

Effective Teachers for At-Risk or Highly Mobile Students: What are the Dispositions and Behaviors of Award-Winning Teachers?

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What distinguishes effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students was the essential question addressed in this study. We conducted a cross-case analysis of US national or state award-winning teachers who taught in schools with student populations characterized as highly mobile, homeless, and/or high poverty. Six teachers meeting the criteria were selected as participants. Frameworks of effective teaching characteristics were adapted from prior research and from a review of the literature to gather on-site classroom observational and interview data from participating teachers. The data were examined in light of extant research related to teaching at-risk or highly mobile students and yielded information regarding beliefs and practices. Teachers' interview responses focused on 2 main areas of teacher effectiveness: the importance of student–teacher relationships and instructional delivery. These teachers emphasized affective and academic needs in their planning, instruction, and assessment. They had high expectations of students and were committed to ensuring that students had what they needed to succeed. Teachers maintained high student engagement and used a variety of instructional activities and a wide range of cognitive levels in the questions asked during their instruction which was primarily teacher-directed. Additional research into effective teaching and working with at-risk or highly mobile students is recommended.

The question of effective teaching has been researched for decades; nonetheless, understanding what is necessary for effective teaching remains crucial for enhanced student learning. Extensive work has been done in synthesizing what is known about the qualities of effective teachers, in general (Stronge, 2007). However, little evidence has been assimilated regarding the qualities of effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students.

In this study, we identified six award-winning teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students, and then investigated and analyzed the actual teaching practices of the teachers and their beliefs about teaching. The purpose of the study was to examine what constitutes effective teaching—teaching

that has been recognized through national and/or state awards as being particularly effective with at-risk or highly mobile students. Specifically, what do the best teachers do that makes such a difference in working with students placed at risk?

BACKGROUND

At-Risk or Highly Mobile Students

Many factors contribute to a student being identified as *at risk*. By the term, *at risk*, we primarily mean students who, because of various environmental factors beyond their control (e.g., homelessness, high mobility, poverty), have an increased likelihood of experiencing challenges in attending, succeeding, and remaining in school. At-risk students are students who lack support to succeed in one or more of the following areas: societal, familial, and school. Home and societal factors include student mobility, living in poverty, and hunger and nutrition. School factors include qualified teachers, rigorous curriculum, school climate, and school safety (Barton, 2003; Kober, 2001). The discussion in the educational community about factors placing students at risk of failure has shifted from a focus on home and societal factors to include an “acknowledgment that substandard teaching and learning environments allow far too many children to fail” (Land & Legters, 2002, p. 2).

The students in this article include students who are generally at risk with an emphasis on students who experience high mobility. Students who are children of migrant workers, children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and children who are military dependents are frequently highly mobile (Walls, 2003). It should be noted that children of military dependents, although sharing a number of characteristics with other highly mobile students, are less likely to experience academic risk (Smrekar & Owens, 2003). For the purposes of this study, we considered students who move (school or residential) an average of once a year.

One of the factors leading to a child being identified as at risk is poverty (Land & Legters, 2002). In 2009, 21% of US children under 18 years of age were living below the poverty level; approximately 12% of Caucasians lived below the poverty level compared to 36% of African Americans and 33% of individuals of Hispanic origin (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011).

Migrant students also are considered at risk due to high mobility, poverty, and limited English proficiency. One indication of the number of migrant students enrolled in public schools is the Migrant Education Program (MEP) participation count. During 2005–06, approximately 635,000 students participated in the Title I MEP (United States Department of Education [USED], n.d.). However, these numbers do not include school-age migrant students not attending school, nor students from migrant families attending schools without MEP funding.

For children and youth experiencing homelessness, the USED, in its 2006 Report to the President and Congress, found that states identified over 650,000 children in grades kindergarten through 12th during the 2003–04 school year using the definition of *homeless* included in federal education legislation (Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). For 2009–10, the most recent school year for which data are available, 939,903 students were identified as homeless and enrolled in school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2011).

Children who are part of military families are also considered highly mobile; however, they are not necessarily considered at high risk of school failure. In 2003, the transient rate was 35% and of the 105,000 students enrolled in Department of Defense (DOD) schools, 54% were identified as minority students. Students in DOD schools scored above the national average at each grade level on the 2003 CTB/Terra Nova Achievement Test in the areas of reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, and minority students in DOD schools scored considerably better than minority students in most states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (DOD Education Activity, 2004).

Effective Teachers and the Needs of At-Risk or Highly Mobile Students

Teachers enter their profession with background characteristics that include subject matter and pedagogical preparation, certification, and experience. These factors have been shown to relate to student achievement and a variety of frameworks to describe these factors have been developed. Stronge (2007) identified six qualities that make an effective teacher: background characteristics, the caring teacher, classroom management, planning, instructional delivery, and assessment practices. Unfortunately, in areas where high quality teachers are needed the most, students often have teachers who do not meet the standards for effective teaching (National Partnership for Teaching in At-Risk Schools, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006).

Research exploring the personal qualities of teachers and students who are at risk indicates that these students do not have access to teachers of the same caliber as students from higher income and more stable environments. Although studies related to personal qualities of effective teachers and at-risk students inform the discussion surrounding students who are highly mobile, they do not address the relationship between personal qualities of effective teachers and highly mobile students. To frame this relationship, we looked at the qualities of effective teachers using a lens that separated three key levels of student need we identified for at-risk or highly mobile students: affective needs, academic needs, and technical needs.

Affective needs. At-risk or highly mobile students have unique affective needs. Due to high mobility and living in unstable environments, these students may experience frustration, isolation, and lack of motivation to succeed (Walls, 2003). Effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students meet affective needs by caring for and interacting with students, being fair and respectful, being enthusiastic and motivating, having a positive attitude toward teaching, and being reflective practitioners (Stronge, 2007). Teachers and at-risk students themselves identify highly effective teachers as caring, dedicated, motivating, encouraging, nurturing, supportive, and respectful (Aronson, 2001; Clubine, Knight, Schneider, & Smith, 2001; Corbett & Wilson, 2004; Ferguson, 2002). Such educators develop a personal relationship with students and have an understanding of their students' various backgrounds (Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & DiBella, 2004).

Effective classroom management is another important consideration. A chaotic classroom environment is likely to exacerbate feelings of anxiety for highly mobile students trying to adjust to a new environment (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995). Effective teachers of students at risk have calm and quiet management styles, provide quiet reminders of appropriate behavior, and encourage students to maintain self-control in the classroom (Carter, 2000; Knapp, Shields, & Turnbull, 1992).

Furthermore, studies of effective teachers of students at risk reveal that these teachers believe that they can make a difference in the lives of their students (Armor et al., 1976; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). According to Midgley et al. "The fact that teacher efficacy beliefs have a stronger impact on low-achieving than on high-achieving students is especially provocative given the tendency to assign teachers with a less positive sense of efficacy to groups of low-achieving students" (p. 256).

The belief that one can make a difference translates into teacher actions. Studies of these actions indicate that effective teachers of at-risk students motivate their students to learn, are enthusiastic about learning, provide a supportive environment, and exhibit supportive behaviors such as staying late, coming in early, and making a commitment to student success (Aronson, 2001; North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 2000; Peart & Campbell, 1999; Pressley et al., 2004). For highly mobile students, teachers have a smaller window of time within which to provide support. Therefore, creating a nurturing environment for students who may be in the teacher's classroom for 1 week, 1 month, or 6 months is critical (Popp, Stronge, & Hindman, 2003).

Academic needs. To meet the academic needs of highly mobile students, teachers must have the ability to assess and plan for students' needs when they first arrive in the classroom (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995; Rasmussen, 1988; Walls, 2003), deliver instruction effectively, and assess student learning. Effective teachers of at-risk students take into account student needs and experiences, as well as the curriculum in planning for instruction (Pransky & Bailey, 2002). Highly mobile students, as with any students, have a wealth of experiences from which to draw. When teachers incorporate student experiences and cultures, students view themselves in a more positive light (Menchaca & Ruiz-Escalante, 1995).

Effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students meet academic needs by protecting instructional time. Again, classroom management is a critical skill. For example, a qualitative study of one school's success revealed that "most teachers were on task every minute they were with a class" (Pressley et al., 2004, p. 221) and a study of at-risk children found that the maintenance of orderly classrooms was significantly related to the reading achievement of students (Armor et al., 1976).

Effective teachers of at-risk students use a variety of instructional techniques, practices valued by teachers and their students (Corbett & Wilson, 2004; Imer, Snyder, Erbaugh, & Kurtz, 1997; Peart & Campbell, 1999). Especially important are techniques that encourage high student engagement and are associated with academic success (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003).

Effective teachers meet academic needs by providing opportunities to demonstrate student learning and assess student learning. The use of assessment information relates directly to teachers' ability to respond to the range of student needs and abilities in their classrooms. Teachers of at-risk students provide written feedback on homework and quizzes; they discuss student errors and how they might be corrected (Lewis, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). For homeless students, effective teachers provide frequent written progress reports so that students and families know how the student is progressing academically (Berliner, n.d.). Individualizing or differentiating instruction by modifying and adapting to meet student needs is a significant predictor of student achievement (Armor et al., 1976; Fidler, 2002).

Technical needs. At-risk or highly mobile students have technical needs as well. By *technical needs*, we mean needs related to social services, correct grade placement, and seeking support from individuals who work with at-risk or highly mobile students (Berliner, n.d.; Rasmussen, 1988). According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the basics of food, clothing, and shelter must be met before the academic and affective needs can be addressed (Maslow, 1968). When students are present for short time periods, technical, academic, and affective needs may need to be addressed concurrently. Effective teachers address student needs before the students arrive in the classroom, when students arrive in the classroom, while they are in the classroom, and even after they leave (Popp et al., 2003).

METHODS

Case Study Research

Case study research is a valuable tool in studying a phenomenon that cannot easily be studied in a more traditional way (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The phenomenon we set out to study was what effective teachers who work with at-risk or highly mobile students do. We defined an effective teacher as one who has won national or state awards for his or her teaching. Effective teaching can also be viewed in terms of outcomes, that is, whether students are making learning gains as a result of being in the teacher's classroom (Mendro, 1998; Nye, Konstantopolous, & Hedges, 2004; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Given the nature of the students with whom the teachers in our study work, it is difficult to measure student effectiveness, as studies use student scores on standardized assessments from year to year to measure growth. Highly mobile students, as their descriptor suggests, move frequently and it is difficult to obtain standardized assessment data to measure the value-added impact on the students. Moreover, the students are not likely to be with one teacher long enough for an impact to be revealed on traditional standardized tests. Therefore, we selected teachers who had been recognized through a systematic selection process by a state or national organization for their work with students who are at risk or highly mobile.

Our observation method focused on the process of teaching, rather than the products of teaching. The process of teaching is the focus of this study as a group of researchers stated (Hiebert et al., 2005), "How can processes be improved by inspecting only their outcomes?" (p. 112). By focusing on the classroom, and instructional strategies and behaviors in the classroom that are shown by research to be effective, we can provide a window into what teachers do (or do not do) with at-risk or highly mobile students that can make a difference in student outcomes. Using the conceptual framework developed by Stronge (2007), we examined these teachers' behaviors through classroom observations as well as examining their beliefs and practices about teaching through the interview.

Participants

Teachers who had won national or state awards and were teaching at-risk or highly mobile students during the past 5 years were eligible to participate in the study. Awards included state teacher of the year, Milken Educator Awards, and national organization awards. Two essential

TABLE 1
Participants by Grade Level/Subject and Population Taught

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Grade Level/Subject</i>	<i>Population</i>
Jeana	3rd grade	Homeless
Rosa	3rd Grade	Migrant
Louise	Elementary gifted resource	Highly mobile
Janice	Middle school English	Highly mobile
Tanya	High school English	Migrant
Ethan	High school social studies	At-risk

Note. Schools were identified as serving these target populations. The populations are not mutually exclusive.

criteria were necessary for inclusion in the study: (a) recognized through state or national awards for teaching excellence; and (b) teaching in schools whose student population could be characterized as high mobile, homeless, and/or high poverty. Using a database of award-winning teachers, we identified those whose schools had demographic profiles that suggested a high incidence of at-risk or highly mobile students. Maximum variation sampling was used to select teachers across grade levels, serving subgroups of at-risk or highly mobile students in different regions of the United States. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants by grade level and subject.

Data Collection

Three instruments were used to collect data regarding teacher practices. In-classroom dimensions of the study included observing teaching practices related to instructional strategies, student engagement, cognitive levels of learning, and teacher- versus student-directed learning. The postinstructional and dispositional dimension included a semistructured interview focusing on teacher beliefs and practices in working with at-risk or highly mobile students.

Differentiated classroom observation scale (DCOS). The observation instrument was the DCOS (Cassady et al., 2004), which involves recording several data points at 5-min intervals: instructional strategies employed (e.g., lecture, teacher questioning, independent seat work, group discussion, assessment activity), percentage of students engaged, direction of the activity (e.g., primarily teacher-directed or primarily student-directed), and levels of cognitive demand (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, creation). Director of learning is recorded as a general observation across the interval, and student engagement is recorded based on the percentage of students engaged at a predetermined time point within the interval. Data on these lesson features are recorded for the whole class together or for multiple groups if differentiated groups are identified in advance. Although developed as a way to examine instructional practices related to differentiation and high ability learners, the instrument is also valuable for examining instructional practices with any group of students (Cassady et al., 2004).

Questioning techniques analysis chart. This instrument is used to categorize the types of questions asked by the teacher and by the students. For 1 hr, the observer recorded all

instructional questions asked by the teacher, orally and in writing, and all student-generated questions that were not procedural in nature. Questions were categorized based on low, intermediate, and high cognitive demand (Good & Brophy, 1997). Later, the observer wrote three examples of each question type on the *Questioning Techniques Analysis Chart* and tallied the number of questions asked by teachers and students at each level. Percentages were calculated for total questions asked at each level. A guide for categorizing questions based on Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Karthwohl, 1956) was provided as a reference for observers to ensure coding consistency.

Teacher interviews. We interviewed each teacher using a semistructured interview protocol based on the effective teachers framework developed by Stronge (2007) and adapted from a concurrent study examining the practices and beliefs of teachers who won national and international awards for their teaching (Little, Grant, & Stronge, 2007). The interview questions focused on teacher practices and beliefs in working with at-risk or highly mobile students and were designed to elicit participants' reflections on their own practice, exploring subjective experience of the teaching profession. Additional questions asked teachers to reflect on their practice, broadly defined (Bain, 2004), and their perspective regarding why their practice merited recognition with an award. Each interview lasted from 45 to 90 min, depending on the length of participant responses. The interviews were scheduled on the same day as the 2-hr observation to accommodate school and teacher schedules. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, allowing additional analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data from the in-class observation instruments were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data from the interviews were analyzed along two dimensions: (a) the qualities that make an effective teacher and (b) the needs of highly mobile students. The interview data also were examined through the lens of the needs of at-risk or highly mobile students (affective, academic, and technical). Each researcher coded all interviews. The interview data were then analyzed according to the proportions of words in the data pertaining to each category, yielding proportions for each of the subheadings under the two main dimensions and for the intersections of the two dimensions, resulting in 28 cells. (Table 2 in the results section contains the matrix

TABLE 2
Cognitive Levels of Instructional Activities

<i>Cognitive Level</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Knowledge	2.38	.44
Comprehension	2.16	.42
Application	2.00	.73
Analysis	2.09	.73
Evaluation	1.38	.50
Create	1.36	.22

Note. During each observation segment, cognitive levels were noted as being (1) not evident, (2) evident, or (3) highly evident.

of categories developed.) The data were then analyzed qualitatively for emerging themes that would not have been apparent using the quantitative analysis.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Analysis

DCOS. The DCOS yielded data regarding the nature and number of instructional activities, student engagement, and teacher-directed versus student-directed learning. The six teachers engaged in 8.5 instructional activities per 1-hr observation. However, the standard deviation ($SD = 3.02$) indicated a wide variability among the six teachers in numbers of instructional activities per observation segment. Student engagement was measured by indicating low engagement (1), moderate engagement (2), or high engagement (3) during each observation segment. Across the six teachers' observations, student engagement was relatively high ($M = 2.83$) and the standard deviation ($SD = .18$) indicated little variability among teachers. Finally, the observer rated the level of teacher- versus student-directed learning on a continuum with 1 indicating *the teacher directed all learning* and 5 indicating *students directed all learning*. We found that teachers directed most of the learning, with an average 1.63 rating. The standard deviation ($SD = .93$) indicated slight variability across the six teachers, with some student direction of learning present.

Researchers also noted the cognitive levels of instructional activities during each observation segment. Specifically, during each 5-min observation segment, researchers noted whether each cognitive level of the revised Bloom's Taxonomy was (a) not evident, (b) evident, or (c) well-represented. Table 3 shows the mean representation of each cognitive level across observations. Knowledge and comprehension both were between evident and well-represented as well as application and analysis while evaluation and create cognitive levels were between not evident and evident.

Questioning techniques analysis. The questioning techniques data were gathered from direct classroom observations described previously. The observers noted questions asked by teachers and students. Questions were recorded as low, intermediate, or high cognitive demand questions. Two additional variables, student questions and teacher questions, were calculated

TABLE 3
Analysis of Teacher and Student Generated Questions, Numbers, Percentages, and Means

	<i>Low Cognitive Questions</i>		<i>Medium Cognitive Questions</i>		<i>High Cognitive Questions</i>		<i>Total Questions</i>		<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>		
Teacher Questions	77	38	71	35	55	27	203	80	38.83	10.83
Student Questions	13	26	28	56	9	18	50	20	8.33	9.16
Totals by Cognitive Level	90	36	99	39	64	25	253	100		

*Mean number of questions asked during an observation.

TABLE 4
Number and Percentage of Words Coded in Each Category

<i>Effective Teacher Qualities/Needs of At-Risk or Highly Mobile Students</i>	<i>Academic Needs</i>		<i>Affective Needs</i>		<i>Technical Needs</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>Total Words by Teacher Quality</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Background	817	2.3	153	0.4	87	0.2	535	1.5	1,592	4.5
Teacher as a Person	1,977	5.6	4,450	12.6	2,085	5.9	1,053	3.0	9,565	27.1
Classroom Management and Organization	2,040	5.8	2,338	6.6	567	1.6	0	0.0	4,945	14.0
Planning and Organizing for Instruction	2,989	8.5	398	1.1	1,365	3.9	0	0.0	4,752	13.5
Instructional Delivery	6,164	17.5	1,521	4.3	97	0.3	0	0.0	7,782	22.0
Monitoring Student Progress and Potential	3,183	9.0	1,732	4.9	663	1.9	0	0.0	5,578	15.8
Other	334	0.9	0	0.0	757	2.1	0	0.0	1,091	3.1
Total Words by Student Needs	17,504	49.6	10,592	30.0	5,621	15.9	1,588	4.5	35,305	100.0

as the total number of questions per observation period. Table 4 presents the descriptive data for this analysis.

Teachers generated the majority of questions, a total of 203 across the six teachers. Students also generated questions, a total of 50 across the six teachers. Teachers asked questions on a range of cognitive levels. The number of questions asked at the low cognitive level was about the same as the number of questions asked at the medium cognitive level, with percentages of total questions at 36% and 39%, respectively. It is interesting to note that 27% of the questions asked were at a high cognitive level. The majority of questions asked by students were at the medium cognitive level. The mean number of questions generated by teachers was 38.83 and 8.33 by students. The relatively large standard deviations for teacher- and student-generated questions indicate the variability in use of questioning.

Teacher interviews analysis. The research team developed a coding template for interpreting the six teacher interviews. Each researcher coded all interviews and then the team reviewed individual codings collectively to achieve consensus when differences occurred. Often, additional context provided by the observer informed these discussions. The coded transcriptions were used to calculate the number and proportion of words assigned to each cell in the matrix that reflect the multiple dimensions addressed in this study. Table 2 provides the actual word count and proportion of words per cell related to the total words transcribed for each of the sub-headings under the two main dimensions and for the intersections of the two dimensions.

Looking at student needs categories, nearly half of the teachers' responses focused on the academic needs of students; 30% addressed their students' affective needs and almost 16% related to the teachers' efforts to meet needs that were outside the classroom. The most frequently coded teacher qualities were related to the teacher as a person and instructional delivery, which, combined, accounted for approximately 50% of the responses. Qualities and skills that feed into instructional delivery, monitoring progress, management, and planning accounted for 41% of the teachers' words.

When the intersection of the two main dimensions was reviewed, some proportions seemed intuitive. For example, it was reasonable to expect that instructional delivery would coincide most frequently with academic needs and that the “teacher as a person” category would align most closely with the affective needs of students. However, some intersections appeared to shed light on the special strengths these teachers demonstrated in reaching at-risk or highly mobile students. Specifically, the academic and technical needs of students combined were responsible for nearly one-third of the “teacher as a person” codings. These six teachers reflected upon affective and academic needs in similar proportions when describing elements of classroom management, and included technical needs in their planning process. Monitoring of student progress included students’ affective as well as academic needs with nearly a third of monitoring coding.

Another key finding of this analysis was that many of the teachers’ responses integrated dimensions across needs and teacher qualities, making it difficult to separate affective and academic comments. The teachers tended to look at their students and their teaching holistically. Although meeting academic needs was their primary concern, they recognized that this could not occur without dealing with their students’ emotional needs. Additionally, the teacher comments suggest that these teachers viewed the components of instruction as closely woven together; that monitoring was an ongoing process that informed immediate instruction and future planning; and that classroom management was seen as a vehicle to ensure academic success.

Qualitative Analysis

Affective and academic intertwined. As noted, the interviews were striking for the close link between academic and affective needs. It was often difficult to separate the two as our teachers recognized the importance of seeing their students as individuals with a wide array of needs. Although students’ academic success was a primary desired outcome, our teachers’ stories highlighted the idea that academic success required a relationship with their students. As Tanya said, “What motivates the students to stay in that class is the personal connection to the teacher and I make it a point to learn my students as learners. I do not teach English; I teach students.” These teachers found ways to learn about student interests and incorporate those interests into academic content to make it meaningful.

I try to go in the directions that they want to go. And I try to remember that my job is not to teach the subjects but to make them contributing citizens to society. I like to build on their strengths. So, if you remember that your job is to make good citizens out of people, it drives your instruction in a different direction. (Louise)

Assessment as integral to meeting student needs. At the same time, these teachers did not take foundational academic skills for granted. They were continually assessing their students and modifying instruction to fill any identified gaps. “I’m constantly assessing—they don’t even know who I’m watching” (Jeana). “I constantly ask for feedback from them” (Tanya). Assessment was not a separate task, but the fuel for planning. Assessment went beyond the notion of a pretest or posttest. It incorporated ongoing, formative evaluation based on keen observations and looked beyond academics to understand the emotional and technical needs of students.

Meeting basic needs of students. Furthermore, our teachers knew their students well enough to identify basic needs that were not being met and they were prepared to address those needs in the classroom and through other school and community resources. “They need book bags, pencils, basic materials. We have these at school for them . . . If they’re hungry, I have oatmeal in the class that we can heat up in the microwave” (Jeana).

High expectations. Seeing students holistically, our teachers did not allow the challenges their students faced to become excuses for poor performance. There were no excuses for the students or the teachers. “Failure of a child is a reflection on you and your teaching methods, not on the child” (Louise). It was a given that instruction needed to change based on student needs. These teachers changed their instruction to reach the students before them. Because they worked so diligently to reach their students, these teachers felt justified in demanding the best from their students. The teachers let their students know that they were there for them and would make the extra effort when needed. If the student could not do something, the teacher would walk alongside until the student could.

If they don’t get into [English] 101, I take that personally. That I failed that child in some way. And I want to know why and I snag them when I see them next and ask, “What could I have done better?” (Tanya)

Measuring success. Not only did the holistic view of students affect the way teachers provided instruction, it also affected the teachers’ way of measuring success. Success went beyond passing a test and was often perceived in a future-looking manner. They looked at how their students succeeded in the next grade, in college, and how they became caring, productive adults.

I measure other things and I’m not a teacher for their achievement tests. I don’t hate them [achievement tests]. I teach my children test taking techniques, because it’s part of their lives. But that does not drive my instruction at all. I have to keep up with—I told you before—what my children are interested in. I can take that and go through that avenue to get where I want to go. (Louise)

DISCUSSION

Limitations of the Study

Difficulties were encountered on multiple levels in obtaining the necessary data for this study. We found that literature and empirical studies related to at-risk students were plentiful, although the literature and empirical studies related to working with highly mobile students were sparse, thus indicating a need for this study. Challenges also were encountered in identifying national and/or state award-winning teachers who work with at-risk or highly mobile students. Although teachers winning these awards were plentiful, the number of awards that emphasized working with these special populations was not necessarily indicated in the descriptions of the award winners. Once the teachers were identified, however, they were eager to participate.

The study faced additional limitations. Five female and one male teacher in six different states participated in this study. We spent approximately 3 to 4 hours with each teacher, 2 of which were spent observing the teacher teach and the remainder of which were spent interviewing

the teacher. Perhaps we would have observed different activities if we had spent more time in the classrooms. However, observing each teacher more than once was too expensive.

Additional studies are needed to determine if the results are generalizable to other teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students. Our results provide some interesting findings about effective teachers' beliefs and practices in working with at-risk or highly mobile students, but definitive conclusions about working with these populations and the nature of effective teaching should not be drawn from a single study such as this, due to the nature of case study research. Rather, we hope that this report will generate research questions and methods that can be replicated with larger samples.

Discussion of Key Findings

In-class observation findings. The teachers in this study used many instructional activities. This is consistent with results in studies that examine student and teacher views of effective teaching (Corbett & Wilson, 2004; Imer et al., 1997; Peart & Campbell, 1999) and empirical studies of effective teaching (Langer, 2001). In examining the number of teachers using each instructional activity, a few of the activities stand out as being represented most widely. All six teachers used questioning in the observation periods, and five of the six teachers modeled what they expected from their students. Similar case studies examining effective teaching found that effective teachers of at-risk students model and scaffold learning with their students (Pressley et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2003). The teachers in our study also held high expectations of their students by planning instructional activities and by asking questions across the range of cognitive levels. These teachers saw their students as being able to think beyond the recall level. Similar studies show that more effective teachers of at-risk students emphasize making meaningful connections, rather than memorizing disjointed facts (Bennett et al., 2004; Bradford, 1999; Knapp et al., 1992; Lewis, 2001; Wenglinsky, 2004).

Another commonality among the six teachers was high student engagement. No observation segments were coded as low student engagement (20% or fewer). This study is consistent with previous findings that indicate effective teachers actively engage students in learning (Stronge, 2007). Specifically, students perform better when they are engaged actively in learning through reading, writing, and questioning, rather than passive learning such as reading in turn (Taylor et al., 2003).

The questioning analysis offers an exciting finding, confirmed by the DCOS: Each teacher thoroughly integrated questioning and student response during instruction and they all asked questions often. Questioning is viewed as an effective instructional strategy when working with all populations of students, including those at risk of failure (Berliner & Rosenshine, 1977; Taylor et al., 2000). The questions these case study teachers asked reflected a range of cognitive levels. A study examining effective practices in high poverty schools found similar results (Taylor et al., 2003).

Teacher interview findings. Because the interview protocol was shaped to reflect the six categories of the qualities of effective teachers and the three types of needs (affective, academic, and technical) of at-risk or highly mobile students identified in the literature review, the protocol influenced the incidence of words calculated within each cell of the analysis. However, despite a question that seemingly aligned with a single category or need, the teachers' responses were far

more complex. Additionally, the responses highly integrated the various needs and teacher qualities. Our teachers did not see their work as occurring in silos.

These teachers' caring and positive relationships with students permeated their teaching. Planning, assessment, instruction, and classroom management were not separate activities and often occurred in unison. Relationships provided the teachers with a broad understanding of their students, which affected long and short term planning, which were also influenced by multiple types of assessments ranging from analysis of formalized tests, to day-to-day observations, to confronting students and asking them what led to breakdown in understanding. This finding is consistent with other case studies (Popp, 2007; Pressley et al., 2004).

Emphasizing positive classroom environments was evident among our teachers. Classroom management was based on knowing their students, and they used this knowledge to deliver instruction. Numerous studies support the finding that effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students provide positive classroom environments, with high student expectations (Armor et al., 1976; Howard, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000; Waxman, Shwu-Yong, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997).

The teachers' responses to the interview questions reflected a high level of teacher self-efficacy, the belief that teaching changes the lives of students and that the teacher has the skills needed to make such a difference (Ashton & Webb, 1986). The teachers were passionate about their students and about their work; they believed in both. Teachers with high self-efficacy do not blame their students for failures; they look at themselves and challenge their own teaching to better reach those students in the future. Teachers with high self-efficacy do not give up. When asked to make recommendations to other teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students, this message was clear:

- "The students are depending on you to learn. You set the tone." (Jeana)
- "Make sure it's your passion. Don't do it if it's not. Because if it's not, you'll waste your time and kids' time." (Ethan)
- "Some of us not only survive; we thrive in this environment. Because every day I go to work, I think this is the day I can make a difference in a kid's life. What could be more awesome than that!" (Tanya)

In similar studies, researchers found that teachers of students facing incredible odds believe they can make a difference with a stronger correlation for lower-achieving students (Armor et al., 1976; Midgley et al., 1989). The teachers from this study demonstrated the belief that they affect their students' futures, for better or for worse.

Summary

When we examined the beliefs and practices of the six highly effective teachers of at-risk or highly mobile students included in this study, we found that these effective teachers viewed the academic needs and the affective needs of their students as of equal importance. Unless one need was met, the other could not be met. They viewed their relationships with students, particularly trusting relationships, as paramount to their success as teachers and to the success of their students. They expected their students to perform well by having a "whatever it takes" mentality and by planning challenging instruction that focused on making meaning, rather than on memorizing facts. They

viewed ongoing student assessment as integral to the instruction process and used a variety of instructional activities within the classroom to actively engage students in the learning process. This included using questioning that reflected low, medium, and high levels of cognitive demand to engage learners and as an integral part of their instructional strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, the conclusions from this study must be viewed as resulting from a particular set of research conditions in one study. As with most research studies, it is important to look at single studies within the context of the body of research on the topic, rather than in isolation. The following recommendations pertain to the larger body of research on effective teachers and at-risk or highly mobile students, as well as to the identification and celebration of highly effective teachers.

1. Although the extant literature is plentiful in regards to effective practices in working with at-risk students, more research is needed in identifying effective teaching practices in working with highly mobile students. More study is needed to determine which characteristics and practices of effective teachers working with at-risk or highly mobile students are unique, compared with other effective teachers. Are these simply effective teachers with a strong passion for serving this population, or do these teachers possess certain qualities and practices that are more critical in reaching these students? This study identified selected practices that have a logical connection to mobility; among these, the teacher's dispositional qualities of caring and commitment were evident. However, exploring the impact of such qualities and practices on student achievement and students' perceptions of their classrooms were not within the scope of this study.
2. Although it is difficult to track highly mobile students, particularly homeless and migrant students, more research into the long-term effects of teacher effectiveness for these populations is needed. Such studies should become more viable (at least for students moving within a state) as states develop more sophisticated data systems with unique student identifiers and the means to identify highly mobile students, either by subgroup flags or tracking actual moves.
3. As demand for teacher accountability of student progress continues to grow, alternative ways to document student growth and a teacher's impact must be considered. End-of-course assessments and statewide assessment will not provide the data needed when a student has made multiple moves. Use of curriculum-based assessment and student goal setting may provide alternative means for documenting growth and the influence of the teacher.
4. State and national organizations should consider recognizing and honoring teachers who work with highly mobile students.

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