

THE OVERLOOKED INEQUITY

Eric Schaps

A lot has been said about the inequities faced by students in urban districts. Much discussed are the problems of inexperienced teachers, inadequate facilities, and high turnover of administrators and teachers. Also, increasingly, the underlying problem of inequitable per-student funding is recognized. Compared with dollars spent on suburban students, urban students receive significantly fewer on average.

But one fundamental inequity remains overlooked: the heavy diet of didactic instruction that prevails in most urban schools. Lecturing predominates across grade levels and content areas. Teachers do most of the modeling and questioning as well as the talking. Students are put in passive sit-and-get roles. And reward-and-punish discipline systems such as positive behavioral interventions and supports are used to keep them in line.

When students acquiesce to this state of affairs—and they usually do comply even if they are bored or alienated—most urban educators feel successful. They are proud that their school is orderly and safe, and that students are generally civil and obedient. Moreover, when parents visit the school, they will often

approve of these same conditions—adult control and order. Educators and parents alike seem to believe that these conditions are not just necessary but sufficient for all kinds of learning to take place—academic, social, and ethical.

In such schools, teachers tend to be viewed with suspicion who deviate from telling as teaching or who reject a heavy diet of surveillance, extrinsic rewards, and predetermined “consequences” for misbehavior. Their colleagues want them to be team players, so as to maintain consistency and present a united front. Their colleagues fear that less external control and more student autonomy will lead to disorder, disruption, or conflict.

This state of affairs stands in clear contrast to what happens in many suburban schools, where teachers have more leeway to practice their craft as they see fit, and to provide students with autonomy. Student autonomy may take the form of frequent opportunities to communicate and collaborate actively with peers, or pursue learning of their own choosing, or even to reflect with teachers and classmates about how the learning process can be improved. Also, discipline is less likely to be

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of the behaviorist variety in suburban schools; positive behavioral interventions and supports is much less common in affluent settings than in low-income ones.

LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

Where didactic instruction dominates, learner-centered instruction is perforce in short supply. “Learner-centered instruction” is a fuzzy term, as are the terms “holistic,” “constructivist,” “experiential,” “inquiry-based,” “problem-based,” “differentiated,” and “hands on” learning. But ideally defined, learner-centered instruction is the use of *multiple* teaching methods that are simultaneously attuned to:

- academic goals, content, and skills;
- social, emotional, and ethical goals and skills;
- students’ personal interests and questions as well as the essential elements of the subject matter at hand;
- the current state of students’ knowledge and skills (which may vary widely within any given classroom);
- the goal of evoking and strengthening students’ intrinsic motivation to learn;
- the goal of building an inclusive learning community in the classroom;
- the goal of involving students in assessing their own growth; and
- the particular pedagogies that enable students to learn best in light of the foregoing considerations.

Learner-centered instruction is necessarily a complex endeavor in light of these many interlocking considerations. It involves a fundamental shift in focus from what the teacher is doing to how students are responding, both cognitively and affectively, both individually and collectively. It involves a shift in ownership of the learning process, so that students join with the teacher to assess their progress and adjusting accordingly. And it can involve

the use of such wide-ranging pedagogies as small and whole-group discussion, role-playing, brainstorming, experimentation, debate, and various forms of cooperative learning.

To be sure, didactic instruction—that is, lecturing, demonstrating, and short-answer questioning—needs to be one of the methods used in learner-centered instruction. But it is only one element in an array of pedagogies that, taken together, afford students more responsibility in the learning process – the responsibility for interacting considerately and productively with other students, working independently with focus and perseverance, and contributing to the well-being of the classroom and school community.

Greater student autonomy and responsibility require that students acquire and apply the skills for managing themselves and collaborating effectively. With greater responsibility comes greater need for self-monitoring, self-management, listening attentively and respectfully to peers, disagreeing constructively, and a variety of other socio-emotional capacities that take time and practice to learn. And so fully integrating character education and socioemotional learning (often referred to as “SEL”) into the academic curriculum is essential if students are to be successful.

Similarly, learner-centered instruction requires that *teachers* possess, or develop, certain observational, communication, facilitation, and classroom management skills. They must become proficient with new teaching strategies. They must come to know their students well—their current capacities and interests, their strengths and limitations. They must be able to make moment-to-moment pedagogical adjustments. And they must be willing to trust students to use their greater autonomy effectively while conforming to school rules and norms.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Urban educators will often maintain that their students are not prepared to handle the greater

demands of learner-centered teaching methods, and that those methods “don’t work” for them. They may attribute their students’ unpreparedness to many factors including family and neighborhood dysfunction. Their reservations should not be dismissed. Because of the considerable demands of learner-centered instruction on students and teachers both, it presents many more challenges than stand-and-deliver teaching and sit-and-get learning. Even modest shifts toward it must be supported by informed district and school leadership, aligned professional development, aligned curricular and assessment resources, and adequate time for teachers and students to successfully move through the change process. Never easy, the challenges become even more daunting when a district must contend with high student and teacher mobility, limited time and money for professional development, and unrealistic expectations for short-term results.

School board members and top administrators in urban districts may or may not clearly recognize these challenges. But even when they do recognize the difficulties, they tend to underestimate what is needed to introduce learner-centered instruction successfully. Under many pressures from many quarters, they try to do too much, with too little, too quickly. They may introduce an overly ambitious array of pedagogical or curricular changes at one time. Or they may fail to provide the various types of support and focus that urban teachers need to comfortably expand their instructional expertise. Or they may allocate insufficient time for the desired changes to become well established before moving on to mandate additional change efforts.

The result is a pervasive inequity in public education: Urban students are consistently deprived of the holistic, higher-quality instruction afforded students in many affluent districts. This difference in *teaching methods* persists despite posing a formidable obstacle to student success. As one prominent observer puts it, “The fact that U.S. schools are structured such that students routinely receive dramatically unequal learning opportunities based

on their race and social status is simply not widely recognized” (Darling-Hammond, 2001, p.221).

Research dating back 2 decades (e.g., Bransford et al., 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998) showed that students become more motivated and engaged when they experience learner-centered instruction. They report greater liking for school, academic self-esteem, trust and respect for teachers, and perceived classroom supportiveness. Over time, they tend to demonstrate greater conceptual understanding, perseverance, and problem solving abilities, and their grades and course completion rates tend to improve (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Learning First Alliance, 2001).

And so where urban students are concerned, shifts towards learner-centered instruction could help significantly to level the playing field. Expanding the instructional repertoires of urban teachers—perhaps even modestly—could be a singularly efficacious route to advancing students’ academic and pro-social development. Doing so successfully depends on giving this priority substantially more time, protection, and resources than has been the case to date. It may require a deliberately incremental, steadfast, district-office-led approach to implementation that:

- recognizes the difficulties involved and thus the need for a multiyear, go-slow, sustained focus;
- systematically deploys, from the outset, the expert personnel needed to provide principals and teachers with timely, role-specific, training and coaching for each phased subset of desired changes;
- also deploys the already-aligned instructional and curricular materials that most teachers need in the way of implementation support—in addition to, and integrated with, the aforementioned professional development;
- monitors and reports to all stakeholders on actual classroom implementation of the desired changes, or lack thereof, and

does so in an ongoing, candid manner, so as to enable informed decision-making about any needed implementation adjustments.

Such a well resourced and carefully orchestrated approach to implementation may be as challenging for district leaders to undertake as student-centered instruction is for classroom teachers. But here too there may be no alternative if urban students are to be justly served.

AUTHOR NOTE

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