Winning Methods of Teachers Who Close the Gap Between Black and White Students

By JoHnnie mckinley

Teachers who are able to close the achievement gap between black and white students have positive relationships with students, have studied cultural differences and understand how to apply their knowledge, and use a range of strategies to reach diverse learners.

In my study of Seattle Public Schools where teachers and principals closed achievement gaps between black and white students on two statewide assessments, common themes emerged.

An analysis of district data revealed 3rd- through 8th-grade classroom teachers with no gap between black and white students’ average Normal Curve Equivalent on the 2001 Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the percent meeting the standard on the 2001 Washington Assessment of Student Learning. To ensure patterns of achievement, classrooms selected for the study had five or more students of each ethnic group meeting either criterion. These analyses identified 33 teachers and 22 principals in 22 schools, of whom 31 teachers and 20 principals completed interviews, surveys, and observations from February 2002 through June 2003.

The teachers and principals in this study demonstrated that they recognized and nurtured self-efficacy, attention to the social context for learning, professional development, reflection, collaboration, and coaching to enhance teachers’ capabilities. By examining their philosophies and practices, a framework of 42 instructional strategies can be gleaned that can provide possible content for collaboration and reflection among other educators, which could change predicted patterns of achievement for black students.

Cultural Understanding

Two initial themes that emerged from the study were teachers’ and principals’ attention to the social context for learning and professional learning to increase cultural competence. Teachers who were successful in helping black students achieve at high levels were able to build positive, respectful relationships with and demonstrate caring for their students.
The district

- Seattle Public Schools has more than 47,500 students, 100 schools, and 2,175 elementary and middle school teachers.
- During this two-year study, black students made up between 8% and 92.2% of each school’s enrollment and 23% of students in the 20 targeted schools.
- The district’s ethnic diversity is indicated by the fact that parent-student participation letters were provided in Cambodian, Chinese, English, French, Laotian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.
- The district is economically diverse: 41% of students in targeted schools received free or reduced-price lunch; free and reduced-price lunch participation ranged from 16% to 83% in the studied schools, with 12 of 20 schools reporting rates above 50%.
- The ethnic makeup of participating teachers and principals mirrored that of Washington state and the U.S., with 14% black, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% Hispanic, and 74% white.

Noddings (2005) said effective pedagogy is grounded in reciprocally caring relationships based on trust and respect between students and their teachers. In interviews, principals and teachers in this district spoke as if with one voice: “It’s about relationships.”

“One of the most important things is (for teachers) to connect and bond with kids,” said a principal. “I can’t teach you how to do that. It comes from within.”

Despite that assertion, teachers and principals confirmed that their social and academic interactions with students of color had been significantly influenced by districtwide professional development on multicultural approaches. Their professional learning focused on cultural competence and increasing cultural congruence in their instructional practices.

Nearly every responding teacher characterized two seminars on the impact of race on school climate, interactions, and performance and on culturally congruent literacy strategies as “the most powerful training in their careers.”

“Actually, attending led to my using” the strategies, a teacher said.

“What’s different about these teachers,” a principal noted, “is they use what they get in these trainings.”

INSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Identifying the strategies teachers used involved multiple steps. I identified 121 strategies indicated in Wáng and Walberg’s studies on teacher effectiveness (1991, pp. 81-100), found significant in my test-retest pilots, and cited in six comprehensive reviews of culturally responsive teaching and learning (Banks, et al., 2001; Cole, 1995; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997; Zeichner, 1996). Researchers have found that these strategies address historical and contemporary sociocultural causes of achievement gaps by focusing on effective and culturally congruent instruction, constructive teacher attitudes and beliefs, positive relationships that nurture student motivation, equitable opportunities to learn, and activism that addresses racism, injustices, and disparate expectations and conditions. Analyzing surveys, interviews, and classroom observation data yielded 42 interrelated strategies that teachers in the study used to effectively make a difference with black students. (See chart available with web version of this article.) The following teacher and principal narratives and examples from observations will paint a picture of how these strategies were applied in teachers’ classrooms.

- **Cooperative group instruction**
  Observations confirmed that teachers promoted collaborative democratic classrooms through cooperative group instruction and shared decision-making. They shared teaching responsibilities with students through reciprocal teaching, during which students took ownership for their own and their peers’ learning, sharing important roles and demonstrating expertise on important content and procedures.

  A principal explained, “She shares the power and doesn’t have to be the one to provide correct answers.”

  A middle school teacher recognized the motivation in this dynamic: “I acknowledge that I can learn from them. It builds trust, and more people are trying.”

  - **Classroom management and climate**
    Invariably, educators reported that classroom management techniques relied on care, respect, and a safe communal climate. Principals described teachers taking care to maintain fairness and appropriateness and working to prevent students’ loss of peer respect. Teachers helped students solve their own discipline problems by setting norms in class meetings and with daily pledges (Gallego, Cole, & Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 2001).

    Both groups described teachers as “warm demanders” (a term used by Kleinfield, cited in Gay, 2000, p. 50) who, while holding students to high academic and social standards, extended their relationship with and caring for students beyond the classroom.

    Said one teacher, “I’m strict, firm but fair,” and a principal asserted, “They know Ms. (teacher) don’t play (sic).”

    Another principal recalled, “What [he] does differently, or is a master at, is making kids feel really good. His classroom is upbeat — the absolutely constant affirmations.”

    Outside the classroom, teachers went out of their way to help children, providing personal grooming supplies and lunchtime and after-school tutoring (Wilson & Corbet, in Gay, 2000, p. 64).

  - **Clear standards and scaffolded learning**
The educators acknowledged that caring relationships alone are not enough to ensure academic achievement. They agreed that having a curriculum aligned to clear standards and assessments, and strengthening students’ literacy skills, contributed significantly to higher achievement overall.

Virtually every teacher in the study uses a literacy model grounded in a constructivist approach that helps students organize their thinking, make connections between concepts, and organize prior and new knowledge through tools such as graphic and advance organizers. In a 4th-grade ecology lesson, for example, students created “dancing definitions” — kinesthetic memory cues — to recall the meanings of words. Educators found such engaging scaffolding strategies effective because, as one teacher noted, these methods “allowed students to organize information in a way that made sense to them.”

- **Culturally congruent instruction**

Teachers achieved cultural congruence by integrating varied perspectives, culturally relevant materials, engaging, complex and meaningful tasks, and constructivist approaches.

Analyses suggest that teachers used strategies such as balancing teacher- and student-centered activities in interdisciplinary lessons that maintained active participation through questioning and recitation, and incorporated students’ preferences for kinesthetics and verbal expressiveness.

For example, after a teacher-led discussion on the freedom theme in Toni Morrison’s *The Black Box*, 4th graders developed community norms incorporating a description of freedom. In another school, to deepen understandings of perspective and vanishing point, a 5th-grade teacher led a discussion as students watched their classmates’ heights seemingly diminish as they walked down the hallway. Afterward, in the classroom, the teacher demonstrated, provided written directions, and coached students on creating vanishing points in drawings.

- **Teacher self-efficacy and expectations for student achievement**

Teachers and principals agreed that the successful teachers in this study balanced two traits — a strong sense of efficacy and a belief in personal capacity to change student achievement — with two strategies — deeply held and expressed high expectations and support — to ensure their students’ academic success. Several teachers said they “help students understand their role” in mastering content and contribute to students’ academic success through clear objectives and continually recognizing and reinforcing students’ efforts.

In a 6th-grade science class, students took turns completing a data table on the characteristics of a powder they were examining, while in a 7th-grade pre-algebra class, students solved problems in small groups as their teacher directed: “Work together to solve the equation and discuss your response with your team.”

Analyses indicated teachers “provided equitable access to opportunities to learn regardless of gaps or needs.” Several teachers declared, “I teach all kids like gifted kids.”

- **Classroom-based assessment**

Observations and interviews confirmed that teachers interwove frequent assessments with instruction to provide feedback and inform their instruction. They taught students to self-assess and reflect, so that students knew what they were learning and why, as well as how they were to show what they had learned. The principal of a middle school with seven participating teachers stated that during walk-throughs, she conducted “wall-walks,” noting whether teachers prominently displayed the essential learnings and the purpose for lessons.

Teachers used a range of assessment methods appropriate to diverse learners, such as performances and observations, to provide feedback to students. Students in an 8th-grade science class with a majority of English language learners coached each other on conveying the outcomes of an experiment, guided by rubrics for assessing scientific inquiry and communication skills. Their teacher provided feedback to improve their presentations and allowed the groups multiple opportunities to present outcomes. For 5th graders reading an article on the Columbia space shuttle astronauts, the performance assessment evaluated how well they had captured important details in a memorial showcase honoring the astronauts’ lives.

- **Coaching and reflection strengthen self-efficacy**

Participants credited powerful teaching teams and collegial and personal relationships within the group — spouse, friend, mentor — with strengthening “beliefs in their [personal] capacity to make a difference in students’ learning” and influencing their level of mutual reflection and collaboration.

Principals reported assisting teachers’ self-reflections with coaching and monitoring, “encouraging the use of specific research-based strategies.” In a middle school with seven participants, teachers stated that the “study caused people to talk with colleagues about why (we) were selected and what (we) do” in the classroom. Teachers felt they “became stronger (teachers) after being identified,” benefiting from self- and peer-reflection to develop
Successful strategies from Seattle Public Schools can be used anywhere.

they expect to make in instructional design, student and teacher academic and social interactions, and contextual features. Teams then develop a schedule for visiting classrooms (and collecting appropriate student work, if relevant) and a method for providing feedback to each other on their observations of whether the selected strategies and contextual features were implemented during the visit.

During or after visits, the team interviews a selected number of students to find out their understanding about what they are learning, how they are showing what they have learned, the purpose(s) of the learning activities, and their judgments about how often the targeted academic, social, and/or contextual features are used.

After observing in classrooms, trying out lessons, and/or collecting student work, teams discuss:
- The frequency with which they have seen targeted student-teacher academic and social interactions and contextual features strategies used (never, seldom, often, always);
- What they heard in short interviews with students;
- Comments and questions they have about what they observed in classrooms;
- Teachers’ decision-making processes in choosing strategies to meet their students’ needs;
- Areas of focus for subsequent lessons and coaching sessions.

These collaborative coaching sessions have the potential to increase teachers’ confidence in using the strategies as teams deepen their understanding of the strategies.

CONCLUSION

Many researchers point to the achievement gains black and poor minority students have made when their teachers use reflective approaches grounded in teacher effectiveness research and culturally responsive pedagogies (Archambault, 1989; Cummins, 1986; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Pasch, Sparks-Langer, Gardner, Starko, & Moody, 1991; Zeichner, 1996). In fact, comprehensive studies by Irvine and Armento (2001) and Pasch et al. (1991) found that these teachers adapt their knowledge, philosophies, instruction, and contextual features to students’ cultures, needs, learning preferences, and prior experiences.

Noddings (2005) has observed that effective teachers “learn about their (students’) needs, working habits, interests, and talents” and apply that knowledge as they construct “lessons and plan for their (students’) individual progress.”

Bernstein (in Gallego, Cole, & Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 2001, p. 983) said such changes are essential to weakening predicted, historical relationships between ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and educational achievement and closing achievement gaps.

The teachers and principals within Seattle Public Schools have successfully closed the gap with strategies that can be used anywhere.

REFERENCES


research and practice say about improving achievement. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.


### Strategies for high-performing black students

**FREQUENTLY USED, OBSERVED, AND EFFECTIVE**

#### INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Curriculum and instructional design variables</th>
<th>2. Classroom implementation: Instructional variables</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Design instruction aligned to curriculum and authentic assessment methods (P)</td>
<td>MULTICULTURAL APPROACHES TO INSTRUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Carefully plan and clearly structure lesson content (P)</td>
<td>• Interdisciplinary lessons (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engage in collaborative team teaching (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURAL COMPETENCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>CULTURAL COMPETENCE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate knowledge of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and gender diversity in classroom (P)</td>
<td>• Understand aspects of own culture that facilitate/hinder communication (TP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INFORMATION IN CURRICULUM ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use curriculum materials that describe historical, social, and political events from a wide range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and language perspectives (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MAINTAIN ACTIVE PARTICIPATION</strong></td>
<td><strong>MAINTAIN ACTIVE PARTICIPATION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Call on every student regularly (P)</td>
<td>• Frequently call for extended, substantive oral and written responses (TP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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#### 3. Student-teacher interactions: Academic variables

**TIME ALLOCATION**

- Carefully plan and clearly structure content and lessons for review of mastered material (P)
- Balance guiding and facilitating student learning with teacher-centered presentation to class as a total group (P)

**CULTURAL CONGRUENCE IN INSTRUCTION**

*Respond to student traits and needs*

- Demonstrate knowledge of content (TP)
- Incorporate student preference for oral, verbal expressiveness (TP)

*Provide meaningful instruction*

- Use constructivist approach with student knowledge as basis for inquiry, representing ideas, developing meaning, elaborating, organizing, and interacting with content (TP)

#### CONTEXTUAL FEATURES AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT VARIABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Teacher-student interactions: Social variables</th>
<th>2. Classroom climate variables</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FAIRNESS AND RESPECT</td>
<td>COHESIVENESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Base interactions on human dignity principles, respect for every person, and an attitude of hope and optimism (T)</td>
<td>• Promote a group-centered collaborative approach toward learning (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW FAVORITISM</td>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Treat all students equally well (T)</td>
<td>• Provide a safe and orderly classroom (TP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide each student with equitable access to learning resources and opportunities to learn (P)</td>
<td>LOW FRICTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create a culture in which students and teachers treat each other with civility, gentleness, and support (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be personally inviting and caring (TP)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop positive and personal relationships with students (TP)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT VARIABLES

- Use continuous, frequent assessments to determine skills and knowledge and to create interventions (T)

**KEY:** Identified by (TP) = teachers and principals, (P) = principals, (T) = teachers
### INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM VARIABLES

- Engage all students using meaningful, relevant, and challenging curriculum, content, and instructional activities (TP)
- Engage students in real-life contextual and vocational activities (TP)
- Use culturally relevant curriculum and materials
- Understand and use speech and expressions familiar to students (TP)

### COOPERATIVE GROUP INSTRUCTION STRATEGIES

- Build lesson format on student group participation (T)
- Provide small-group instruction in cooperative, problem-solving groups (TP)
- Ensure that all students in groups share important roles and demonstrate their expertise during small-group tasks (TP)
- Use a variety of oral and written communication patterns, including responding in unison, in pairs, and in teams after group collaboration (TP)
- Regularly place students in groups mixed by race, gender, and ability (P)

### PROCEDURES FOR REHEARSAL, PROCESSING, AND TRANSFERRING NEW CONTENT

- Use graphic and advance organizers (T)

### SETTING AND MAINTAINING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR CONTENT MASTERY

- Ensure that all students understand individual role in content mastery and task completion (T)
- Provide equitable access to opportunities to learn regardless of academic gaps or needs (TP)

### CONTEXTUAL FEATURES AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT VARIABLES

- Establish a physically inviting classroom (P)
- Use current learning materials and technology (P)

### 3. Classroom management variables

#### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

- Carefully plan lesson/day for active student engagement (T)
- Maintain active learning by using questions and recitation (P)
- Maintain active learning by randomly calling on students (T)

#### LOW APATHY

- Create lessons such that class members are concerned and interested in what goes on in class (P)

### STUDENT DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES

- Use established routines and rituals balanced with excitement (P)
- Provide explicit coaching on appropriate behavior (P)
- Prevent situations in which students lose peer respect (P)

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