

Explaining Teacher Success With At-Risk Students

By Martin Haberman

Distinguished Professor, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

I recently observed in a middle school serving youth in poverty. In the first classroom, things were falling apart. Students sharpened pencils but did not write anything. They left and entered the room at will. They crumbled papers and tossed them around. They chatted with friends and walked around aimlessly. They shouted out, passed notes, did each other's hair or simply slept.

In effect, students were doing everything but paying attention to the teacher or completing the assignment at hand. Finally the bell rang. The students charged out of the room pushing and shouting. It would be easy to infer that these students are not interested in learning, low in achievement, unmanageable, and at risk of dropping out.

I followed the students as they moved down the hall.

As they entered the next classroom, they quieted down and took their seats. They began to work quietly, completing an assignment written on the blackboard. After a few minutes, the teacher started a discussion. The students raised their hands to speak and seemed eager to answer questions and make comments.

They listened politely to each other. They seemed very interested in the topic and appeared eager to share ideas. They followed directions, finished writing their own assignments, and helped classmates to complete theirs. It would be easy to infer that these are eager students, interested in learning, gaining many new concepts and skills, and on their way to being highly successful in school.

What accounts for the differences in these students between hour one and hour two? The usual explanations for why there are so many at-risk youth are: dysfunctional families, violence, unemployment, crime, drugs, gangs, racism, poor housing, lack of health care, handicapping physical conditions, abusive parents, poor nutri-

tion, low self-esteem and lack of role models. (These 14 reasons do not even begin to cover the explanations offered.) *But the children in period two are the very same youth as in period one!*

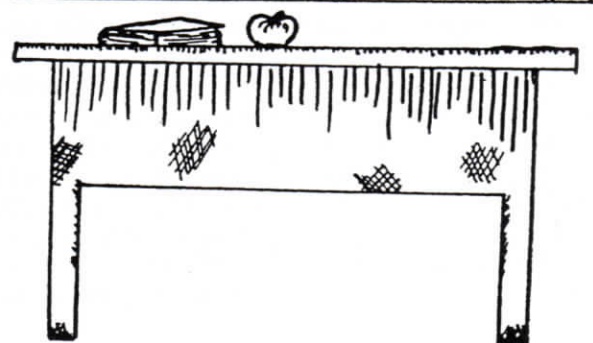
A second set of explanations for why some students succeed and others fail deals with the nature of the school principal and school leader-

ship. But these youngsters have the same principal!

Other common explanations for why students fail relate to the relevance of school curriculum, the testing program, the school organization, the poor texts, the number of computers, and class size. But all of these conditions are the same for these

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students between period one and period two!

The most fully documented explanations for why students are at risk refer to their socioeconomic class and their parents' level of education. Again, these factors cannot possibly pertain since we are seeking to explain different behaviors in the same students.

Finally, there are the "scientific" explanations. At-risk students have lower ability. They test lower on IQ tests and on other tests that claim to measure potential. But do such tests explain the differences in student behavior and achievement in the first and second periods?

The most reasonable and best explanation for understanding the changes in the behavior of these youth can be found by examining the differences in their teachers. One was a star teacher, the other a failure. What makes some teachers highly effective with youth in poverty?

The "Personality" of Star Teachers

There is no single personality type of construct that will predict teacher success. If star teachers were psychologically tested, they would represent all types. Some are outgoing, others are shy. Some are talkative, others are terse. Some are greater risk-takers than others. There is no model type that can predict and explain their success. In his famous study, "Characteristics of Teachers," David G. Ryans of the University of Texas-Austin identified three types of teachers:

x = Enthusiastic, surgent creative

y = Businesslike, well-organized

z = Aloof, remote

Unfortunately, when this analysis was applied to teachers of real children and youth, it was found that some students' achievement increased most with "x" teachers and others with "y" teachers. Some students even improved in achievement most with "z" teachers. There is simply no basis for predicting how well teachers will function on the basis of their personality assessment.

The Behaviors of Star Teachers

Research has identified specific behaviors of teachers that correlate with higher student achievement. For example, if teachers increase their "wait time" after asking a thought-provoking question, more students will try to answer. But waiting more than three seconds after asking a question is one discrete behavior. There are literally *hundreds* of such "right" teacher behaviors that have been identified by research. The State of Wisconsin has an official "Behaviors to Look For" list, which defines the 124 behaviors of good teachers.* Unfortunately, such lists do not tell the teacher which specific behaviors are more important or less important, and which behaviors should be done with greater frequency or over greater periods of time. It is not possible for teachers (or anyone else) to remember and simultaneously perform long lists of discrete behaviors. And if it were possible, it would not be desirable to have teachers functioning mechanistically

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rather than holistically.

Where does that leave us? We need star teachers who can serve as models. But if personality type or long lists of specific behaviors do not predict effective teachers, what does?

The Functions of Effective Teachers of Children in Poverty

Over the years we have identified 14 abilities that discriminate between star teachers on the one hand and quitters and failures on the other. The abilities that characterize the teaching of great teachers include the following:

1. Organizational know-how
2. Physical/emotional stamina
3. Coaching versus directiveness
4. How they explain success
5. The basis of their rapport
6. Their job definition
7. Their definition of purpose
8. Persistence

9. Willingness to protect students' learning

10. Applications of ideas to practice

11. How they explain "at risk"

12. The basis of their relationship with students

13. Their view of burnout

14. Fallibility

How teachers perform these functions and the ideology they believe in that undergirds their performance explains the difference between star teachers and quitter/failure teachers. In part two these abilities will be explained further.



AUTHOR NOTE:

Martin Haberman is a distinguished professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The Haberman Educational Foundation of Houston, Texas (800-667-6185) provides training in the use of his teacher and principal selection instruments.

* Wisconsin Teacher Performance Assessment Instrument (Behaviors to Look For); Department of Public Instruction, Madison, 1987.