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Solidarity in Community: Encouraging Positive Social and Academic Behaviors in Urban African American Children

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Despite substantial policy attention given to closing the gap in achievement between African American and White students in recent years, we have seen, at best, mixed results from these efforts, and some indication that in some areas the gap has widened (Fuller, Gesicki, Kang, & Wright, 2006). Whereas some scholars have focused on cultural explanations for the gap (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003), others have demonstrated that such explanations often exaggerate the importance of adversarial attitudes and poverty and offer only a partial explanation of the persistence of African American low achievement (Fryer & Torelli, 2005; Tyson, 2002). Still other scholars have focused on the positive attitudes of urban African American children (e.g., Lewis & Kim, in press; Wilson & Corbett, 2001), as well as the positive influences of effective teachers (Bond, 1998; Foster, 1997; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003; Foster & Peele, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

This paper extends our knowledge in this area by exploring *solidarity in community* as a framework for analyzing two successful urban classrooms in which the majority of the students were African American children from low-income families. We identify and define five components of this construct, based on our analysis of videotaped data from a study of effective teachers of urban children titled “Learning Through Teaching in an After-School Pedagogical Laboratory” (Foster, 2004; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003, 2005). We end with a discussion of the implications our findings have for future research and teacher professional development.

Review of the Literature

The construct of *solidarity in community* combines insights from the literature on social cohesion, belonging, teacher-learner relationships, and culturally relevant pedagogy to identify classroom characteristics and pedagogical and disciplinary practices that promote positive school outcomes for African American children in low-income urban settings. Below, we consider each of these bodies of literature in turn.

Social Cohesion and Solidarity

We define solidarity in community as a form of social cohesion characterized by mutual respect, reciprocity, commitment, connection, and accountability. Sociologists have identified social cohesion as central to sociological theory and research (e.g., Hagan, 2000). Hagan (2000) affirmed the centrality of this construct but noted there is little consensus regarding its precise meaning or the way in which groups achieve cohesion. Historically, scholars have used the construct to theorize macro-level social stratification and social exclusion in modern societies to address the problem of social integration (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Andersen, 1999; Hagan, 2000). Within sociology, researchers often link individual-level analysis to macro-level variables. For example, Arts and Gelissen (2001) examined the relationship between (a) demographic characteristics and macrosocial context and (b) people’s attitudes and beliefs regarding equity and justice, which are aspects of solidarity.

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According to Bollen and Hoyle (1990), social cohesion can function in key ways to mediate how groups form and maintain themselves. They suggest that we can operationalize social cohesion either as individual forces that influence individuals to remain part of a group (a cause of social cohesion) or as the collection of salient forces that lead a group to cohere (an effect of social cohesion). They cite a number of scholars who look for antecedents to social cohesion, including “firm behavioral leadership (Shelly, 1960), anticipated need satisfaction (Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984), and success in reaching group goals (Lott & Lott, 1965)” (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990, p. 481).

Hagan (2000) was concerned with the subjective dimensions of social cohesion. He was specifically interested in the “elements of a group member’s perception of his or her group membership that might reflect a tendency to cohere or ‘stick’ to the group” (p. 482). Hagan contended that as individuals within a group perceive higher social cohesion, “the group as a whole will come to exhibit unity of purpose and experience [higher group cohesion]” (p. 483). In addition, Hagan found a strong correlation between a member’s sense of belonging (cognition) and morale (affect). He suggested that the two variables might have a reciprocal relationship that reflects two dimensions of the more general construct of cohesion.

Belonging in Classrooms

A sense of belonging is an important feature of productive classrooms for African American children (Booker, 2006; Ford, 2005). Osterman (2000) has suggested that classrooms in which children have a strong sense of belonging are correlated with high student motivation, self-regulation, and autonomy, and strong (mutually productive and satisfying) working relationships between teachers and students and among students. Teachers’ nurturance of care and collaboration in the early grades encourages children to be active, mutually supportive members of the classroom community, effectively integrating social-affective and intellectual development into their general school experiences. In a review of the literature on belonging and academic outcomes, Booker (2006) found studies that defined belonging in terms of student perceptions of “teacher support, encouragement, and warmth” and identified significant relationships between belonging and achievement outcomes.

Osterman (2000) asserted that we have given little attention to children’s relational and affective needs, despite their potential importance. He identified a tacit assumption that “beliefs and practices that nurture individualism and competition, rather than community and collaboration” (p. 324) produce better students. According to Osterman, the culture in post-primary grade classrooms promotes individualistic and competitive values and behaviors, which are further reinforced by “organizational policies and practices that systematically prevent and preclude the development of community among students and directly contribute to students’ experience of isolation, alienation, and polarization” (p. 324).

A competitive school culture—intensified by teachers’ individualistic orientation (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie, 2006) and the introduction of high-stakes tests and student ranking, and combined with conscious and unconscious racial bias and stigma (Farkas, 2003)—likely has a negative affect on teachers’ perceptions of and relationships with African American children. It also likely jeopardizes African American students’ sense of belonging and efficacy in schools. The lack of a sense of belonging and connection may result in African

American students' feeling alienated from the school or classroom; they may consequently be "less likely to initiate 'prosocial' behaviors, adopting instead patterns of withdrawal or aggression" (Osterman, 2000, p. 351). These students may establish "their social worth by distancing themselves from their peers, just as teachers distance themselves from less capable students" (Osterman, 2000, p. 355).

Importance of Teacher-Learner Relationships

Scholars and practitioners alike assert that the teacher-learner relationship is central to improving educational experience and student achievement (Booker, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Foster 1997; Foster, Lewis, & Onafowora, 2003; Ferguson, 1998; Kozol, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Meier, 2000; Osterman 2000). Meier (2000) argued that we can best improve learning by improving the relationships between teachers and learners. Moreover, she asserted that if we desire effective and long-lasting learning, we must engage "learners on their own behalf, and [this] rests on the relationships that develop between schools and their communities, between teachers and their students, and between the individual learner and what is to be learned" (Meier 2000, pp. 18–19).

Meier echoed the perspective of Delpit (1995), who described an effective teacher as one who not only has control of the classroom through "personal power," but also "establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships that garner student respect; [and] *exhibit(s) a strong belief that all students can learn* [italics added]" (Delpit, 1995, pp. 35–36). Good teachers, according to Kozol (2000), "choose to teach in elementary schools because they love the personalities of children." They not only share with children what they have gleaned from their own education and experience, but also "find the treasures that exist already in children" (pp. x–xi). These perspectives on teaching suggest the importance of a strong working alliance between teacher and learner; they also imply that teachers must be able to identify and name with specificity the "treasures" in their students if they are to nurture and build upon them.

Solidarity, Interdependence, and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Numerous scholars have underscored the important role that culture plays in teaching and learning for African American students (Ford et al., 2000; Foster & Peele, 1999; Gay, 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1994; Scherff, 2005; Wlodkowski & Ginsburg, 1995). Reconciling differences between the cultural patterns of African Americans and those of their teachers is likely key to improving teacher effectiveness and academic achievement for African American children (Foster & Peele, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In light of this understanding, many scholars have argued that effective instruction for African American children requires "culturally relevant teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1994) or "culturally responsive teaching" (Gay, 2000), including incorporating African American cultural styles into pedagogical practices. For example, communal values have been associated with the culture of African American families (Tyler, Boykin, Boelter, & Dillihunt, 2005). Dill and Boykin (2000) found that communal teaching strategies improved performance and effort in their study comparing African American student performance in peer learning criterion contexts, communal learning contexts, and individual learning criterion contexts.

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Scherff (2005) identified four conditions necessary for culturally responsive teaching: (a) inclusion, (b) development of positive attitudes, (c) enhanced meaning, and (d) the cultivation of competence. Students feel a sense of *inclusion*, according to the author, in collaborative and cooperative learning environments in which knowledge connects with their experiences and teachers treat them equitably. Students develop *positive attitudes* when they have meaningful choices and teachers base curriculum content at least in part on students' interests, experiences, and strengths. Students will experience *enhanced meaning* if the content is relevant and they are able to participate in discussion in their vernacular. Finally, students will develop a sense of *competence* if teachers connect student assessment to real-world frames of reference, allow multiple ways of representing knowledge, and support students in self-assessment.

Methods

This study was part of a larger study titled "Learning Through Teaching in an After-School Pedagogical Laboratory" (L-TAPL), in which Michèle Foster (2004) developed a pedagogical laboratory that aimed to link community-nominated master teachers in urban elementary schools with teachers looking to improve effectiveness with urban children from low-income families. We collected data for this study in the first two L-TAPL sites established in Oakland and Los Angeles.

L-TAPL documented and analyzed the processes by which children learned in the labs and inexperienced teachers learned to teach. The program met 3 days a week for 2 hours after school; the curriculum included language arts, math, and science. The teachers were permitted to develop their own curricula, with the condition that they include these basic skills. The program lasted 16–20 weeks. Videotape of the first 3 weeks is the primary source of data for this analysis. We chose this time frame because it was within the first 3 weeks of the program that participating teachers first observed positive changes in the behavior of their own students participating in the after-school program—behaviors, according to the teachers, their students displayed far less often in their regular classrooms.

In this paper, we seek to identify the elements of classroom practice that appeared to support these changes in the children's behavior. Through an iterative process, and using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we reviewed the videotape, identified salient themes and categories, and developed criteria for coding. We continued this process until we reached consensus on core themes that emerged from the video data. We used a discriminate coding process (Sarker, Lau, & Sahay, 2000) to identify relevant samples that illuminated core themes. During this process, an overarching construct emerged—what we call *solidarity in community*—that connected many key elements of the classroom characteristics. This construct is complex and involves five overlapping and mutually influencing elements:

1. Developing a sense of "we-ness" and shared interests in children;
2. Providing support and opportunity for all children to participate and develop skills;
3. Supporting positive classroom identities through teacher-student interactions;
4. Incorporating children's ideas, interests, and experiences into the curriculum; and

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5. Creating classrooms in which children can maintain their integrity and feel comfortable.

Results

One of the core classroom characteristics that we feel supported the positive behaviors we observed is what we call solidarity in community. In our study, solidarity in community developed as teachers encouraged and supported children in identifying with and supporting one another in all aspects of the classroom. Teachers rarely isolated children, or allowed children to isolate one another, for praise or criticism, but treated all children as if they were able and expected to learn from one another. Teachers' interactions with children did not draw attention to differences in academic ability and behavior. Teachers engendered solidarity in community through overlapping, mutually supportive discourse and actions that continually provided children with opportunities to connect and identify with one another.

We use the term *solidarity in community* to refer to a form of social cohesion characterized by mutual respect, reciprocity, commitment, connection, and accountability to the group. Solidarity simultaneously supported students in developing a feeling of connection and mutual support and promoted the well-being of each member of the class. Although some children periodically presented challenging behaviors, they were minimally disruptive, partly because children were motivated to quickly resolve conflict and partly because problems were not usually stoked or supported by children who were otherwise uninvolved.

Below, we discuss each component of solidarity in community in turn.

“We-ness”

One common way the teachers cultivated solidarity in their classrooms was by helping children develop a sense of “we-ness” (Lewis & Kim, in press; Rivers & Scanzoni, 1997). By this, we mean that teachers encouraged children to identify with one another in all aspects of the classroom. In particular, the teachers encouraged a sense of community and solidarity through their discursive practices, their instructional and disciplinary activities, and their encouragement of interaction among the children. In particular, the teachers made regular use of inclusive words like *we*, *us*, and *our* instead of the singular *you* and *your*.

One example occurred during the very first week of the after-school program in Oakland, when the teacher was deciding what she would have children do as she tried to allocate time for activities:

TEACHER: I was going to have you make another picture (*looking at the clock*), but I'm not sure if we're in the mood to make another picture.

Some children shouted that they wanted to draw another picture while others shouted out “no.” The teacher paused for a moment, then replied:

TEACHER: Wait a minute, wait a minute. *We* don't decide things by saying same thing over and over . . . *we* decide by saying “Teacher may *we* vote,” and *we* vote on that.

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In this example, the teacher used the children's disruptive behavior and enthusiasm to emphasize the values and behaviors that she wanted the children to practice (voting) as a shared value and condition. She did not say "I want you to decide things by voting," which would have signaled that this was a condition for the children, from which she was separate. Instead, she included herself, indirectly signaling not only that she was a member of the class, but also that she was subject to the rules and consequences.

Teachers used these discursive practices both in the speech they initiated and in their restatement of children's verbal contributions. For example, during the first week of the Oakland lab, the master teacher sat the children in a semicircle and asked them as a group to share what they wanted to learn in the after-school program, to help her develop a "Why are we here?" list. After going around the circle and saying each child's name, she announced that she had a *very* important question to ask the class. She told the children that she wanted them to share why they each signed up for the after-school program. She asked, "Why are *you* here?" However, she wrote on the sheet, "Why are *we* here?" One child blurted out something, and the teacher responded, "Shhhh. You know what, *we're* listening, you need to listen," once again using the inclusive *we*, even when correcting an individual child, pairing the "you need to listen" with "we're listening." The teacher went to the board and asked the class to read out loud and in unison each word as she wrote, "Why are we here?" reinforcing the sense of shared participation and connection. In this way, the teacher got the children to see that their individual desires and interests came together as a collective reason for being there.

We found a very similar pattern of reinforcing we-ness discourse with concrete practices at the Los Angeles site. For example, during the first week the master teacher paired the children in an activity she called "My Partner and Me." In this activity, the teacher asked the children to introduce each other, sharing names and nicknames and saying why they liked or did not like their names. After a particular pair of children finished sharing with the class and returned to the larger circle, one of the children took her chair and sat outside the circle, facing away from the group. Seeing this, the teacher sought to reintegrate the student into the class circle.

TEACHER: The chair needs to be turned to face this way. *We're* working up here. You are welcome to sit there but you got to turn your body this way so you see who is out there. Just like you listened and you're respected when you represented. . . . OK guys, see, *we* got a problem here. *Everybody* at this table *you're* going to stop and come back here. Bring your chairs, come back in the circle. Thank you. Chairs need to come back. (*She calls a few of the children's names individually.*) Come on in the circle. Thank you. *We're* waiting to hear Cameron and Justin.

All of the children returned to the circle except one, who remained outside the circle with her head down. The teacher called the child to come and sit next to her. The child started walking toward the teacher. Another child sitting in the circle said "Come on" to the pair that was about to present, and the pair started their introductions. Not all of the children were listening and paying attention.

TEACHER: Just a minute. Excuse me. *We* want to make sure everyone is listening. You see this is how *we* respect everybody. Everybody's chair is turned and *we* need to sit and listen . . . show *our* patience.

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In this example, not only did the teacher punctuate her discourse with language that signaled connection and solidarity, she physically brought all the children together and provided them with the opportunity to participate in resolving the problem.

The following example involved an African American boy who presented particularly challenging behaviors for the other children and the teacher. During the second week of the lab at the Los Angeles site, a child had just finished reading a story to the class, and the teacher and the class applauded. The teacher began to comment on the reading when there was sudden loud laughter from a few children because a boy (Marquis) had tipped his chair over backwards.

TEACHER: Oh excuse me, excuse me. First of all *we* don't do that. Marquis could've gotten hurt.

STUDENT: Are you OK, Marquis?

TEACHER: Thank you, Tiana, that was an excellent example. Thank you, that's exactly what *we* need to do.

Armand, another African American boy whom the children and teacher found challenging because he was frequently disruptive, said in a taunting tone, "I've never done that [tipped over] before." The teacher intervened:

TEACHER: Excuse me, Armand, if you're not with *us* you can go back out [of the classroom] until you get yourself together, *we* don't need it in here, honestly.

ARMAND: Whatever.

The teacher ignored Armand's response. She once again thanked Tiana for having expressed concern for the boy who fell over backwards.

TEACHER: Again, thanks for the good example, Tiana, that's exactly what *we* should've done. If somebody falls, *we* want to make sure that the person is not hurt, so *we* are not going to laugh, *we*'re going to make sure he's not hurt and if *we* can, help him get up. Are you OK, Marquis?

Marquis replied that he was OK.

TEACHER: Good. Thank you.

The teachers reinforced *we*-ness and connection through their interactions with children individually and as a group and through their efforts to encourage children to interact with one another. In this case, the teacher conveyed and supported *we*-ness in her discourse (e.g., *we* want to make sure; what *we* should have done; etc.) and reinforced it by getting the children to collectively respond to the situation. Rather than chastise the boy for falling or the children for laughing, she used the situation as an opportunity for children to practice behaviors that could help them develop and sustain connectedness. Rather than call attention to potentially disruptive behavior (tipping over in the chair), she focused on the children's response to what happened and their failure to consider the welfare of the child who took the tumble. When another boy tried to

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participate in a way that could have been divisive or used to his advantage, she interrupted him and reasserted the core values of solidarity and care. The teachers often cultivated solidarity through such low-stakes activities during the first 2 weeks of the labs, treating competent behavior and participation as normative—as no more than what they expected of all children, and what they knew the children could do.

Opportunity for All Children to Participate and Develop Skills

The second characteristic we identified in our analysis is what we call the democratization of support and opportunity. The teachers provided repeated, relatively equal opportunities for children to show they could be trusted with responsibility. They also provided children with supported opportunities to develop and demonstrate emergent academic and social competencies.

During the first week of the Los Angeles program, the teacher asked children to leave the notebooks she had given them in the after-school lab rather than take them home. However, after one of the children questioned her request, she changed her mind.

TEACHER: Does anyone have a backpack that you can keep your notebook in?

Many children shouted out something about having backpacks.

TEACHER: Then it would be better for you to keep them. You're all responsible and I keep forgetting that I'm not working with kindergarten. So with kindergarten I have to always make sure that they keep up with things, but you all are responsible, I'm sure I'm not going to have any problem. You can take your notebook home, taking it with you putting it in your backpack, and make sure you bring it back every time you come because I have one for everybody.

Here, as we saw in the analysis of “we-ness,” the teacher not only said positive things about the children’s abilities (“You’re all responsible”), but demonstrated her belief in the children through her actions and her explicitly positive view of the children as a group.

The teachers set clear expectations for the children and consistently provided them with real opportunities, in an atmosphere of trust, to practice the skills and dispositions expected of them. They demonstrated flexibility, but core values, behaviors, and practices were non-negotiable. However, the teachers’ words and actions, their expectations, and the opportunities they provided for children were consistent and mutually supportive.

These characteristics of the labs were apparent during the second day of the program in Los Angeles:

TEACHER: When we are in the circle it’s very important that we show respect to what’s happening. So that means we’re not going to be talking to our neighbors or we’re not going to twist around. I didn’t expect that from any of you because you all were so brilliant and interactive and participatory yesterday that I’m sure we’re going to do the same excellent job today. But I do want us to start together in unity so that we can have

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that same commitment to working together. We all understand that? (*The children say “yes” softly.*) OK. Good. So you may find a seat.

About 15 minutes later, one of the African American boys violated one of the class rules, and the teacher used this incident as an opportunity for the children to practice and develop the skills she expected them to have in a well-regulated class.

TEACHER: We’re going to remember our ground rules. I’m going to remind, well somebody else remind Armand what our ground rules are. Tyree, what is it that Armand is doing that he needs to stop?

TYREE: Stop talking when . . .

TEACHER, interrupting Tyree: Why don’t you turn and tell him?

TYREE, turning to Armand: Stop talking when she’s talking.

TEACHER: Oh, thank you. I’m sure he appreciates you reminding him.

In this example, the teacher supported the students in holding each other accountable for following the class ground rules, which simultaneously provided the opportunity to develop important skills and conveyed high expectations. Rather than assert her authority, the teacher transferred it to another child—in this case, another African American boy—who reminded Armand of the rule. This interaction occurred in front of the class, giving students a positive impression of both Tyree and Armand when the teacher preempted any possible negative response to Tyree’s suggestion by saying, “I’m sure he appreciates you reminding him.” A supported transfer of authority was one of the ways that lab teachers helped children practice respect for and accountability to one another.

During the second week of the Los Angeles program, two of the boys had a mild conflict, one of them slightly hurting the other.

TEACHER: The more important thing is that you hurt somebody. For example, this is a good example, Armand did something to Marquis, and Marquis came to tell me, and what I’m always concerned is that you try to solve your own problems. I’m not going to be here all the time, your mother is not going to be here all the time, your particular teacher is not going to be here all the time, so you know how to solve your problem. Somebody does something wrong to you, what should you say to the person?

ARMAND: I said sorry.

TEACHER: Right, you did, you did the correct thing. But Marquis should’ve done what, he should’ve done what to you, Armand?

ARMAND: He should’ve said sorry to me.

TEACHER: No, no. You’re the one injured him. What was the first thing Marquis should’ve said?

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KAYA (*another child*): That's OK?

TEACHER: Oh no, he's injured. He's been hurt. So you're not going to say OK. (*Armand laughs at that response.*) First of all, Armand, we're going to listen to people who respond. Kaya gave a legitimate answer, so we're listening to her and respecting what she says. But I'm saying that in this incident, I want them to get to the point that Marquis lets you know that you injured him.

When another child failed to understand the teacher's point, she asked Marquis and Armand to come to the front of the class and act out what happened. The teacher gave the other children a chance to respond to the question of what Marquis should have said to Armand.

MARQUIS: You bumped into me.

TEACHER: Then Armand, what are you going to say?

ARMAND: I'm sorry.

TEACHER: See how easy that was? You need to learn how to confront each other and do it in a gentle way, be patient. Remember the story *Subira*, *Subira*? Give the person the benefit of the doubt, and have them apologize.

Once again, we have an example of the teacher's providing the children with supported opportunities to develop skills they needed to help manage the classroom—in this case, the ability to confront wrongdoing gently and resolve conflict. She accomplished this by bringing the class together and asking questions of all the children that helped them discover what they needed to say and do to resolve conflict. Thus, she used a particular incident to help the children learn, practice, and develop important interpersonal skills and community values.

Like most of the examples, this vignette is multilayered and contains aspects of all of the characteristics of solidarity. By bringing the children together to work through the problem, the teacher conveyed we-ness. She had the children treat the problem as requiring everyone's attention, and as something they needed to solve together. The way she worked with Armand and Marquis suggested that each was capable of taking responsibility for independently working through the conflict. Her use of questions effectively prompted the children to work together to come up with the correct way to handle conflict and have ownership of the resolution. Finally, she did not treat conflict as bad; nor did she treat those responsible for the conflict as bad or wrong (i.e., as having negative identities). Rather than assuming malicious intent on the part of the child who initiated the conflict, she reminded the children that they must be patient and gentle with one another, that they should "give each other the benefit of the doubt."

Teacher-Student Interactions and the Development of School Identities

Classroom teaching is a highly public activity. Children view most everything that a teacher does in the classroom, whether the teacher is interacting with the class as a whole or with an individual child. Teachers' interactions with children have implications for the children's views of each other and the kinds of classroom identities the children develop (Wortham, 2004).

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The teachers in our study tended to use the highly public nature of teacher-student interactions to promote positive social identities in the children and to manage their classroom behaviors. For example, during the first day of class during circle time, the teacher in Oakland asked the children, “Who likes school?” A majority of the children raised their hands, exclaiming that they liked school. However, one boy said, “No.” A girl seated next to him jumped off her chair, pointed at him, and said, “He’s the only person don’t like school!” The teacher paused for a few moments, then posed a question to the boy in a tone that conveyed genuine curiosity:

TEACHER: You don’t? Do you like it sometimes?

BOY: No, never.

TEACHER: Never?

She paused another few moments, then addressed the girl:

TEACHER: You know what? He may not like school but he is here and while he is here he may enjoy some things.

She then moved on to the next child. During the interaction, she had not isolated the boy or attempted to change his mind; she also had not allowed the other children to treat the boy as other (less than). She modeled acceptance of the boy the way he was and created a safe space for him to be comfortable in the classroom.

The teachers cultivated solidarity by treating most situations as if all children could learn from whatever someone else was doing. Children were encouraged to identify with one another and see each other as having something positive to offer the class. In cultivating a sense of connection through a shared positive identity, despite differences in ability, the teachers did not allow children to create social and academic hierarchies in their classes.

Another way teachers fostered solidarity was by taking children’s contributions seriously. For example, during the “Why are we here?” activity, one child responded, “To get out of school.” The teacher worked to understand what was meant.

TEACHER: To get out of school? (*She smiles.*) This is after-school, and guess what, we are still in school, so we’re not going to say that. You are out of school, but you are in school. Hmm. We got a problem here.

CHILD: When we get out of school.

TEACHER: When we get out of school? What, why are we here, to do what when we get out of school?

SECOND CHILD: To go home.

TEACHER: You need to raise your hand. Did you come here to go home? If you did, you took a bad way to get home, come here and sit in a chair. You know what? I don’t get it. We are out of school, but we are not here to get out of school.

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CHILD: OK, then to learn.

TEACHER: OK, to learn—maybe you are here to be back in school. You are back in school, you know that, don't you? To learn more.

Even when a child's answer did not make sense and could easily be dismissed, the teacher took it seriously as an intellectual challenge and used it to encourage the class as a group to think about and try to resolve the "problem." In this way, she treated the child's response as a substantive contribution. By having the class work together, she communicated to the other children that they must take the child seriously. Through this otherwise mundane activity, the teacher gave a positive impression of the child, while modeling how to work through problems.

Another example of how the teachers used low-stakes activities to promote positive identities occurred at the Oakland site. During one of the first days of the program, the master teacher told the class that she was going to need helpers, then asked Anthony—an African American boy with a negative reputation in the school, though this was not known to the teacher at this time—to get her red bag, which she had left in the hallway. As Anthony got up to retrieve the bag, other children interrupted him. Seeing this, the teacher stopped what she was doing and gave her full attention to the situation, saying, "Let him do it. Look, he's in charge of his body." The way in which she said this was as important as what she said. Her tone conveyed that his ability to self-regulate was self-evident.

Being in charge of one's own body was one of this teacher's core values and themes and something she stressed with the children, especially during the first week or two of the program as she established expectations for the children. It is thus particularly significant that she used an African American boy as a positive example to underscore her belief and confidence that the children could naturally self-regulate. By not bringing undue attention to his actions, she conveyed that his good behavior was normal and expected. After she made her point, she went back to her preparations, reinforcing her message that Anthony could manage his body without her. When he handed her the red bag, she engaged him and the class with mild humor, reinforcing the positive view of the boy, then quickly moved on to the next activity.

The teacher used this strategy even when children presented challenging behaviors. For example, one day she asked the children to report on how well they had used their self-regulation that day. When she came to Anthony, the boy who had retrieved her red bag, he motioned to her with his hands, rather than offering a verbal answer. She told him that she did not know what the motioning of his hands meant.

ANTHONY: Kinda. (*He begins to pound his chair with his fists.*)

TEACHER: Kinda? What does kinda mean?

ANTHONY: I don't know. (*He continues to pound the desk.*)

Another child was apparently about to answer for Anthony, but the teacher stopped the child, saying, "I want Anthony to tell me." Then she went over to Anthony and moved each of his hands from the chair seat. He shifted his position on the chair but remained seated, looking defiant. She modeled for him how he should have responded. He shrugged his shoulders. The

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teacher asked, “You want me to ask other people?” She asked the class, and one of his classmates volunteered that Anthony had talked back to a teacher during the regular school day.

TEACHER: Talkin’ back? That’s worse than talkin’—sit up in your chair. (*Anthony does not respond.*) Sit up in your chair, I’m not kidding. You were talking back to your teacher? (*She turns to the other child.*) What did he say?

The other child told the teacher that Anthony had yelled at the classroom teacher.

TEACHER, *with incredulity*: Nooo! You didn’t, yell at your . . . ? Nooo! I don’t want to believe that. Is that true? I don’t want to hear that again. I mean it. (*Without hesitation or lingering on the topic, she moves on to the next child.*)

In this case, the teacher communicated her high expectations of this African American boy by expressing her disappointment at his having yelled at his classroom teacher. She expressed disbelief that he would do such a thing. She treated what others had come to expect of this boy as unacceptable and unexpected. The way she ended the interaction also supported a positive view of the boy. She could easily have cautioned him that if he repeated the transgression, he would have to face consequences. Instead, she expressed her surprise and disappointment and, conveying her expectation that he was capable of self-regulation, simply told him, in a tone of certainty, that she did not expect to hear of his doing such a thing again. She treated the misbehavior as an aberrant incident, indirectly communicating her high expectations and belief in the child.

Curriculum Incorporating Children’s Ideas, Interests, and Experiences

The high degree of active and substantive participation in most lab activities provided children with many opportunities to exert agency in the classroom. In addition to allowing children to be agents in the classroom, each teacher created a classroom that became an artifact of the children’s lives. What we mean by this is that the teachers validated and meaningfully incorporated children’s knowledge, interests, and experiences into their teaching. One way the Oakland teacher accomplished this was through her “Why are we here?” activity. Although she had a curriculum plan, she introduced it by eliciting the children’s interests through this activity. As each child shared what he or she wanted to learn, the teacher wrote it down on the board. By the time every child had participated, the list included all of the core curriculum subjects that the teacher had planned to teach, almost all of which had come from the children without prompting, simply by inviting them to share what they hoped to experience in the after-school program. This practice accomplished at least two things. First, the curriculum became something all of the children could identify with one way or the other because they all had contributed to it. Second, the children had the opportunity to see each other through their interests and contributions to the curriculum, reinforcing positive identities. Children could begin to see each other as having something to offer the class.

Even when the children did not come up with curriculum content that the teacher had planned for them, she found a way to introduce the subject and connect it to the children’s interests. For example, several minutes into the exercise, she explained to the children that something was missing from their list.

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CHILD: To do science.

TEACHER: Oooh, you better know it. (*She turns to the group.*) Who likes science in here? (*Several children respond enthusiastically, hands raised.*) Oh, you do? I'm glad I brought something today that's for science.

With that, two little girls looked at each other with excitement and exclaimed "Ooooh." The teacher shared in the students' excitement of learning in the same way that she positioned herself as a member of the community who shared the children's interests. Sharing an enthusiasm for learning was a part of the layered sense of solidarity the teacher created, and one of the ways she connected with the children. As the children calmed down, she asked the student who had suggested science to guide her as she wrote "To do science" on the board. The teacher asked, "How would you say this?" She then repeated the child's words to the class as a whole. She spoke in a slow and deliberate fashion, almost savoring the words "To-do-science."

The teachers in our study also drew upon the interests, experiences, and knowledge of children within the context of specific lessons. For example, during the second week at the Los Angeles site, the teacher had the children sit down on the floor in circle.

TEACHER: Thank you. I think some of us are ready and some of us aren't, so we're going to give everybody a chance to calm ourselves and remember where we are.

CHILD: We're going to have a talk time?

TEACHER: We're going to have a talk time, that's a good way to put it. Now, these are the ground rules, some people are following them and some people aren't. And I don't want to have to keep stopping for those people that don't want to. Now it's important that we started with a book called *Subira, Subira* because that's the tone of the class that I want to establish. I want to make sure that we are patient with each other, we give each other opportunity to talk, we give each other opportunity to express ourselves. But evidently there's something on some people's minds that they haven't been able to share so we're going to stop right here and we're going to be able to talk about it. We don't need to do a lesson, we don't need to dissect the flowers, we don't need to talk about *Subira, Subira* until we get this situation straight because some people need some extra attention so I want to give them this time to raise it to tell us what's bothering them.

ARMAND: It's my birthday. But none of you like me here so . . . and that Kala said "f" my mom because she didn't come with a birthday cake. (*A couple of children talk among themselves, responding to what Armand said.*)

TEACHER: We're talking one person at a time. (*The children quiet down.*) Armand has a legitimate concern. Number one, it's his birthday and he wants us to celebrate and recognize it. It's same thing with me, when you have a birthday, don't you want people to recognize your birthday? (*Several children say "yeah" in soft voices.*) Yes, it makes you feel good because the day of your birth is a special event, so why don't we stop and sing happy birthday to Armand and then we can go on, but there's another issue that he raised we need to get back to too. But first, let's deal with [the fact that] Armand has a need. *We're* his friends, we're his classmates, I'm his teacher for this particular time of the day,

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and we want to make sure that his needs are met, so let's sing happy birthday to him and make sure that he feels good about it.

The children began singing "Happy Birthday to You" in a manner that the teacher considered dull and lifeless. She commented that it sounded like a "funeral version" of the song and encouraged the children to put more emotion into their singing. She then suggested that they sing a version of the song written by the African American songwriter, Stevie Wonder, tapping into the everyday culture of the children, who then began singing more joyfully.

The teacher in Oakland similarly used and extended the everyday cultural knowledge of children without putting down their home cultural experience. She asked children to draw two pictures: one of themselves in school, in the Mind, Body, and Spirit Club (their name for the after-school program), and the other of themselves as grown-ups. As she asked the children to draw themselves in the Mind, Body, and Spirit Club, she asked them what they thought a club was. One child offered that her mother went to a club. The teacher acknowledged this experiential knowledge of the child and then, using a discursive style that was culturally familiar to the children, put her hands on her hips and responded in a joking manner:

TEACHER: My mama went to the club and I went to the club with my mama.

The children laughed with delight. The teacher then immediately inserted a transition from their parents' clubs to their after-school club:

TEACHER: This is not a club for some old ladies; this is a club for kids.

However, she further explored the children's own knowledge and experience by asking them, "Whose parents go to the club? Do they enjoy it? Get dressed up?" affirming the children's parents' activities and linking them to the after-school club. When one child responded that adults drink brandy at the club, she deflected the response:

TEACHER: We don't want to hear an itinerary of what they do.

She then completed the tie-in:

TEACHER: What would you do in a *kid's* club? You don't have to get dressed up, but you really want to have a good time.

In this way, the Oakland teacher learned about the children's lives at home, validated their experiences, and extended these experiences into the classroom, creating a bridge between their knowledge of clubs at home and their after-school club.

Teaching with Integrity

Parker Palmer has written that the integrity of teachers has to do with bringing to the classroom not only their gifts and strengths, but also their "shadows and limits, [their] wounds and fears" (Palmer, 1998, p. 13). In our view, the integrity of the teachers with whom we worked played a key role in their ability to develop productive relationships with the students. Each teacher embodied the kind of character African American children report wanting in their

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teachers, including being helpful, treating children with respect, and seeking to improve their ability to teach (see Lewis & Kim, in press). They were effective partly because they made the classroom a safe place that supported the integrity of the *children*, a place where the children were comfortable. The teachers in this study not only encouraged and supported the students' strengths and potential, but they also made it safe for children to bring their faults or limitations into the classroom. They allowed the students to be whole people. The teachers promoted this sense of integrity by modeling it to children and inviting children to use their gifts but also confront and overcome their limitations—the mistakes they made, and their ignorance.

As with the other characteristics of classroom solidarity, the teachers used mundane and relatively low-stakes activities to model integrity in the early weeks of the after-school program. One message that the teachers communicated was that they sometimes made mistakes and that they might need the assistance of the children to correct them. For example, during the first week of the Oakland program the teacher wrote the students' names on the board, before she knew them well.

TEACHER: Would you *please* make sure that I spell your name correctly because if I start spelling it wrong this time I will spell it wrong next time I write it? I think it is your job to tell me. OK?

Beyond acknowledging that they might sometimes make mistakes and need the assistance of the children, the teachers also conveyed to children that they, like the children, needed to cultivate patience as a way of managing limitations in themselves and in others, and in order to give the children time to develop skills. For example, the master teacher in Los Angeles emphasized that they would all have to learn how to work together and be patient with one another. They were all capable of making mistakes, and so they had to be respectful of one another.

TEACHER: This is what we are trying to do today. Work out how to work together; how to be respectful.¹ You can't do anything well unless you have patience and give yourself time to develop. Who is being patient with me and who I can be patient with. We all have emotions, but need to control them. Patience helps us to control our emotions.

In this brief statement, the teacher communicated a number of important things. First, she indirectly acknowledged that the children make mistakes and that mistakes are expected and a necessary part of learning to work together. She also implied that all children are incomplete, will make mistakes, and need "time to develop" the habits that are necessary for them to work together. Thus, they all had to attend to when they needed the patience of others, as well as when they needed to show patience themselves. She also communicated her high expectations of children by suggesting that they each must exercise judgment in this regard. Finally, the teacher acknowledged that the children's emotions were necessarily a part of the enterprise of working together in the classroom. Using the collective *our*, she connected the ability of the children to work together, and the inevitability and necessity of making mistakes in the course of learning new skills, with the expression and control of emotions. Thus, working together, the exercise of

¹ This is a paraphrase.

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patience, and the expression and control of emotions became normative expectations in the classroom.

Another example of the way the teachers cultivated and nurtured these expectations in the classroom came when the Los Angeles teacher was challenged by the chronic misbehavior of a third-grade African American boy. She lost her patience with the boy and sent him out of the room for “acting obnoxious” and interfering with the work of the classroom. The teacher later apologized to the boy in front of the class for sending him out of the classroom. She apologized because, as she told the boy in front of the class, she realized that what the boy needed from her was “to know that she loved him.” She then acknowledged to every child individually and by name that she needed to be patient with each child. She acknowledged to the class that she needed to be especially patient with this boy and another third-grade boy who challenged her patience. She then she asked the boy she had removed from the classroom to accept her apology (which he did). Finally, she gave him options for dealing with *her* impatience, saying that he could either leave the situation or “step forward” and remind her to be patient.

This vignette is instructive on a number of levels. First, through modeling, the teacher reinforced the norms she expressed earlier: that when working together we need patience, and that sometimes we experience emotions and need patience to control them. She acknowledged that she had made a mistake in her relationship with one of the children, explaining that rather than express frustration she needed to express love. The public nature of the admission served as a model for all the children, but it also served to create a positive view of the boy who had made her impatient. Second, she made clear that his behavior, rather than being merely “obnoxious,” was about his need for love. Third, she created a positive image of the boy by publicly treating him as worthy of her apology. She could have apologized privately, but she did it publicly as a model for all of the children, potentially raising the boy’s standing in the eyes of the other children. At the very least, she may have helped check any negative perceptions of the boy that the children may have harbored. Fourth, she may have provided the boy with a positive self-image.

Finally, the teacher gave the boy (and by extension, the class) suggestions for how to handle *her* impatience: They could either exclude themselves or “step forward.” What she seemed to accomplish here was to reduce the potential for disruptive behavior in the class by shifting the focus to *her* behavior and helping the children to see they were able to make independent decisions about how to respond. Implicit in her message was the understanding that the children did things that resulted in her impatience, but this was largely unstated. She also did not give up her authority: she was apologetic but not deferential; she identified with the children without trying to be one of them. She was able to give the boy a more positive public and personal identity in the class, while giving the entire class a positive message about their abilities. In doing so, she raised expectations for how children would behave and take control of their behavior in the classroom. This occurred within the context is her emphasis on “having a good heart.” At one point, she reminded the children, “It takes a lot of patience to work with people who’ve lost their good heart.” Later, she developed a chant building on the “good heart, good mind” theme that she used to get the children’s attention when they were not listening or to facilitate classroom transitions.

Discussion

We have argued that the two successful teachers of urban African American children in our study created classrooms of *solidarity in community*, fostering cohesion and helping children to support one another socially and academically. We have identified five elements to this construct. First, the teachers used discursive practices to signal “we-ness” or shared interests among the children and between the teacher and the students. They reinforced this message of we-ness through their interactions with the children and the manner in which they encouraged children to interact with one another.

Second, the teachers in this study democratized opportunities and support such that children had relatively equal chances to contribute to the class and receive support from the teacher for their efforts.

Third, the teachers promoted positive views of the children. They used “minimal intervention” (Lewis, 2000) in their work with children, typically intervening in problem behavior only to the degree necessary for the children to self-correct or self-regulate. This approach further supported the development of productive behaviors and high expectations in children.

Fourth, the teachers made their classrooms artifacts of the children’s lives. To do so, they used not only children’s material artifacts (art work and writings), but also their collective interests, experiences, and ideas. This enabled the students to feel comfortable and validated in their classrooms.

Finally, the teachers made their classrooms places of integrity, learning environments to which the children could comfortably bring their whole selves—their strengths and their weaknesses. The teachers modeled integrity for their students, not only bringing their considerable skill and knowledge to their classrooms, but also acknowledging that they sometimes lacked knowledge the children had (e.g., how to correctly spell the children’s names) and sometimes needed the children’s help. They also admitted mistakes in judgment (disciplinary actions based on a misunderstanding of the needs or intentions of children) and conveyed that the children were worthy of their apologies.

The teachers in this study not only created classrooms that welcomed and supported children as whole people, they taught children as whole people as well. We-ness and mutual respect, broadly shared support and opportunity structures, classrooms as expressions and extensions of children’s lives, and interactions that promoted positive social and academic identities were all possible largely due to the integrity of classroom relationships. Children could bring more of themselves to the after-school program than to their regular classrooms—indeed, they needed to do so in order to assume the responsibilities and develop the skills and habits necessary for creating solidarity in community and a productive and caring classroom.

In an article on agriculture, Berry (2005) cautioned against reducing the complexity of husbandry to science, arguing that scientific knowledge is but a subset of husbandry. Without husbandry, he wrote, “‘soil science’ too easily ignores the community of creatures that live in and from, that make and are made by the soil,” and “‘animal science’ forgets, almost as a

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requirement, the sympathy by which we recognize our selves as fellow creatures of the animals” (p. 99). We believe a similar case can be made for not reducing education to the science of education. In recent decades, school districts, for a variety of policy-related reasons—the most recent being No Child Left Behind—have narrowed curricula (Center on Education Policy, 2007). This process has been driven partly by the so-called accountability movement with its focus on standardized test scores, and partly by an at least implicit goal of preparing children for the global economy with its anticipated technological changes. Rarely do we attend to children as whole people, as members of complex social systems. Similarly, we seldom address, in a manner that is core to our educational processes, children’s need for connection to each other, their families, and the places where they live. Moreover, if children are from low-income families, education becomes “extractive” (Serpell, 1998), distancing children from their families, which schools often view as having a negative influence on children (Lewis, 2007).

Although the teachers in our study provided children with solid content knowledge of core subject areas (math, science, and language arts), they did so within the context of meaningful relationships that they cultivated and supported with and among the children. Contrary to narrowing the focus of instruction and education, the classrooms we observed were as much about the health of a living system—the social world of children—as they were about the core subjects. The teachers seemed to understand, at least intuitively, that conventional educational outcomes as measured by tests are but a subset of the broader outcomes relating to the health, well-being, and education of children. These teachers attended to the wholeness of children and their social worlds, inviting children to bring to the classroom interests, knowledge, and experiences that were a product of school, home, and community environments—their lived day-to-day culture. The teachers in this study prepared children to be more broadly and deeply productive, to be responsible members of their classrooms, and to expect and be prepared for meaningful participation in their educational experiences. By extension, this approach to education might better prepare African American children for meaningful participation in their homes and communities. In this way, the students in these classrooms were perhaps better prepared to understand and participate in the complexities (social and otherwise) of the world in which they lived, and which they would help to create.

Conclusion

The teachers and children in this study demonstrated how to develop teaching and learning environments advantageous to urban African American children. It is reasonable to expect that these classrooms would be advantageous for any child. They remind us that we can teach children as whole people, while remaining rigorous in our academic and social expectations. In fact, it seems likely that the holistic approaches of the teachers in our study paved the way for academic and social success of their students as measured by standardized tests. At the very least, this study suggests that classrooms of solidarity in community created the necessary conditions for positive and productive classroom behaviors.

Leonard Collins, one of the teachers Michèle Foster interviewed for her study about African American teachers’ perspectives on teaching (Foster, 1997), stated that it was not enough for children to be the future; they must be educated to change the future. Classrooms of solidarity in community provide examples of educating low-income urban African American

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children to be agents, and thus to be in a better position to help create and not just conform to the future of which they will be a part.

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