journey, it is important they review the five main characteristics of the urban child. Who is the urban child? What are the truths, and what are the myths?

The first thing to know is that the urban child is a human being between the ages of birth and 18. Often, when referring to young adults receiving special education services, the age is extended to 21. These ages generally encompass the early childhood primary, intermediate, junior or middle, and high school grades. Although it is becoming more difficult to recognize preteens and teenagers as children nowadays, they are still children. In fact, one of the main problems encountered in educating urban children is the speed with which they are expected to grow up. Urban children are having more intense and different life experiences as children than most adults

have had. These types of experiences can, and more than likely will, physically and psychologically age anyone. However, chronologically, the urban child, or any child for that matter, is still a child, regardless of the number or types of experiences.

Victims of Labels

Second, the urban child (the adjective used to be *inner city*) is likely to be, more than most children, a victim of labels that communicate and allow low expectations. The list on the following page covers excuses that teachers, principals, social workers, parents, and even the children themselves use to escape the challenge of rigorous learning and the assistance of strong instruction. More often than not, the labels are preceded in very subtle ways by some other phrase that is the heart and soul of low expectations.

The Scourge of Low Expectations

Third, the urban child is the individual (especially when male) most likely to end up in prison. How does this occur? Consider two examples that trace part of the responsibility to low-expectation practices in a school.

Abdul played his way through middle school. With 22 days of truancy his previous year, a failure in PE and Industrial Arts, and barely passing grades in his academics, Abdul ended up with a basic high school schedule for ninth grade: Practical Math, Basic English, Data Entry, Wood Shop, and General Science. After the first week of classes, Abdul told his sister that he was done with school (Abdul's mother was dead, his father lived out of state). Upset, the sister dragged Abdul into the counselor's office. After hearing the sister's complaints about Abdul's schedule and noting recorded remarks from teachers such as, "You are in Data Entry so you can get a job where you can succeed," "This is your fifth time through this basic math. I hope you get it this time," and "Stupid is as stupid does—this class is for the most stupid," the counselor commented, "Look, he's obviously not able to do this minimum work—if he could, he'd be in class now. We're doing the best we can. But he has to be able to do the work."

At this point, Abdul's sister pulled a copy of Abdul's test record from her pocket. Under "IQ," she pointed to the number 147. The counselor, stunned only for a moment, said, "This can't be Abdul's. No kid in this school ever got that score."

Abdul left school the next month. Three years later, he was in prison. The ability he was thought not to have appeared in his street activities. Within a month of going full-time to the streets, he became an accountant—organizing the books for his 450-member gang that specialized in crack sales totaling millions of dollars per year.

Jose's experience was no better. A gifted athlete who played on the all-city, all-star team in the sixth grade, he was turned down for admission to the junior high Spanish class. When he asked why, the principal responded, "You people are good athletes, but you'll never cut it in a language class." Five years later, Jose received a 20-year sentence. His crime? Jose had become a skilled forger, earning several hundred thousand dollars for his gang each year.

“I Can’t Teach You Because You Are . . .”

black	from a rural area	an orphan
brown	from an urban area	an adoptee
yellow	from a suburban area	a truant
red	learning disabled	the child of
white	visually impaired	middle-aged parents
of interracial background	orthopedically handicapped	HIV positive
a Chapter 1/Title I student	speech impaired	not immunized
not a native English speaker	emotionally disordered	a dropout
bilingual	attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	born after September 18
monolingual	autistic	not ready for kindergarten
Limited English Proficient	hearing impaired	a Head Start recipient
a free lunch student	lesbian	a food stamp recipient
a reduced lunch student	gay	a welfare recipient (Aid to Families With Dependent Children, AFDC)
a neighborhood walker	dyslexic	a WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program participant
a latchkey kid	medically fragile	a public housing resident
an oldest child	asthmatic	a Section 8 resident
a youngest child	hyperactive	physically abused
an illegal resident	overactive	sexually abused
an immigrant	inactive	a head trauma victim
fatherless	slow	wheelchair bound
motherless	backward	paralyzed
homeless	basic	afflicted with Down syndrome
federally connected	a nonreader	behaviorally disturbed
a left-brain learner	illiterate	emotionally disturbed
a right-brain learner	an underachiever	educationally deficient
a refugee	a gifted underachiever	educationally handicapped
an evacuee	a migrant	
of low SES (socioeconomic status)	a transient	
of high SES	“at risk”	
	a jail bird	
	a ward of the state	

Children of Single Parents

Fourth, the urban child is likely to be the child with a single parent, who is most likely female, and most likely trapped in a low-pay, dead-end job or else fighting to survive on welfare. Many teachers who work in the urban schools look at this parent and make superficial judgments, and these judgments translate to low expectations:

“How can you expect Mario to do better? His father is in the state pen.”

“Her mother didn’t even finish Grade 8. Where does she think she’s going?”

“Antonio’s mother never comes to school. She doesn’t care.”

Fifth, the urban student is likely to be the child of immigrant parents who live in a community from the same country or region. Often, these children return home from school to share a small apartment with cousins, aunts, and uncles. They live near friends from the same villages in Russia, Poland, Mexico, Guatemala, Vietnam, Africa, or China. They hold on to the traditions and values of the “old country.”

THE TASK AHEAD

When these children of different cultures, backgrounds, and languages come into the same classroom, the teacher is faced with more than differences in knowledge and skill. Urban teachers face a heterogeneous mix in their classrooms that runs deeper than language. They face a plethora of obstacles to instruction that can overwhelm even the strongest. What to do? Where to start?

While it is important for districts to continue their efforts to remake the size of schools, align the curriculum, and strengthen assessment, they cannot forget the quality of instruction. In this, it is important that urban districts pay attention to that research that makes the most difference in the improvement of test scores for urban students.

This research starts with the high expectations of studies begun several decades ago with the Los Angeles Teacher Expectation Student Achievement (TESA) project. When teachers learn to use the TESA behaviors well, they lay the foundation for the understanding that how students learn is more important than how they teach. The selection of the strategies and tactics they use to promote better learning follows from what works with the different students they face.

When teachers make this substantive change in perspective, they ready themselves to become mediators of learning. A mediator, as defined by cognitive psychologist Reuven Feuerstein, is a teacher who helps students better understand the world by developing the students’ ways of knowing, or “cognitive functions.” Very often, as a result of the urban students’ lack of preschool mediation, these children come to school with poor cognitive readiness to learn. The mediators see this and use the principles and practices of mediated learning to help these children develop the prerequisite cognitive functions they lack.

The chapters that follow provide teachers with information on the principles and practices of mediation. There teachers will find road maps to understanding each of the mediation criteria, why it is important as a way to increase the quality of student learning, and how to build the mediating experience into meaningful lessons.

This book will not provide all the answers to moving urban students along the pathway to higher achievement. Part of those answers must come from the ways teachers and their school leaders apply the information in a systematic way. Part will come from new research on what works to help urban children become better learners so that they are in charge of their own educational destiny. And part will come from the other reforms that urban districts are putting in place. What must not be forgotten, however, is the essential idea that the most gain will come from the quality of mediated instruction that targets high achievement for all students.