

LESSONS FROM TEACHERS

Lisa Delpit

Florida International University

This article argues that with changes in attitudes and actions in classrooms, teachers can alter what happens in urban schools and transform the lives of students. Ten precepts are offered to assist them in that role: teach more, not less, content to poor, urban children; ensure all children gain access to conventions/strategies essential to success in American society; whatever methodology/instructional program used, demand critical thinking; provide the emotional ego strength to challenge racist societal views of the competence and worthiness of children and their families; recognize and build on children's strengths; use familiar metaphors, analogies, and experiences from the children's world to connect what children already know to school knowledge; create a sense of family and caring in the service of academic achievement; monitor/assess children's needs and address them with a wealth of diverse strategies; honor and respect children's home culture; and foster a sense of children's connection to community.

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When I teach worn-out new teachers every Thursday at 5:30 in the evening, it breaks my heart to see the stress outlined around their eyes and the corners of their mouths. They seem so tired. On some days, some of them have been crying. I have come to know about their own children who make demands on their nonexistent time. I have come to know about their ailing parents for whom they are the sole caretakers, about their husbands who have had heart attacks, about their upcoming marriages or divorces, about the problematic pregnancies they are experiencing, or about the new babies who catch cold after cold.

And then, I hear about the parents of their students who “don’t care” or about the children who are disrespectful, uninterested, cannot read, constantly talk, or always get into fights. And although my heart aches for the difficulties these hardworking teachers are facing, I find I must challenge their interpretations of the children and their parents and challenge them to look beyond what they think they see in parents

and students to what they may see in themselves. I find I must add what must initially seem like more stress to their already stressful lives as I ask them to change their patterns of behavior and dig deep to become the teachers I know they can be—the teachers who can change the lives of the poor children of color that they teach and subsequently, the failing schools of this country’s cities.

There is much talk about the “problem” of urban education, much research to study the problem, and many policies enacted to address the problem but little belief that anything will ever really change. After all, that little voice constantly asserts itself between the lines of the research reports, the policy documents, and the energetic beginning-of-school pep talks, saying we cannot change the community, we cannot change the parents, we cannot change the crime, the drugs, the violence. But despite mutterings to the contrary, I know that there are things that we can do, because I have seen them make a difference. I have seen children who,

based on their socioeconomic status or their ethnicity, were expected to score at the bottom of their respective districts on standardized tests score, instead, in the top 10% of their state. Educators have proven this over and over again. For example, the Marcus Garvey School in Los Angeles, California; the Chick School in Kansas City, Missouri; Harmony-Leland in Cobb County, Georgia; and the Prescott School in Oakland, California, among many others, have all educated low-income African American children who have performed at higher levels on mandated standardized tests than schools serving the most affluent students in their respective districts (Hilliard, 2003).

Sankofa Shule, a public, African-centered, charter school in Michigan, has produced low-income African American students who are reading from two to four levels above grade level, who are doing algebra and calculus in grade school, and who outscored Lansing School District and the state of Michigan on the state accountability test (MEAP) in 2000 in mathematics and writing. The school was called "an educational powerhouse" by *U.S. News and World Report* in its April 27, 1998, issue (Rivers, 2003).

When I share this information with my young teachers, I try to help them understand what needs to happen in schools to approach such results. They, like most others in the educational enterprise, tend to believe that there is some magic program out there that will solve their problems. My friend and colleague Martha Demientieff, a gifted Alaska Native teacher, says that we all seem to be waiting for some new program to ride in on a white horse and save us!

The reality is that we can actually save the children we teach and ourselves, regardless of which instructional program we adopt. With changes in attitudes and actions in classrooms, without the need for outside experts, we can change what happens in schools and we can change the lives of our students. I have tried to talk about these changes in ways teachers find not so overwhelming. The following is my attempt to codify the information gleaned from my own teaching, from my colleagues' or my own research, and most important, from what I

have learned from watching and talking with extraordinary teachers who regularly perform magic. These teachers have taught me the following lessons.

SEE THEIR BRILLIANCE: DO NOT TEACH LESS CONTENT TO POOR, URBAN CHILDREN BUT INSTEAD, TEACH MORE!

So often in the belief that we are "being nice," we fail to realize the brilliance of our students and teach down to them, demanding little. In an insightful study titled "Racism Without Racists: Institutional Racism in Urban Schools," Massey, Scott, and Dornbush (1975) found that under the pressures of teaching and with all intentions of being kind, teachers had essentially stopped attempting to teach Black children. They showed how oppression could arise out of warmth, friendliness, and concern through a lack of challenging curricula and evaluation. Carter G. Woodson (1933/2000) wrote in his book *The Mis-Education of the Negro* that

The teaching of arithmetic in the fifth grade in a backward county in Mississippi should mean one thing in the negro school and a decidedly different thing in the white school. The negro children as a rule come from the home of tenants and peons who have to migrate annually from plantation to plantation looking for light which they have never seen. The children from the homes of white planters and merchants live permanently in the midst of calculations, family budgets, and the like which enables them sometimes to learn more through contact than a negro can acquire in school. Instead of teaching such children less arithmetic, *we must teach them more than white children.* (p. 4, italics added)

As in Woodson's world of 1933, today's middle-class children acquire a great deal of school knowledge at home. Those children who do not come from middle-class families must be taught more to "catch up." If children come to us knowing less, and we put them on a track of slower paced, remedial learning, then where will they end up?

Teaching to state-mandated tests exacerbates this dilemma. By illustration, when I visited a small, private school, the 3- and 4-year-olds ran up to me eager to share what they had learned that week. They showed me pictures and told me all about the structure of the middle ear. One of them had a hearing loss, so they were all

studying what that meant. They could name all the parts of the ear and told me how the brain processed sound. When I went up to the first- and second-grade classroom, those children, too, were eager to share. They were studying the constellations and had taken a trip to the planetarium so that they could learn to identify them in the night sky. They were learning the stories and myths that several cultures connected with various constellations. They were also writing their own myths about the star patterns they saw at night.

When I go to inner-city schools, the children are just as excited to share their work. However, they show me their handwriting papers, their test-oriented workbook pages on subject-verb agreement, or their multiple-choice responses to reading comprehension paragraphs. These latter children may well improve their scores on the state-mandated tests that ask them to prove they know such things, but which children are receiving a better education? Which will have discovered information that will give them the opportunity to become doctors, astronomers, or writers? Which ones are likely to have the background information college texts will demand?

ENSURE THAT ALL CHILDREN GAIN ACCESS TO “BASIC SKILLS”—THE CONVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES THAT ARE ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

What we call basic skills are typically the linguistic conventions of middle-class society and the strategies successful people use to access new information. For example, punctuation, grammar, specialized subject vocabulary, mathematical operations, five-paragraph essays, and so forth are all conventions. Using phonetic cues to read words, knowing how to solve word problems, determining an author's purpose, and finding meaning in context are all strategies. All children need to know these things. Some learn them being read to at home. Some learn them writing thank-you notes for their birthday presents under their parents' tutelage. Some learn them, as Woodson (1933/2000) suggested, just living in a middle-class home environment. Those who do not learn them before

they come to school depend on school to teach them.

But this does not mean that we can do so by teaching decontextualized bits of material and expect children to learn how to function in the world. Answering fill-in-the-blank questions or focusing solely on the minutia of learning will not create educated people.

One evening when my daughter was in first grade, she had a homework assignment to write three sentences. She was a child who loved to write, so I did not anticipate any problems with the assignment. We discussed topics she could write about—her grandmother's upcoming visit, her recent birthday party, or the antics of her two new kittens. As she began to write, the telephone rang and I walked away to answer it. After finishing the phone call, I came back to see how she was doing. She informed me that she was finished and gave me her notebook to read what she had written—"The dog can run. The boy is tall. The man is fat." I was puzzled by the lack of any personal significance in her words and finally responded, "That's really great, Maya, but what happened to writing about your grandmother or the party or the kittens?" My 6-year-old looked patiently at me and said with great deliberateness, "But Mom, I'm supposed to write *sentences!*" Still trying to get a handle on her perspective, I asked, "Maya, what are sentences?" She responded quickly, "Oh you know, Mom, stuff you write, but you never would say." "Ah so."

This teacher had, I am sure inadvertently, taught that sentences were meaningless, decontextualized statements you find in workbooks and on the blackboard that "you never would say." Written work in school was not connected to anything real, certainly not to real language. As all good, experienced teachers know, there are many ways to make school feel like it is a part of real life. Spelling words can be taken from stories children write in invented spelling. Grammar conventions can be taught as they arise in the letters children can write to their sports heroes or in the plays they might write to perform for the class. Strategies can be taught in the context of solving community problems, building model rockets, reading the directions

for new board games, or learning to summarize and simplify a concept into a form appropriate for teaching it to a younger child. Strategies and conventions must be taught, but they must be taught within contexts that provide meaning.

WHATEVER METHODOLOGY OR INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM IS USED, DEMAND CRITICAL THINKING

There is evidence that a number of instructional approaches may “work” for children in urban settings who might not be expected to succeed. Whatever approach or methodology is implemented, however, one factor that is necessary for excellence is that children are demanded to think critically about what they are learning and about the world at large. A key word here is *demand*. Many times it will not initially feel comfortable for students who have previously been asked solely to complete workbook pages. Yet many children, especially African American children, need and expect the teacher to push them. “To”, as one young African American man said, “*make me learn.*”

Famed mathematics teacher Dr. Abdulahim Shabazz has successfully taught students who came to college with deficits in mathematics at three historically Black universities. During the period from 1956 to 1963, while he was chair of the mathematics department at Atlanta University, 109 students graduated with master’s degrees in math. More than one third of those went on to earn doctorates in mathematics or math education from some of the best universities in the United States. Many of the original 109 produced students who earned Ph.D.s in math. Nearly 50% of the African American Ph.D. mathematicians in 1990 in the United States (about 200) resulted in some way from the original 109 Shabazz master’s students (Hilliard, 1991). Shabazz says that a significant percentage of the original 109 began with serious academic deficits in math and language arts. His slogan has always been, “Give me your worse ones and I will teach them.” How has he done this?

In an interview with Dr. Asa Hilliard (1991), Shabazz made it clear that SAT and ACT scores have almost no meaning for him; instead, he has

focused on a set of excellence-level goals that have shaped his approach to dealing with all students. His goals are

- To teach understanding rather than merely to teach mathematical operations;
- To teach mathematical language for the purpose of communicating in mathematics and not merely as a way to solve textbook problems;
- To teach his students that math is not at all a fixed body of knowledge but that it is an experimental enterprise in the truest sense of that word and that their approach to the solution of mathematical problems then and in the future should be to try a variety of strategies;
- To have students believe as he does that mathematics “is nothing more than a reflection of life and that life itself is mathematical.” He wants them to know that the symbols used in mathematics approximate the reality of human experience and cosmic operations; and
- To give his students a sense of hope that they can become superior performers (Hilliard, 1991, p. 23).

This is a testament to demanding critical thinking—not to accept anything as a given but to understand one’s own agency in the process of education and connect teaching and learning to the students’ own worlds. Other successful teachers have adopted various versions of this thinking strategy to their own subject areas and to varying ages of students. Carrie Secret, a phenomenal teacher of low-income African American elementary students in California, presents complex material to her charges by reading to them and having them listen to recordings of famous African American speakers. In one series of lessons, she has third graders re-create a sermon of famous minister Jeremiah Wright as a dramatic performance. The sermon is not written for children and is full of difficult vocabulary and complex metaphorical allusions. She and the children define the vocabulary together, delve into the metaphors, and explore the meaning of each line of the often-complicated text. The students write about how the text connects to their own lives and explore how the messages in the sermon connect to other literature they have studied. Only after exhaustive study do the children then “perform” the text for parents and for other adults. I have seen one of their performances and know firsthand why they routinely move their audiences to standing

ovations, shouts of approval, and tears of pride. These children know what they are talking about, know what it means to them, and know how to make others believe it.

Although we sometimes seem to act to the contrary, there is no real dichotomy between teaching basic skills and insisting that children learn to think critically. As with Shabazz's and Secret's students, when we teach appropriate conventions and strategies within the context of critical thinking, we can produce the educated people we strive for. To quote my own previously published work,

A "skilled" minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly. On the other hand, a critical thinker who lacks the "skills" demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning can aspire to financial and social status only within the disenfranchised underworld. (Delpit, 1995, p. 19)

PROVIDE THE EMOTIONAL EGO STRENGTH TO CHALLENGE RACIST SOCIETAL VIEWS OF THE COMPETENCE AND WORTHINESS OF THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Children are particularly susceptible to the media's assaults on the intelligence, morality, and motivation of people who look like them. The general notion in this country is that children who belong to stigmatized groups are "less than" their middle-class, lighter skinned age-mates. Children readily internalize these beliefs about themselves. I was once working with a young girl who had failed to learn multiplication. When I announced my intention to work with her on the topic, she looked at me and said, "Ms. Lisa, why are you doing this? Black people don't multiply, they just add and subtract. White people multiply." Were it not for the poignancy of her statement, it would be funny. Here is a child who set severe limits on her potential based on a misguided notion of the limits of African Americans, a notion no doubt appropriated from general American culture. She had never been told that Africans created much of what we know as higher mathe-

matics. She knew none of the great African American scientists and engineers.

It reminded me of my own nephew, who is only 6 years younger than I am—a difference great enough that I had experienced most of my early schooling in segregated schools, whereas he attended only schools that had officially been desegregated. When he was in high school and I was just out of college, I once berated him for making a D in chemistry. His response was, "What do you want from me? The White kids get Cs!" Although I had internalized the notion that we Black kids had to be "twice as good as White kids to get half as far," as had been drilled into us by parents and teachers in all-Black schools, he could not imagine that he could and should be equal to, if not better than, his White classmates.

Theresa Perry (2003), in *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, pointed out that although there was no expectation of being rewarded for advanced education in the same ways as Whites in the larger society, African Americans from slavery through the civil rights movement pursued educational achievement with a vengeance. In an attempt to develop a theory of Black achievement, Perry offered an analysis of why education was such a clear goal for educational attainment in the past and why that goal has become so much murkier in today's society. Perry argued that because the country's dominant belief system has always denigrated the academic competence and capacity of African Americans—most overtly visible in Jim Crow and the pre-civil rights era—Black institutions of the past, including segregated schools, organized themselves to counter this hegemonic belief:

Most, if not all of the historically Black segregated schools that African-American children attended were intentionally organized in opposition to the ideology of Black inferiority. In other words, in addition to being sites of learning, they also instituted practices and expected behaviors and outcomes that not only promoted education—an act of insurgency in its own right—but also were designed to counter the ideology of African Americans' intellectual inferiority and ideologies that saw African Americans as not quite equal and as less than human. Everything about these institutions was supposed to affirm

Black humanity, Black intelligence, and Black achievement. (p. 88)

In Black schools, churches, clubs—indeed, all Black community institutions—everything focused on this one goal. In all settings, there were intentional activities and belief systems designed to ensure achievement, including regularly practiced rituals that included uplifting songs, recitations, and performances; high expectations; extensive academic support in and out of school; and regular group meetings to express the expectations of adults that young people must work hard to be free in an oppressive society.

Today's schools, integrated or not, seldom develop the same kind of intentional communities. In the post-civil rights era, most public schools are de-ritualized institutions. Certainly, they are institutions that are not intentionally organized to counter inferiority myths—and the reality is, because of that kind of institutional space, Black students today, as perhaps never before, are victims of the myths of inferiority and find much less support for countering these myths and embracing academic achievement outside of individual families.

When I spoke at Southern University a few years ago, a young African American woman who had been a student teacher the semester before told me that one of her students, a young African American teenager, came up to her after a social studies lesson and said, "So, Ms. Summer, they made us the slaves because we were dumb, right?" She had been so hurt by his words that she did not know how to respond.

To teach children who have internalized racist beliefs about themselves, one of the things that successful teachers must constantly say to them is, "You will learn! I know you will learn because you are brilliant." Jamie Escalante taught poor barrio children in California to pass advanced placement calculus tests. As depicted in the movie *Stand and Deliver* (Menéndez & Musca, 1988), he would say to them, "You have to learn math. Math is in your blood. The Mayans discovered zero!" We have to be able to say to our children that we understand and they need to understand that this system is set up to guarantee their failure. To succeed in school is to

cheat the system and we are going to spend our time cheating. Teachers have an important role to play here. They must not only make children aware of the brilliance "in their blood" but also help children turn any internalized negative societal view of their competence into a compelling drive to demand that any system attempting to relegate them to the bottom of society must, instead, recognize and celebrate their giftedness.

RECOGNIZE AND BUILD ON CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS

To do this requires knowledge of children's out-of-school lives. One of the teachers in Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1994) *The Dreamkeepers* speaks of having brought candy to school for a holiday party. She thought she brought enough candy for everyone, but all of the candy disappeared before half the children had been served. She was perplexed but then discovered that the children were putting some of the candy in their pockets. After some inquiries, she realized that they were doing so to take some home for their siblings. Many teachers might end any inquiries about the disappearing candy with the conclusion that the children were stealing. They might think, "I'm not going to bring candy into this classroom anymore because these children are selfish and untrustworthy." But this teacher understood that what was happening was a real strength that she could build on. After all, how many children from middle-class families would be so focused on making sure that siblings received the same treats as they had? These children were exhibiting a sense of caring for others and nurturing that could very well make instructional strategies such as peer tutoring or collaborative learning much easier to implement.

When I was a new teacher, Howard was a first grader in my class. After several months of failing to get Howard to progress in mathematics, I was ready to take the advice I was given to refer him for special education placement. Among other academic problems, Howard was having real difficulty with math worksheets, especially those concerning money where there are pictures of different configurations of coins

and the child is supposed to indicate the total amount represented. It did not seem to matter how frequently we reviewed those worksheets, Howard just could not get it. Before I made any referrals, I had the opportunity to visit Howard's home and talk to his mother and his grandmother. I found out that Howard's mother was suffering with a substance addiction and that Howard was responsible for getting his 4-year-old physically challenged sister up every morning and on the bus and to school. He also did the family's wash, which meant that he had to have a lot of knowledge about coins and money. He was very good at it because he knew he could not get cheated when he purchased laundry supplies from the corner store. What I found out through that experience was that I, without really knowing this child, almost made a terrible mistake. I assumed that because he could not do a task in my classroom that was decontextualized and paperbound, he could not do the real-life task it represented. It is often very difficult for teachers, particularly those who may not be from the same cultural or class background as the children, to understand where strengths may lie. We must have means to discover what the children are able to do outside of school—in church, at community centers, as caretakers for younger siblings—or what skills they may be able to display on the playground with their peers. A lot of our youngsters in urban settings come to us with what we refer to as "street smarts," yet we seldom seem able to connect that kind of knowledge to school problem solving and advanced thinking.

USE FAMILIAR METAPHORS, ANALOGIES, AND EXPERIENCES FROM THE CHILDREN'S WORLD TO CONNECT WHAT CHILDREN ALREADY KNOW TO SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE

To connect students' out-of-school lives to academic content, another teacher described in Ladson-Billings (1994) taught about the governmental structure of the United States by connecting it to the Black church structure. She had the children collect the articles of incorporation of their churches. She then made the connection to show how the minister could be compared to the president, how the deacons could be com-

pared to the legislators, and how the board could be compared to the senators. The children not only learned about the constitution in a way that they were able to apprehend with much greater clarity but also learned that institution building was not merely the purview of others but a part of their culture as well.

Yet another teacher, Amanda Branscombe (personal communication, 1990), who happens to be European American, had a class of ninth graders who were considered special education students. She had the children teach her the rules for writing a rap song. She told them, "No, no, you can't just tell me to write it, you have to tell me the rules. I know nothing about rap songs. I've never even heard one. What rules do I need to know to write one?" So the children really had to explore meter, verse, and the structure of a rap song. After they had done so—and that was a massive undertaking on its own—Branscombe compared their rules to those Shakespeare used to write his sonnets. Then they set about exploring Shakespeare's rules in the context of his writing.

One year my mother, who was a teacher, taught plane geometry by having the students make a quilt for a student who had dropped out of school to get married and have a baby. The students presented this quilt to this young woman as a present. There are several connections here. It is obvious that by making the quilt, the students were creating something for someone they cared about, but their teacher also taught them the theorems of geometry as they worked to piece the shapes of the quilt together. School knowledge was connected to a sense of community. Teachers really are cultural brokers who have the opportunity to connect the familiar to the unknown. We teachers have to work at learning to do that.

CREATE A SENSE OF FAMILY AND CARING IN THE SERVICE OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Jackie Irvine, a friend and colleague, told me about her interview with a teacher identified as an excellent teacher of African American children. She asked Ms. Brandon (not her real name), "How do you view teaching? How do

you ensure children's success?" The teacher answered, "Well, the first thing I have to do is make the children mine." She continued, saying that on the 1st day of school she would go down each row and say "Son, what is your name?" The little boy would say, "My name is Justin Williams." And she would say, "Sweetheart, that is a wonderful name, but in this class your name is going to be Justin Williams *Brandon*." She would ask the next child, "Darling, what's your name?" "My name is Mary Johnson." She would say, "And in this class, darling, your name is Mary Johnson *Brandon*." Ms. Brandon proceeded down each row to give each child her last name. She then said, "Now, you are all my children, and I have the smartest children in the entire world. So you are going to learn more this year than anybody every learned in one year. And we are going to get started right now."

In her dissertation research, Madge Willis (1995) looked at a very successful school in Atlanta serving low-income African American students and found an overwhelming sense of family, a sense of connectedness, and a sense of caring. I have discovered that children of color, particularly African American, seem especially sensitive to their relationship between themselves and their teacher. I have concluded that it appears that they not only learn from a teacher but also for a teacher. If they do not feel connected to a teacher on an emotional level, then they will not learn, they will not put out the effort.

Barbara Shade (1987) suggested that African American children value the social aspects of an environment to a greater extent than "mainstream" children and tend to put an emphasis on feelings, acceptance, and emotional closeness. Shade contended that the time and effort African American children will spend on academic tasks in a classroom depend on their interpretation of the emotional environment.

MONITOR AND ASSESS CHILDREN'S NEEDS AND THEN ADDRESS THEM WITH A WEALTH OF DIVERSE STRATEGIES

We do a lot of "monitoring" and "assessing," of course, but we are not very adept at addressing specific needs, especially in diverse cul-

tures. Assessment in these contexts is not as straightforward as it may seem on the surface. In her studies of the narrative styles of young children, Sarah Michaels (1981) found that Black and White first graders tended to tell "sharing time" stories differently. White children tended to tell "topic-centered" stories, focused on a single object or event, whereas Black children tended to tell "episodic" stories, usually longer and always including shifting scenes related to a series of events. In a subsequent study, Courtney Cazden (1988) and Michaels created a tape of a White adult reading the oral narratives of Black and White first graders with all dialectal markers removed. They then played the tape for a racially mixed group of educators and asked each educator to comment about the children's likelihood of success in school. The researchers were surprised by the differential responses of African American and European American educators to an African American child's story.

The White adults' comments included statements such as

"Terrible story, incoherent."

"Not a story at all in the sense of describing something that happened."

"This child might have trouble reading."

"This child exhibits language problems that will affect school achievement; family problems or emotional problems might hamper academic progress" (Cazden, 1988, p. 18).

By contrast, the African American adults found the story "well-formed, easy to understand, and interesting with lots of detail and description" (Cazden, 1988, p. 18). All five of the African American adults mentioned the "shifts" and "associations" or "nonlinear" qualities of the story, but they did not find this distracting. Three of the five African American adults selected this story as the best of the five they heard. All but one judged the child as exceptionally bright, highly verbal, and/or potentially successful.

This is not a story about racism. Again, there was no way that the adults knew the race of the child who told the story, because all the stories were read by a White researcher. The point here is that when a teacher is familiar with aspects of

a child's culture, then the teacher may be better able to assess the child's competence. Many teachers, unfamiliar with the language, the metaphors, or the environments of the children they teach, may easily underestimate the children's competence.

I have also discovered that to effectively monitor and assess the needs of children who may come from a different cultural background, the notion of basic skills often needs to be turned on its head. We must constantly be aware that children come to school with different kinds of knowledge. Our instruction must be geared toward understanding that knowledge, building on it, and teaching that which children do not already know. To offer appropriate instruction, we need to understand that because what we typically think of as basic skills are those skills that middle-class children learn before they come to school—knowledge of letter names and sounds, color names, and counting; recognition of numerals; familiarity with storybooks and with the particular kinds of language found in them; and so forth. Those skills may not be "basic" to children from nonmainstream or non-middle-class backgrounds. We also need to rethink the general belief that critical and creative thinking, the ability to analyze, and the ability to make comparisons and judgments are higher order skills. It is often the case that for children who are from poor communities, critical thinking skills are basic. Those are the skills they come to us with. They are accustomed to being more independent. Often they are familiar with real-life problems and how to solve them.

So those children who appear to learn the basic skills presented in school quickly typically learn most of them during their 5 or 6 *years* at home. Low-income children who did not learn these skills at home, and who do not learn them in the first 5 or 6 *months* of school, are often labeled remedial at best or special education material at worst. Even more problematic, the knowledge that these children do come to school with is often viewed as a deficit rather than an advantage. I have seen far too many children labeled as "too streetwise" by adults who see their ability to solve problems with

near adult sophistication as violating some preconceived notion of childhood innocence.

An Anglo teacher I worked with in Alaska successfully taught low-income Alaska Native children in rural villages. When she came to teach in the city, she was appalled at how dependent the middle-class children were. "They don't even know how to tie their shoes," she said of her kindergarten class. The village kindergartners could not only tie their shoes but also fix meals for their siblings, clean up, and help their parents with all sorts of tasks. The village kindergartners, members of an ethnic group typically stigmatized by the larger society, took on the responsibility of keeping areas of the classroom in order with little adult supervision, which freed their teacher to work on academic tasks with small groups. The teacher found the city kids unprepared for such responsibilities. When paint spilled on the floor, most of the middle-class children stood around waiting for someone to clean it up. In the village, the children would take care of the problem without the teacher ever knowing a problem had occurred.

What I am suggesting is that we teach traditional school knowledge to those children for whom basic skills are not so basic and appreciate and make use of the higher order knowledge that they bring from home. On the other hand, I suggest that we appreciate the school knowledge middle-class children bring and teach them the problem solving and independence that they sometimes lack.

We must also be very aware that we need to use a variety of strategies to teach. Although it is important for children to have the opportunity to "discover" new knowledge, we must not fool ourselves that children need only, for example, a "literacy rich" environment to discover literacy. What we seldom realize is that middle-class parents are masters at "direct teaching" long before their children ever enter school.

I recently visited a child care center where I saw children pounding nails into a tree trunk and having a great time. When a father arrived to pick up his daughter, she called out to him, "Come see what I'm doing!" The father joined her at the tree trunk to admire her work. The

father inquired, "Do you remember what we said those rings in the tree trunk were for? Yes, to tell how old the tree is. Let's count the rings and see how old this tree is." The point here is that if that child were later put into a "tree trunk-rich" environment, it might appear that she discovered the meaning of tree rings on her own. We have to know when to teach information directly and when to provide opportunities for children to explore and discover—and we have to realize the difference between teaching and merely allowing children to display what they have already learned at home.

We have to have a variety of methodologies, we have to be able to assess broadly, and we have to be able to pull out of our teaching hats the appropriate method for the children who are sitting before us at any given moment.

HONOR AND RESPECT THE CHILDREN'S HOME CULTURE

When educators hear this precept, they frequently interpret it to mean that they are being directed to create an all-African American or all-Latino or all-Native American curriculum. This is not what is being asked of them. Most parents do want their children to learn about their own culture, but they also want them to learn about the rest of the world. I have described what I want for my child as an academic house built on a strong foundation of self-knowledge but with many windows and doors that look out onto the rest of the world. A problem, however, is that the cultures of marginalized groups in our society tend to be either ignored, misrepresented, viewed from an outsider perspective, or even denigrated. Aside from a yearly trek through the units on Martin Luther King and perhaps, Rosa Parks, the historical, cultural, and scientific contributions of African Americans are usually ignored or rendered trivial.

Even when they have the desire to do so, educators are often unable to connect to the cultures of their students because our universities are so limited in what is taught about other cultures. I sometimes ask my students to make a list of the names of an explorer, a philosopher, a scientist, a poet, and a mathematician. After they have

completed their lists, I then ask that they write the names of a Chinese explorer, a Latino philosopher, a South American scientist, a Native American poet, and an African mathematician. Obviously, the first list is much easier for them and is usually populated with names of European males. The second list is impossible for them to complete. I point out the "cultural deficits" with which we in this country are typically saddled as a result of our limited education!

Teachers who wish to learn the culture of their students usually have to pursue the study on their own. One excellent example of a teacher who has done so is Stephanie Terry of Baltimore, Maryland. When I visited her classroom, Stephanie taught first grade in an all-African American school. Although she considered herself an "Afrocentric" teacher, she taught the curriculum mandated by the Baltimore school system. However, she always added material about the children's cultural heritage as well. When she taught the mandated unit on libraries, for example, she taught about the first major libraries in Africa. When she taught about health, she taught Imhotep, the famous African physician, philosopher, and scientist. She ensured that the children would find people who looked like them in the curriculum. Stephanie's students always scored near the top of any standardized tests administered, yet she never spent a moment "teaching to the test."

On a cautionary note, however, I should mention my observation of the teacher next door to Stephanie's classroom. That teacher also tried to use African American culture in her curriculum, but her manner of talking to the children seemed to militate against their getting any benefits from the enriched curriculum. Although she had done a lot of research to create her curriculum, she said things to the children such as "You see the way you're acting you could never be Gwendolyn Brooks! You just don't know how to act. You all act like you don't have any sense at all!" and "You all don't even care about all the work I put into this. You don't have any respect. You just need to sit down and stop acting like idiots. I don't even know why I try anything nice with this class! You'll never be anything!"

I happened to be at an assembly later in the week where the children were watching the presidential inauguration and the principal asked, "How many of you think you could be president?" It is interesting that all of Stephanie's kids raised their hands. When I looked at the class from the teacher next door, I saw only one or two hands raised. It struck hard that it is not just the curriculum but also the attitudes toward the children that affect what the children believe about themselves. One cannot "honor and respect" the culture without honoring and respecting the children themselves.

To get teachers to consider the wealth and strength of African American cultural contributions to this country, Ladson-Billings (1994) has asked teachers to consider what the United States might look like today if African Americans had arrived only recently. There were many thoughtful responses: If African Americans had just immigrated, this country would not have the rich musical heritage provided by blues, jazz, and gospel. Other teachers suggested that the moral conscience of the nation might not have been heightened without the experience of the civil rights movement. Another teacher suggested that the country would be unrecognizable because we may have failed to grow beyond the 13 original colonies without the labor of enslaved Africans. The point of the exercise was to help teachers keep in mind the value and the contributions of a particular people to this country when we teach their children.

FOSTER A SENSE OF CHILDREN'S CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY—TO SOMETHING GREATER THAN THEMSELVES

The role of community in education has changed considerably during the years since the desegregation of schools. Prior to desegregation, the Black community played an especially significant role in schools, providing many of the resources the local districts refused to provide (see Walker, 1996). The children of the community were told in no uncertain terms by their parents and their teachers that their role was to excel in school because so many had suffered so that they might be in the position to

receive an education. We students were admonished that we must excel for those who had come before us, for our communities, for our descendants, in short, for all to whom we were connected by kinship or affiliation.

Perry (2003) pointed out that prior to the civil rights movement, although there was no expectation of being rewarded for advanced education in the same ways as Whites in the larger society, African Americans pursued educational achievement:

For African Americans, from slavery to the modern Civil Rights movement, . . . you pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person; how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for social uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people. (p. 11)

Today's students receive a different message. We tell them that they must do well in school for only one purpose—to get a good job. This incentive to succeed is meager, indeed, when compared to the incentive derived from disappointing one's community, prior and future generations, and in truth, the entire race! It would behoove us to rethink how we talk to children about education and its purposes. The connection to community, to something greater than our individual selves, can be the force that propels our children to be their best.

In *Urban Sanctuaries*, McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (2001) studied urban children who were and those who were not involved in community organizations. What they found is that children who were a part of some community-based group that valued educational achievement tended to be more successful in school. Whether the group was Boy Scouts, a sports team, or a church group, when the children regularly heard adults important to them outside of school and home discuss the importance of school achievement, they pushed themselves harder to excel. It seems that such groups can create a culture of achievement in which children are wont to disappoint their fellow members. Again, the children were able to benefit by identifying with something greater than themselves.

My young Thursday night teachers have no idea of the power they actually hold. Despite their feeling of inadequacy, of being overwhelmed and undervalued, what they fail to understand is that they have the potential to change the lives of so many children. When I have asked adults who, based on their childhood demographics, should not have but did achieve significant success—those who came from low-income communities, from single-parent families, from the foster care system, or who spent many years in special education classrooms—they have all identified one common factor to explain their accomplishments. Each of these adults attributed his or her success to one or more teachers. All talked about a teacher who was especially encouraging, or who demanded their best, or who convinced them they were more than the larger world believed. Teachers changed their lives, even when the teachers themselves did not realize they were doing so.

And so, when teachers express feeling ineffectual, I remind them of the significant role they can choose to play. The above 10 precepts are offered to assist them in that role. By knowing their students and their students' intellectual heritage and using that knowledge in their instruction, by always demanding students' best, by fighting against societal stereotypes, and by helping students understand the important role they can play in changing their communities and the world, teachers truly can revolutionize the education system and save this country, one classroom at a time.

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Lisa Delpit, executive director of the Florida International University Center for Urban Education & Innovation, received the award for Outstanding Contribution to Education in 1993 from Harvard Graduate School of Education, which hailed her as a "visionary scholar and woman of courage." Her work on school-community relations and cross-cultural communication was cited when she received her MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship. Most recent, she has been selected as the Antioch College Horace Mann Humanity Award recipient for 2003; the award recognizes a contribution by alumni of Antioch College who have "won some victory for humanity." Among her publications are Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (New Press, 1995); The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African-American Children, coedited with Theresa Perry (Beacon, 1998); and The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom, coedited with Joanne Kilgour Dowdy (New Press, 2002).