

instruction with scripted teaching. Rather, students need focused instructional strategies throughout their school years that are designed specifically for their cultural and academic backgrounds.

This is how the "basic skills" of the middle class should be acquired by children who do not possess them upon entering school. This is how middle-class parents, often without realizing it, teach their children. They build upon the children's interests; they ensure that the children are exposed to new settings; they discuss what the children have experienced while using new vocabulary. That is what we as teachers must do for our charges who do not bring to school the academic trappings of middle-class homes. And we must not only identify what they *don't* know but acknowledge and celebrate what they *do* know and bring with them to class—a maturity in problem solving, an ability to do what is needed in difficult situations, an understanding of real-world problems—that middle-class children are not likely to exhibit for years to come. They bring what schools sometimes disparage as "street sense," knowledge that is not only "higher order thinking," but that can be built upon to spur the acquisition of the "basic skills" that schools demand.

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WARM DEMANDERS:
THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS
IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN OF POVERTY

"My teacher treated me as a diamond in the rough, someone who mostly needed smoothing."

—Mary Frances Berry, *USA Today*

"There comes that mysterious meeting in life when someone acknowledges who we are and what we can be, igniting the circuits of our highest potential."

—Rusty Berkus, *To Heal Again*

I've taught many young teachers, and they all seem so tired when they arrive at my evening classes. I know they work hard, and I know that for many of them "the system," "the parents," "the paperwork," "the high-stakes tests" all make it seem that what they do doesn't make much of a difference. If there is one message I try to convey to them, it is that *nothing* makes more of a difference in

a child's school experience than a teacher. As I have written before, when I interviewed a group of African American men who were successful but "should not" have been, based on their socioeconomic status, their communities, their parents' level of education, and so on, all of them insisted that their success was due in large part to the influence or intervention of one or more teachers during their school careers. These were teachers who *pushed* them, who *demand*ed that they perform, even when they themselves thought that they could not. The teachers gave them additional help and insisted that they were capable of doing whatever anyone else could do.

Gloria Ladson-Billings says that successful teachers of low-income, culturally diverse children know that their students are "school dependent."¹ What she means is that while children from more privileged backgrounds can manage to perform well in school and on high-stakes tests in spite of poor teachers, children who are not a part of the mainstream are dependent upon schools to teach them whatever they need to know to be successful.

I am reminded of my own experience with my daughter in softball. To say that I am unknowledgeable about sports is an extreme understatement. Yet I wanted to make sure that my daughter was not handicapped by my limitations, so I took her to become a member of a locally sponsored team. Since my own knowledge of the sport did not extend beyond the names of the bat and ball, I was amazed that after two practices my seven-year-old actually knew where left field was! After practice, the coach came to talk to the parents. He told us that we needed to "work with" our kids at home, practicing softball skills and going over the rules. My first thought was panic, my second was, "Look, I get her here; you're the coach. It's your job to teach her. I can't do a thing." Suddenly I understood fully what many parents who are not school-savvy or educated themselves must think about schools and teachers who insist that they "work with" their children at home! If the coach

didn't teach Maya, there was little hope for my child's future softball career.

For children of poverty, good teachers and powerful instruction are imperative. While it is certainly true that inequity, family issues, poverty, crime, and so forth all affect poor children's learning opportunities, British educator Peter Mortimore found that the quality of teaching has *six to ten times* as much impact on achievement as all other factors combined.² This can explain why I have found, like educator Robert Marzano, that two schools serving the same population can have vastly different success rates.³ In a recent study of schools in a southern city, I visited two public elementary schools located less than a mile apart, both serving very low-income African American children. One school's state test scores were at the top of the district—higher than the average score of the district's well-to-do schools, and the other school's scores were at the very bottom of the district. What was the cause of such a discrepancy? The schools essentially served the same population. The difference could only be the quality of teaching and instruction. In each of the classrooms in the higher-scoring school I saw teachers engaged with their students, actually teaching. In the lower-performing school, I saw most teachers sitting while students completed seat work.

What gave me even more reason to pause was the realization that the teachers in the lower-performing school apparently believed that it was okay to remain seated and not involved with the students when a visitor came into the room. This was even the case when she or he observed my conversations with the students that made it clear that many of them did not understand what they were supposed to be doing on the worksheet. That observation led me to conclude that somehow the culture of the school signaled to the teacher that "not teaching" was okay. If there is not a strong culture of achievement in a school, many teachers may not be teaching as effectively as they are capable of doing.

Indeed, Mike Schmoker in his remarkable book *Results Now* cites a 2001 study by K. Haycock and S. Huang that shows that "the best teachers in a school have *six times as much impact* as the bottom third of teachers.⁴ Much of Schmoker's work centers on the notion that poor children are not learning because schools and teachers are not adequately teaching them. He records instances of researchers and administrators visiting large numbers of classrooms and observing very little effective teaching and, despite district- or state-mandated curricula, very little coordinated, integrated instruction.

In my own recent visits to a number of schools and classrooms during a six-month stay in one mid-sized, predominantly African American district where I observed the two schools mentioned above, I was shocked to find how little teaching was actually occurring in many classrooms in a variety of schools. I saw an inordinate number of classrooms where students were doing seat work for an entire period—mostly busywork that had little connection to deep learning. Few if any questions were asked, and those that were demanded little thought on the part of student or teacher. Children who chose not to do the worksheet were ignored as long as they were quiet.

In one classroom of over-age high schoolers who had recently switched to a new schedule, the teacher told me that the periods were too long and the students got tired so she allowed them to take naps if they chose to take a break from doing their assigned seat work. In this language arts classroom, the teacher was apparently unaware that two students, instead of using the computers to complete their assignment, were instead comparing cell phone plans!

It is no surprise, but still a jolt, to realize the implications of such non-teaching. Schools that had been designated as "failing" had large numbers of teachers like those described. In contrast, schools that performed at high levels had larger numbers

of teachers who were actually teaching. They were visible in the classroom. They held students' attention. They were explaining concepts and using metaphors to connect the knowledge students brought to school with the new content being introduced. They used different kinds of media. They asked students to explain concepts to their peers. They posed questions that required thought and analysis and demanded responses. *No one* was allowed to disengage.

One of the most poignant aspects of this reality is that students are quite aware when the instruction they are receiving is subpar. While many are willing to play the game to avoid being challenged, others are distraught at the realization that they are being shortchanged. In a Florida high school that has been designated as "failing" for several years in a row, the students were primarily low-income Haitian immigrants, many of whom were from Haitian Creole-speaking families. Many of those teaching in this school were substitutes or Spanish-speaking new immigrants with limited English skills themselves who were recruited from Central American countries because they knew a specific subject area but who had no teaching experience. A district math supervisor told me that she once visited the school and had to hold back tears when the students in one class looked at her pleadingly and said, "Miss, can you please teach us something?"

During my sojourn visiting schools, I also had the opportunity to talk with high school students who were involved in a citywide after-school spoken-word poetry-writing program. As I always do when I have the opportunity, I asked the primarily African American students to talk to me about what problems they saw in their schools. Most of the students' comments focused on what teachers did or did not do in classrooms.

Students were also very aware of the culture of their schools, the attitudes their teachers have toward teaching, and the effort those teachers put into their craft:

- ♦ It's bad when they say you go to a bad school. It's like then they think you are automatically a bad person. Even when it's just one bad seed that acts crazy, people think everyone in the school is like that.
- ♦ Sometimes the teachers won't give you help. Some of them say things like, "I got mine; all I have to do is get my paycheck."
- ♦ In high school a lot of teachers are about occupying us, not teaching us.
- ♦ The bookwork and the tests have nothing to do with us.
- ♦ Our teachers don't understand how much impact they have. It's hard when they act about as serious about what they're doing as our little sisters or brothers.
- ♦ One teacher said she didn't want to teach today because she was having a bad day. But then she would have about four or five bad days in a row!

I also asked them to describe a good teacher they had encountered in their school lives:

- ♦ A good teacher takes time, makes sure you understand.
- ♦ One who enjoys being there.
- ♦ One who doesn't put on a movie when they're tired.
- ♦ A teacher who asks questions to help get the students closer to the answers.
- ♦ For each chapter there should be a lecture, activities and games, and reading outside of the text from different sources (from a future teacher, perhaps?).
- ♦ One who has a sense of humor, but can be serious when necessary.
- ♦ Someone you can find outside of class for help.
- ♦ Someone who is patient, understanding, ready to teach if you're ready to learn.

- ♦ One who is willing to learn about you and about new things.
- ♦ A good teacher inspires you and pushes you to the point of no return.

Many researchers have identified successful teachers of African American students as "warm demanders." James Vasquez used the term to identify teachers whom students of color said did not lower their standards and were willing to help them. Warm demanders expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment.⁵

Franita Ware in her research describes several such teachers, including Ms. Willis, a sixteen-year veteran, who taught third through fifth grades. In one example of Ms. Willis's no-nonsense approach, she spoke loudly and clearly to her students about the importance of completing and submitting homework:

Chris, pass out the workbooks while I'm doing some housekeeping and I want everybody to . . . listen. Yesterday I checked for two things; number one, homework. I had about half of the class that turned in their homework. I do not give you homework every day, but when I do it's a practice skill that needs to be done. It's something that you need: it's not just something for you to do. . . . And I expect you to do it. Now from now on, if you cannot do it, then you need to write me a note of explanation. And the only reason I'll tell you that you cannot do your homework is that you are dead—and you won't be here then. Because if you go to Grady [a local hospital with a reputation for long waits], I told you all the time . . . take your book with you and do it while you're sitting there. . . . We are not here to play, I'm getting you ready for middle school. . . . I am thoroughly disappointed with you. . . . Excuse me for hollering.⁶

Ware comments that what was remarkable when observing this classroom is that the students were "*absolutely quiet and looked at her with respect while she spoke.*"⁷ They did not indicate any anger or resentment, but rather their facial gestures suggested remorse. Ms. Willis was explicit about why these students in a remedial class needed to do homework; at the same time she acknowledged that students were not always in control of their lives (e.g., perhaps having to spend the evening in the hospital). However, she gave students ideas for ways to resolve issues that might arise and take control of unforeseeable eventualities. There were no excuses.

Ms. Willis would tell her students who could not read that they *would* read and that she would teach them. Poverty is not seen as an excuse for failure with warm demanders. Although they recognize the difficult circumstances of their students, they demand that they can and will rise above them.

Another teacher studied by Ware, Mrs. Carter, expressed similar beliefs. She refused to accept poverty as an excuse for lack of academic achievement. When a student didn't own a computer, she still had to finish a computer-based assignment. Mrs. Carter allowed the student to come early and/or stay after school, and she wrote a pass for her to use the computer during the homeroom period. The point is, there are no excuses.

I know of another warm demander with an excellent reputation for producing high achievement levels with her low-income students. This elementary teacher sympathized with her young charge who would fall asleep every day in reading class. Although she knew that the child's home life was in shambles, she told the child that, no matter what, she had to work to learn in school. In order to keep the child awake and alert, the teacher had her stand during reading instruction. There was no ridicule involved, only support and praise for her efforts. If the child wished to sleep at recess, she could.

Teachers who are warm demanders help students realize that

they can achieve beyond anything they may have believed. One of my favorite stories about a warm demander comes from well-known motivational speaker Les Brown. After being abandoned as an infant by his young, single mother, who gave birth to him on a filthy floor in an unused warehouse in Liberty City, Miami, Brown and his twin brother were adopted by a single cafeteria worker. Because of his high energy and inability to focus, he was placed in an educable mentally retarded class in fifth grade. He says that because he was called slow, he lived up to the label. He languished in these classes until a chance encounter in his junior year in high school changed his life.

As he was waiting outside a classroom for a friend, the substitute teacher inside the class called out to him,

"Young man, go to the board and work this problem out for me."

"Well, I can't do that sir."

"Why?"

"I'm not one of your students, first of all."

"Go to the board and work it out anyhow."

"Well, I can't do that, sir."

"Look at me. Why not?"

"Sir, because I'm educable mentally retarded. I'm not supposed to be in here."

Brown says that as the students in the class erupted in laughter, the teacher, Mr. Leroy Washington, said, "Don't ever say that again. Someone's opinion of you does not have to become your reality."⁸

That comment was the turning point of Brown's life. Mr. Washington became his mentor. Brown followed Washington around, watched him, modeled his behavior, and wanted to be a great speaker like him. Brown believes that it was because of Mr. Washington's comment and his continued insistence that Brown would be what he believed he could be, that Brown became the remarkable success that he is today.

Brown spoke about Mr. Washington in an interview: "In his presence he made you feel, without uttering a word, that you had greatness within you. That man triggered something in me that reminds me of what Goethe said, 'Look at a man the way that he is and he only becomes worse, but look at him as if he were what he could be, then he becomes what he should be.'"⁹

Warm demanders are sometimes spoken of by their students as being "mean." For those teachers who master this pedagogy, their "meanness" is often spoken of with pride by their students, and often with a smile, "She so mean, she *makes* me learn."¹⁰

Tyrone Howard studied a teacher, Ms. Russell, who, although stern and self-identified as authoritarian, would always treat her students with respect. She referred to them as "Ms." or "Mr." and always explained why she chose to take various actions. Her students sometimes expressed discontent with her domineering ways of teaching, but most thought that the ends justified the means: "She's mean and she hollers a lot, but you learn. I know that I have learned a lot this year, especially in reading and math. And if you look at all of the kids who make the honor roll or honor society, they're mostly in her class, so I guess it's worth it."¹¹

I have written elsewhere that we cannot assume that a raised voice carries the same meaning in all cultures. My great niece DeMya at five years old turned to me one day and said out of the blue, "When people's mamas yell at them, it just means they love them." Tyrone Howard found similar beliefs when he sought to get young students' responses to their teachers.

Jaylah, a fourth-grade student stated, "If you [a teacher] holler, it just means you care. But you can't holler for no reason at all. If we did something bad and she didn't holler, I would think that something's wrong, and maybe she [doesn't] care [any] more."¹²

My own caveat about interpreting the raised voices with which some teachers, usually African American, talk to children, is that it is important to listen to their words, not just their tone. Good

teachers may be telling the children that they are "too smart" to be acting the way they are acting, or submitting the kind of work they are turning in (or not turning in). When a teacher expresses genuine emotion and a belief in a child's ability to do better, that is a message that many children are eager to hear, regardless of the medium.

Howard wrote of one teacher who became upset with one of her fourth-grade students because of the student's failure to complete a task. The teacher angrily told the student she was capable of better work. The student stood humbly without response. To an outsider this might have seemed harsh, but shortly after the teacher expressed her disappointment, she approached the girl, put her arm around her shoulders, and had a private conversation. The next day the teacher showed Howard a note she found on her desk in which the chastised student thanked the teacher for being so terrific and thanked her for her "toughness," because it "really got me back on track."¹³

I need to pause for an aside here, however. I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that everyone should proceed to be mean to or yell at black children. That model typically works only when, as Mrs. Carter in Ladson-Billings's work suggests, your own cultural background is so similar that you also associate a raised voice with concern and caring. And there are certainly times when "yelling" by a teacher of whatever color is intended to belittle and degrade students. What I am saying is that real concern about students' not living up to their academic potential should be transmitted in the teacher's genuine mode of emotional expression. For many teachers, that mode could more likely be quietly expressed as disappointment. It could be expressed through humor. The point is to make sure the students know that the teacher believes they are capable and expects a lot of them.

It may be surprising to some that the students respond to such high expectations and strong demands. It is important to point