

**Teaching Urban Students: Perspectives & Strategies For
K-12 Classroom Teachers & Administrators**

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Abstract

The education of urban students requires a tailored approach in which their unique experiences and home environments are treated realistically, and without condemnation. Urban students are as capable as others, and excel when classroom instruction is meaningful and encourages action. Effective urban schoolteachers have set upon themselves the task of making a difference by expanding beyond traditional approaches and philosophies of education.

Statistics/Urban Students Findings

The current literature reports that urban areas and minority students are the fastest-growing populations in public schools, and in 2006, approximately 81 percent of Americans lived in urban settings (Schulte, 2004). “Urban” does not necessarily denote African American or another minority group. Rather, it signifies the location and environment in which the students live; the majority of urban students are Caucasian. It is held that 50-75 percent of urban students begin kindergarten without the literacy skills needed for reading success (Cartledge & Lo, 2006), and African American students represent 16 percent of elementary and secondary school populations, yet they compose 21 percent of special education participants (Schulte, 2004).

Additionally, nearly 50 percent of all urban public school students do not graduate and teacher turnover is very high (Schulte, 2004). This can indirectly impact urban students’ learning outcomes and skill development. For example, by 6th grade, black students collectively trail white students by more than 2 years in reading, math and writing skills (Lomotey, 1989).

Introduction to Urban Issues

Knowing about students’ lives, motivations, resources, and language is essential to effective education. Teaching urban students requires a different approach which takes into account their

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unique experiences. Their environments are filled with adaptations to specific cultures of origin and cultures of thought, which may encourage the expression of certain behaviors (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). Aspects of environment such as school, neighborhood and family can have a bearing on a student's likelihood of school suspensions and arrest (Kirk 2009).

At the crux of recent studies is the fact that it is not the number of students being taught, but the character and nature of the environment that most affects students' reactions to a lesson. This fact was noted by Mrs. Smith, an 11th grade math teacher at a large urban high school. She stated, ***“When teaching my students, the one thing I have learned to do is get to first base with them, which is finding out about their environment and what catches their attention and reactions. Some days it's the hard core facts and formulas and the next day it might be mathematical humor or life application skills. I prepare several mini lesson plans within the standard lesson plan so as to increase the chances that the students will attach, react, engage and process.”***

Toldson and Lewis (2012) reported that children who are slow learners and who lack the knowledge, social graces, and sophistication to manage learning environments are the ones most vulnerable to suspensions, but are not children who pose legitimate risks to the security of the school. Environment and home resources go hand-in-hand when attempting to address urban students' outcomes. It is reported that urban student poverty, parent education and home resources can work as the perfect storm to dampen the results of education in ways other students and educators need not contend (Schema, 2006). At the core of home environments' negative sting is the disconnect between how urban students perceive school-based activities and the day-to-day activities occurring in their home that impede learning (Bouillion & Gomez, 2001).

The material taught and discussed in the urban classroom tends to not become a part of students' home life activities to the degree that it does for non-urban students. As a result, within urban schools, an alarming number of students achieve at significantly lower levels in knowledge, skills, high school graduation and entry-level employment. Despite efforts to bridge the racial achievement gap, urban and low income students are often labeled as low-achieving and disadvantaged (Cooper & Liou, 2007). The poverty-driven learning gap is enforced by the restriction of resources which often casts families into a socio-demographic class which promotes school suspension (Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009).

Because of urban students' disconnect between classroom instruction and day-to-day living activities, effective interactive instruction (i.e., white boards, Blackboard, CAI) should be used. Slaughter (2009) reported that the above materials and equipment have the ability to connect students with the material, teachers, and each other because it promotes the free exchange of ideas, clear communication, and critical thinking. The exchange of ideas and dialogue between student to student and teacher to student can be intimidating for some teachers. They fear that they may lose control of the classroom or the topic, or be seen as an inadequate teacher. Critical thinking and progressive class discussions are not how most teachers were trained. As a result,

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many of them avoid free-flowing learning and exploration that digs into the heart of the matter. Mrs. Ross, a new 4th grade teacher at a local charter school stated it well. She reported, ***“I totally was not prepared for the type of students that were in my classroom. Their level of disrespect, low value for school, willingness to challenge me and need for constant reminders is not what I expected. I do not blame anyone for this. It’s just that my college courses and student teaching did not address what I’m dealing with in the classroom. My students can and will learn, I’m just not sure how to teach them.”***

Participants and Methodology

For this study, three school superintendents, five building principals, nine classroom teachers and 5 school board members were interviewed. They all live in urban Genesee and Saginaw Counties (Michigan). The gender makeup was 15 females and 7 males. The ethnic makeup was two Hispanic Americans, eight African Americans and 12 Caucasian Americans.

A qualitative methods study was utilized to examine the participants’ urban professional education experiences. With the help of face-to-face interviews, this study uncovered meaningful data regarding the daily experiences of those who teach in urban settings.

The participants were asked typical intake and pre-screening questions, such as age and socioeconomic status. During the interview, they all were asked the same open-ended questions regarding their experiences. They were asked approximately 15 questions that ranged from “Describe your school’s building climate,” and “What seems to motivate your students,” to “How important is parent involvement,” and “What is the best way to facilitate meaningful dialogue and learning in the classroom?” Their responses generated qualitative data.

Data Collection

The data collection process utilized standard qualitative tools. The participants’ verbal responses to the interview questions became the raw data, with each response given equal weight and transcribed verbatim. In addition, the researchers’ reflections were collected in an attempt to identify the essence of experiences, themes and clusters.

Literature Review

Administrative Leadership

There are several keys to effective urban education (see Chart #1). Strong administrative leadership is a key. It must be present when seeking to address and experience success in urban education. Successful administrators have learned to constantly juggle, motivate staff, create a positive school environment and maximize their skill set. As a result, their potential to steer the

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ship effectively is not regularly interrupted and there are few constant sources of frustration. Superintendent Smith stated clearly that, ***“I have to become whatever is needed and effective at everything on a daily basis. The more I think about it, the more I realize that most of my day and stressors have very little to do with the students and their needs. My issues and those reported by my peers is union, budgeting and state funding issues. It can take everything in me and then some to not necessarily keep the ship floating, but to more importantly set the tone and tempo for the entire district, from the bus driver to the literacy coach.”*** Mukurla (2002) documented that the role of the building principals in predominately black urban middle schools is vital to learning and progress. The building principal sets the tone for parental involvement, structured environments, school-wide programs such as retained student services and mutual respect among students and teachers. This tone, when not positive, can be counterproductive and promote school dropout.

Mastery of the Basics

Urban schools that set a priority on mastery of the basics brace themselves to experience overall success. Mr. Stricker, a 17-year teaching veteran reported, ***“Even my advanced placement students need to revisit the basics on a regular basis. I’m finding that more and more of my students do not have mastery of the fundamentals of math, science and writing. They are smart and able to work hard, but their foundation is not very solid. Thus they can complete and do well on classroom assignments but barely pass standardized test on various subjects. It’s frustrating for the students, me and parents.”*** To this end, the schools ensure that their advanced placement and entry level subject matters regularly review and incorporate basic skill practice sets and assignments.

Adaptation to Curriculum

Mrs. Hart, a seasoned master teacher offered, ***“Sure, I could just go in and breeze through the material as it is outlined and meet the needs of 40 percent of the students. However, if I take the time to prepare more interactive activities, intentionally re-phrase critical points, create an engaging environment and sell them on the importance of thirsting for knowledge, I might be able to reach and teach another 20 percent of the class and capture the imagination of my at-risk students.”*** The adapting of instruction can benefit urban learners. Schools that encourage adapting and adjusting of curriculum give students yet another opportunity to learn. Adaption helps to ensure that learning is taking place and remains the focus of instructional time. The focus is not so much to cover the material in a systematic manner, but rather to create blocks of time for meaningful learning to take place.

Safe Environment

Critical to outstanding urban education is a safe school environment. An atmosphere of safety is the single most important aspect of the school day for students. Most schools receive very little

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guidance or assistance in their attempts to establish and sustain proactive discipline that ensures safety (Sugai et al., 2000). Students must feel safe. Will Barnes, a literature teacher shared, ***“When safety is not a concern, students allow themselves to release their thoughts and inner feeling more easily. I have watched this phenomenon for over seven years. When there are threats of bullying, regular fist fights in the hall way, conflict between groups of students and a general disregard for others, my students seem to shut down for periods of time and distance themselves from the learning process somewhat.”*** Feeling unsafe, vulnerable and at risk of emotional, social or physical harm, can wipe out intentions to learn before the first bell rings.

Chart #1 Keys To Quality Urban Education

Strong administrative leadership	A focus on basics	Adaptable instruction
A safe school environment	Regular incentives	Progress monitoring
Regular staff development	Parent involvement	Available technology
Peer tutoring	Minority staff members	Early childhood programs
Multicultural programs	Race relations discussions	Student support and retention

School-Based Incentives

For students, second to feeling safe is the need for their school to provide incentives. Nelson, et al. (2010) indicated that middle school teachers who write notes of praise had fewer office referrals. In addition, the usage of a school-wide Positive Behavior Support program has proven to provide incentive, improve student social development, and decrease the need for disciplinary actions (Luiselli, et al.. 2010). Mary Hargove, an elementary art teacher stated, ***“There is a part of me that doesn’t want to provide incentives to students for putting forth their best effort. That is sort of what’s wrong with the world and children now. However, I must admit that incentives and acts of acknowledgement work and improve students’ attachment to school. Incentives are definitely in the best interest of the students.”*** It stands to reason that other incentives such as brief ceremonies, announcements, and accolades work to improve all students’ behaviors and go a long way in helping urban students remain focused, steadfast, deliberate, and intentional in their learning. For incentives to take place, close monitoring of students’ progress (or the lack thereof) should take place.

Staff Development

The preservation and ongoing offering of training, coursework, mentoring, shadowing, career path identification, engagement in the decision-making process, open communication, and acts of appreciation can encourage staff members to put forth their best on a daily basis. This fact was echoed by Jimmy Watkins, a ten-year middle school math teacher, ***“I went into teaching by choice and because I wanted to make a difference and not necessarily make a lot of money.”***

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The opportunity to take part in world class training, collaboration with my peers and recognition by the administration is priceless to me. For sure my friends make more money than me but they don't make better citizens and have the wonderful work environment that I have. Like other organizations, staff development is critical to school districts and urban students' learning. The investing in staff members is a win-win situation for everyone, including students.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement separates the achievement of urban students from other students. Toldson and Lewis (2012) stated that supportive schools get parents involved by offering them information about how to help their child learn at home, which community services are available, explanations of classes in terms of content and learning goals, information about child development, volunteer opportunities, and academic updates between report cards. For the most part, school districts that excel from top to bottom in terms of student achievement and graduation rate have strong parental involvement at each grade level (including middle and high school).

Nancy Redd, a high school science teacher offered ***“One thing about it, no matter what the grade level, students either hate or love when their parent comes up to the school or attends parent/teacher night. There really is no in between. Parent involvement gives me leverage in the classroom and with students. When a student knows that their parent and I are on the same page and communicate by email, phone, visits or webmaster, the chances of success for me and the student increases by the folds.”*** Parent involvement can set the tone and send a message to students and school officials that the quality of education and learning that takes place is important to them.

Usage of Technology

Today's students love technology and the explosiveness of its images, sounds, colors and applications. For urban students, it is critical for their learning endeavors to feature computer-assisted instruction that enhances test taking skills, promotes critical thinking, promotes competence and captures their imagination. Superintendent Janet Skiltz stated, ***“Thanks mostly in part to the evolution of video games and computer software, this generation is image, sound, lights and action oriented. We can either fight it, ignore it or whole heartedly embrace and implement technology in the curriculum. To be honest, the students are not the ones who complain the most about technology being used in the classroom, it's some of my teachers who have years of education and teaching experience. They just are not very comfortable with technology and probably deep down inside feel that a computer or robot will eventually replace them.”***

Student Support

Urban schools that offer a consistent diet of peer tutoring, early childhood education programs, and multicultural programming are setting themselves up to help students learn from others and learn about themselves. This combination is powerful and can move an average student towards honor-roll status. Toldson and Lewis (2012) suggested that urban schools that service black males may find success by pushing for the school to have a collective grade point average of 3.0, creating an atmosphere where 100 percent of the student body is involved in extracurricular activities, the presence of 25 percent of black males in honors courses, less than 6 percent of the student body involved in special education classes and a suspension rate of less than 10 percent for black male students for any reason. Jackie Gray, parent of a 13 year old male stated, ***“I thought long and hard before I pulled my son out of his home school district and away from some of his life-long friends. In my mind, a change was needed because his friends and the school were not pushing him to achieve. None of his several black friends tried to beat his math test score or push him to read yet another book or to join the preppy clubs. As a result, he began losing his thirst to compete academically and pretty soon lowered his expectations of himself. We knew there was a problem when he brought home a C+ grade on his math test and justified his score by saying all of his friends scored even lower.” My daughter had several black female friends that pushed her academically. As a result, as a group they all graduated with 3.8 or higher grade point averages and high 20’s composite scores on the ACT. My son has yet to find peers of this nature and it is hurting him in more ways that we all can imagine or think.”***

Minority Teachers & Race Relations

Frequent teacher training on cultural competence, empathy and respect, defense management, classroom management, and other relevant topics help make leaders and teachers effective (Toldson & Lewis, 2012). A regular source of commentary is the need for minority teachers and race relations to be addressed in urban schools. The hiring and promoting of minority teachers for the sake of having them in place is not the answer and neither is the current trend of the white female educator majority.

Discussions on hiring practices and race relations can bring projects to a complete halt and divide loyal persons and close-knit communities. In general, minorities overestimate the importance of minority teachers’ availability and Caucasians underestimate the value of minority educators in urban districts. Roberta Flynn, a retired school administrator stated, ***“Black people seem to be convinced that the majority of discipline problems in schools is due to white teachers not being versed in cultural issues or their not being willing to change their approach to managing urban students. In response, white people insist that the most qualified person should be hired and not necessarily the well-versed individual who 90 percent of the time is a white female.”*** It goes without saying that the ethnic makeup of the teaching staff should move swiftly towards reflecting the makeup of the student body.

Supporting Retained Students

Urban students tend not to recover from failing a class or being retained. As a result, there is a sense of urgency and need for urban schools to assist such students. Retained students who are not afforded additional support, mentoring, skill building and constant sources of motivation, may remain at risk of future dropout. There is a relationship between being retained, school dropout, and school suspensions. Parent Jack Russett reported, *“Once my son failed 7th grade, something seems to have happened to him morally and socially. For the next several grade levels his goal was to get back in his right grade, never mind the fact that he failed miserably with turning in his assignments and scoring well on tests. Like so many black students, it was utterly important for him to graduate with his student body graduating class. My son needed and excelled in the school’s at-risk program that addressed his school failure, suspensions and risk of dropping out.”*

Eleven Principles Toward Effective Outcomes

Cartledge and Lo (2006) reported on effective outcomes when teaching urban students. The identified principles can serve as the foundation and energy necessary to meet the educational needs of urban students.

Effective school leaders/educational experts: The administration and support persons have achieved a level of expertise and knowledge that is visionary, relationship-focused, and collaborative in nature.

Curriculum & instructional programs reflect students’ needs: The material and supportive learning tools are sensitive and reflect the culture and experiences of urban students.

Teachers are committed and well-prepared: A deep conviction and desire to teach urban students is evident and there is an overwhelming personal dedication to being emotionally, socially, physically, and spiritually prepared for each day of instruction.

Early intervention and prevention programs: District-wide, research-based interventions and efforts to identify student learning deficiencies early.

Teaching staff have a sense of urgency: Overall, there is a push and determination to see improvement and academic gain among students now and in the future.

Academic interventions produce high academic engagement: Interventions are designed to facilitate students’ improved standardized test scores as a result of intentional academic engagement by the students.

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Instructional decisions should be research/data driven: Respected, nationally-noted, researched-based curriculum/material should be utilized.

Expectations are high: Regardless of the student body’s current performance level and daily behaviors, the overall message and emphasis is placed on students possessing the ability to reach higher levels of learning and personal functioning. The high expectations must be set early in the school year and supported by adequate private and public student-based consequences and rewards.

Behavioral interventions are effective: Efforts to manage disruptive and counterproductive behaviors must be written down, consistent, and progressive, and supported by administrators, teachers, parents and students.

Positive collaboration with parents: Regardless of their social class, educational level, or concerns, positive programming and support from parents is crucial to addressing the plight of urban students and schools. In most cases, major barriers must be addressed in order to experience outstanding parent involvement and input.

Students are affirmed and nurtured: From top to bottom, within the district and community, every effort must be taken to ensure that student learners feel supported, affirmed, important, capable and able.

Characteristics of Effective Urban Teachers

Below, Chart #2 summarizes the characteristics of effective urban teachers. Years of research and federal programs have examined urban education, including the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Duncan-Andrade, 2007). Research reports that teaching urban students requires the teacher’s ability to tap into the student’s rich experiences, cultural customs and practical skill sets.

Chart #2 Characteristics of an Effective Urban Teacher

Knows students’ lives	Understand students’ motivators	Has adequate resources
Uses creative approaches	Explores unique experiences	Communicates clearly
Involves parents	Makes connections	Uses interactive instruction
Promotes the exchange of ideas	Creates an environment of understanding	Engages in professional development
Rewards critical thinking	Uses video lessons	Encourages group discussion
Is committed	Is engaging	Loves challenges

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The effective education of urban youth requires: a clear definition of effective teaching, respect for the significance of the urban cultural context, and the offering of professional support, school culture awareness, and pre-service training (Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

A common way to promote connections between teachers and students is teacher modeling/instruction. Wyman et al. (2010) documented that teacher modeling/instruction can reinforce and improve students' poor social skills and the number of disciplinary referrals. Furthermore, teacher factors such as avoiding burnout and maintaining high efficacy can positively affect students' out-of-school suspensions (Pas et al., 2010).

Teaching Urban Students

Urban students are no less capable than other students; rather, they do not respond well to the passive, ambiguous, low-interaction, and limited autonomy that are typical of some classrooms. The best approaches and strategies for teaching urban students include: providing contextually-rich and varied activities and assignments, focusing on curriculum, involving the community and family members, and taking advantage of local resources.

Moreover, urban students perform best when they are able to construct their own meaning from lessons and are given a chance to integrate real-world situations (Rivet & Krajcik, 2008). In their study, Corbett and Wilson (2002) interviewed urban students about their learning outcomes. The students reported that the best teachers ensured they did their homework, controlled the classroom, were available and willing to help them, explained assignments and contents well, varied the classroom routine, and took time to get to know them.

Types of Urban Teachers

Duncan-Andrade (2007) reported that the types of urban teachers are gangsta, wanksta and rida (see Chart #3). These categories of teachers help to conceptualize the needs of the students and the specific skill sets and philosophies of the teachers.

For example, the gangsta hold deep resentments toward most parents, students and community members and are in general dissatisfied with their jobs, schools and community. The wanksta are the majority of urban teachers. They are always talking about what they are going to do, but do nothing. The rida can be counted on until the end and their goal is to not let their people down. They are consistently successful with at-risk students and they risk deep emotional involvement.

Chart #3 Types of Urban Teachers

Gangsta

Deeply resent most parents, students and community members
Are dissatisfied with their jobs, schools and community
Aggressively advocate for ineffective and repressive school policies
Believes that remediation, zero-tolerance discipline, and tracking are wonderful
Deliberately sidetrack discussions on racism, structural inequalities, and social justice
Are not the majority of teachers

Wanksta

Are the majority of urban teachers
Are always talking about what they are going to do, but do nothing
Are a result of a natural human instinct – self-protection
Intend to be an effective teacher
Realize they are poorly prepared and do not have support
Really do not believe they will improve as teachers
Their future in teaching is predicted by their relationship with their students
Have trouble rationalizing being hurt/humiliated by students while continuing to teach
Lose their passion to teach
Move toward finding reasons to disinvest/Create excuses for their inability to teach
Are detached from their students' learning outcomes
Are deeply troubled on one hand
Retain the illusion that they can and will make a difference

Rida

Can be counted on until the end
Their goal is to not let their people down
Are consistently successful with at-risk students
Risk deep emotional involvement
Endure the inevitable letdowns
Are able to challenge students at a deeper level
Are not committed to the larger structure of the school
Believe that higher-ups in administration are corrupt

A Closer Look At The Rida

The ideal urban teacher fits the mold of the rida. This type of teacher is neither born nor created. Rather, they evolve into the unique individuals who comprise the school's educational pillars. At their core is a deep sense of responsibility, spiritual fortitude, multi-level interest and skill sets, etc.

Pillar #1 Critically Conscious Purpose: The rida made a decision to teach urban students. They do so not because they love kids or want to be part of the solution or were given a chance by the administration. They teach urban students because they deeply believe that their students are the students that are the most likely to change the world. They revere the fact that their students have the least to lose in life and the most to gain. They appreciate and recognize that their students are more likely to take the necessary risk to improve their lives and the lives of others.

The rida realize that the students who struggle in school are fertile ground. They also realize that it is important for them to work to understand the history of the communities and people in which they work. Of critical importance is the fact that ridas have lived and studied in oppressive settings that shaped their perspective. They do not attempt create a classroom that mirrors middle-class education, but instead develop practices that respond best to needs of the poor and working classes.

Pillar #2 Sense of Duty: The rida have a strong sense of duty to students and the community. They view themselves as servants of the people. They maintain positive attitudes and jump at chances to work with challenging students. They take risks with students and the curriculum. For the rida, teaching students is a privilege, not a right. They want to be at the school even when others belittle their efforts

The rida are not afraid of their students or the nearby community. They describe teaching in urban settings as a way of life and not a job. On a deeper level, they associate their teaching with the struggle for human dignity and justice.

Pillar #3 Preparation: The rida credit their success to preparation. They feel that they can be successful with students who were unsuccessful in other classes. Somehow, they are able to create contagious excitement, release their passion, and demonstrate the learning process. When asked, they cannot quantify the amount of time they spend teaching and preparing because it is a lifestyle, not a job. They regularly stumble upon materials and ideas. Their level of commitment comes from their mentors and previous teachers.

Pillar #4 Socratic Sensibility: For the rida, it is fascinating to promote self-examination in terms of recognizing that the unknown exceeds the known. They embrace Socrates' thought, "All great undertakings are risky and as they say, what is worthwhile is always difficult,"

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Malcolm X's view, "The examined life is painful," and Cornel West's affirmation that "The unexamined life is not worth living." The rida strives to strike balance between confidence and frequent self-critique.

Pillar #5 Trust: With no doubt, the rida is able to build students' trust. They understand that whatever level of trust they are given must be earned every day because historically, schooling holds negative connotations for black and poor people. They see their students as their students and not somebody else's child. Within the classroom they create a culture that fosters trust. They do not coddle students and move towards being loved and not liked.

Conclusion

Much more can be stated about urban education and the successful classroom teacher. There are sufficient tools and strategies available to ensure that every child learns at their optimum level. Effective urban teaching is not for the faint of heart. It takes dedication, emotional letdowns, the overcoming of fears and personal "isms", self-examination, and a passion for teaching.

At the crux of future urban students' progress is the need for schools of education at universities throughout America to sufficiently prepare students to enter the teaching arena. Today's K-12 student learner is not the same as the learners of yesteryear. There must be concerted efforts by everyone towards removing remaining barriers and propelling our young learners to higher heights. It can be done and it should be done.

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**Resources Available From
Recco S. Richardson**

Videos/DVD

To view each, go to reccorichardson.com, click on media, scroll down to video page and click. The videos should appear.

Richardson, R., & Morgan, P. (2011). The disappearing act: Helping depressed children/teens.

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