

Excerpts from “What Urban Students Say About Good Teaching”

Dick Corbett and Bruce Wilson, *Educational Leadership*,
September 2002, Volume 60, Number 1, pages 18 – 22.

Interviews with inner-city adolescents show that they want to learn and have a vision of the kind of teacher who can help them excel. Interviews with 400 students attending inner-city, low-income middle schools in Philadelphia revealed that these students cared deeply about their learning, and had a clear vision of the kind of teacher who could help them excel. Students consistently said that good teachers: **made sure students did their work; controlled the classroom; were willing to help students; explained assignments and content clearly; varied the classroom routine; and took the time to get to know the students and their circumstances.**

What can schools do to encourage students to care more about learning? Make sure that teachers act in ways that demonstrate how much *they* care! At least, that would be the answer of nearly 400 students we interviewed from inner-city, low-income middle and high schools. In fact, the students never wavered in identifying their teachers as the main factor determining how much they learned, and they spoke with one voice when describing good teachers.

Good teachers

- Made sure that students did their work.
- Controlled the classroom.
- Were willing to help students whenever and however the students wanted help.
- Explained assignments and content clearly.
- Varied the classroom routine.
- Took the time to get to know the students and their circumstances.

Significantly, students did not confuse teachers' personal qualities with their professional ones. Interviewees described "mean" good teachers and "mean" bad teachers; "funny" good teachers and "funny" bad teachers; and "boring" good teachers and "boring" bad teachers. If a teacher had the six qualities that students identified as those of a good teacher, then demeanor, sense of humor, and charisma—as well as any other personal characteristic—were unimportant.

What Is a Good Teacher?

Students repeatedly invoked the six qualities of good teaching in answering almost any question we asked. Students talked approvingly about "strict" teachers—those who pushed students to complete their assignments and maintained an orderly classroom. Students added that good teachers were willing to help, explained assignments and content clearly, varied classroom activities, and tried to understand students.

Good Teachers Push Students

These urban students admitted that their default response to most assignments was to ignore them, which understandably gave the impression that they cared little about learning. Nevertheless, students liked teachers who successfully combated this habit. As two students explained (in their words and syntax),

I like the ones that don't allow excuses. It's my turn to get an education. I need to have someone to tell me when I'm tired and don't feel like doing the work that I should do it anyway.

If they don't keep after you, you'll slide and never do the work. You just won't learn nothing if they don't stay on you.

Teachers "nagged" students in many ways—by consistently checking homework, offering quiet individual reminders, giving rewards, and calling parents. As one student boasted, "He keeps pressing me until I get it right."

Good Teachers Maintain Order

According to students, their teachers varied tremendously in how well they were able to control students, and the ones who could not maintain control bothered them a lot. As one student succinctly explained,

The kids don't do the work. The teacher is hollering and screaming, "Do your work and sit down!" This makes the ones that want to learn go slower. It makes your grade sink down. It just messes it up for you. The teacher is trying to handle everybody and can't.

Another student pointed out the difference between strict and not-so-strict teachers:

Teachers that just let you do what you want, they don't get a point across. Strict teachers get the point across.

And, as was typical of almost everything students had to say about good teaching, everything came back to whether they learned:

I want a teacher strict enough for me to learn.

Good Teachers Are Willing to Help

Just as research has demonstrated that students have different learning styles, the students we interviewed had different helping styles. Some wanted help after school, some during class, some individually, some through working with peers, some through whole-class question-and-answer sessions, and some without ever having to acknowledge to anyone that they needed it. Being omnisciently adept at knowing how and when to offer help was an indelible part of being a good teacher.

A good teacher takes time out to see if all the kids have what they're talking about and cares about how they're doing and will see if they need help.

Teachers who offered generous help often hooked students who previously had been reluctant classroom participants into working.

One boy in the class, he do all his work now. If it wasn't for my teacher, he wouldn't do nothing. At the beginning of the year, he don't do nothing; now he does. . . . [It's] 'cause the teacher took time out to help him and talk to him.

Teacher help also broke the cycle of failure that we heard about from so many students. One of them explained this phenomenon and the role of teacher assistance in ameliorating it:

Say, for instance, I didn't come to school. The next day I came in, they went over something new. There wouldn't be like time to show me what they did [the previous day]. And the teacher wouldn't make sure I understood. So, I start moving with them, but I be behind. They should have given extra help. . . . They could pull me to the side and ask me if I want to do it. Then it would be my choice.

Good Teachers Explain Until Everyone Understands

Many students complained about teachers who moved too fast through material or explained it only once and in one way. They much preferred to have teachers who stayed on an assignment until everyone understood, who offered multiple and repeated explanations, and who, as one student said, "feed it into our head real good; they do it step-by-step and they break it down."

Students seemed most disturbed by teachers who allowed discipline problems to affect the quality of their explanations. For example, many students referred to teachers who would say a variant of "I've already told you this; you should have listened the first time" in response to repeated requests for clarification. Although the teachers may have been justified in feeling frustrated at the lack of attention that prompted the requests, to students this phrase meant "I refuse to teach you."

By contrast, students' faces brightened considerably when they were able to say something like the following:

The teachers are real at ease. They take the time, you know, go step-by-step. We learn it more. It seems like they got the time to explain it all. We don't have to leave anyone behind.

Good Teachers Vary Classroom Activities

Different activities appealed to different students. Students' preferences included working in groups, listening to the teacher talk, reading from a book, doing worksheets, participating in whole-class discussions, and doing hands-on activities. However, students agreed that learning was the primary reason for liking a certain approach, as the following three statements illustrate:

I prefer working in groups. You have more fun and you learn at the same time. You learn quickly. So, you have fun and you do the work.

My favorite subject is math because she made our work into a game and I caught on real fast doing it that way.

I prefer to work by myself because most people don't read on the same level. I don't like to listen to others read. I might be ahead or behind where they are, whatever the case may be.

Good Teachers Try to Understand Students

Students applauded teachers who did more than just teach content to them. They especially appreciated teachers who made the effort to see beyond students' behavior and understand who they really were. One student explained:

I heard teachers talking about people, saying "Those kids can't do nothing." Kids want teachers who believe in them.

Students particularly valued teachers who recognized the possibility that students' misbehavior was not automatically targeted at the teachers.

Sometimes a teacher don't understand what people go through. They need to have compassion. A teacher who can relate to students will know when something's going on with them. If like the student don't do work or don't understand, the teacher will spend a lot of time with them.

GOOD TEACHING = MORE LEARNING

Students clearly expressed the belief that good teaching was important because it made them learn better. Understand that when they said "better," students sometimes meant that they learned "something." Unfortunately, it was not unusual for these students to spend a semester or an entire year in a core subject in which they learned nothing, most often because they experienced a revolving door of substitutes or a new teacher who was not equipped to meet the challenges of an urban environment. Indeed, one student's advice to an early-career teacher was, "She should quit this job—it's too hard for her."

Students defined learning "better" as "getting the work right," "understanding something that a teacher already tried to teach," and "getting stuff we haven't had before." Despite the lack of definitional sophistication, students voiced no doubt about doing better in some teachers' classrooms than in others.

And because they cared about learning, it mattered greatly to students how often they encountered good teachers. Nearly every student in all six Philadelphia middle schools could identify a teacher whom they considered to be good; and nearly every one could describe a classroom situation where little learning, if any, took place.

Dick Corbett (610-408-9206) and **Bruce Wilson** (856-662-6424) are independent education researchers. Their most recent book (with coauthor Belinda Williams) is *Effort and Excellence in Urban Classrooms: Expecting and Getting Success with All Students* (Teachers College Press, 2002).