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The Urban School Experience

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The Urban School Experience

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Abstract

We are constantly talking about urban schools and the trials and tribulations related to the administration of these institutions of learning. We discuss the unfortunate circumstances that many of the students who attend these schools endure in their homes and in their community. We discuss the inability of these institutions of learning to employ and sustain effective instructional leaders. We create program after program in an effort to alleviate the mass exodus of qualified teachers and promising students. We discuss the various interventions and solutions that should be implemented. We discuss the various curriculum development strategies and the assessments that go along with the implementation of those strategies. We talk about the “pipeline to prison” (PPRI) concept and how that concept is such a reality in our schools and how our administrative procedures enhance the perpetuation of that concept. Most of my career as a teacher, coach, counselor, program specialist and administrator has been defined by my experiences in the urban school environment. The following are realities, perceptions, solutions and ideas from the Urban Experience.

Keywords: transparent, collegial, urban, institutional, implementation

Introduction

I walked passed a group of students on the stairway of the school steps engaged in a heated argument. It was my first day at the school as the Assistant Principal in charge of discipline. Before I knew it, I was on the ground struggling to separate two students who were trying to inflict severe bodily harm on each other while the school security guard observed with amusement. This incident would be only the tip of the proverbial iceberg!

As a teacher and an administrator in urban public school systems across the United States, I experienced many instructional and administrative challenges. I was able to develop specific instructional strategies and administrative techniques that were tailored to address these unique challenges associated with urban education. The academic, social and environmental characteristics of the different school districts were unique but many of the challenges related to instruction and the administration of the schools were very similar. The research that I conducted supported many of my observations and validated the strategies that I implemented within the schools. This holistic and qualitative manuscript is a composite of my experiences and research related to the Urban Experience in America.

Experience

Moving back to California in the early eighties and looking for a job in Northern California was interesting and challenging. My previous position as a teacher and a coach in Oklahoma at a private school hardly prepared me for my first job in the state of California. Budget shortfalls created a scarcity of teaching opportunities in my hometown of Stockton, California. However, the opportunity for temporary work as a substitute teacher was available. The full-time teaching positions during the middle of the school year were either occupied by tenured veteran teachers or were monitored by long-term substitutes. Most of these substitutes did not have a teaching credential let alone the certification in the content areas that they were supposed to be teaching.

Discussion

“The problem that urban districts face in staffing their schools is often couched in terms of a teacher “shortage” but exactly what kind of shortage is it when virtually all classes eventually end up with some sort of teacher?” (Jacob 2007). Finding qualified and certified teachers is a common problem in the urban environment. School budgets and personnel allocations are frequently determined by a student enrollment projections during the previous school year. Urban school enrollments often fluctuate radically from one year to the next. Transiency, displacement and student transfers are common place.

Families often live in temporary housing and permanent residency is most often an anomaly. That combined with the fact that many qualified teachers and veteran teachers opt to avoid employment in these schools make attracting teachers and staffing in urban schools very difficult. While recruitment of highly qualified personnel is a hallmark of recent efforts at educational reform, there has been little discussion of the stress associated with urban classroom teaching (Craig, 2016). Although seldom acknowledged, teaching requires above-average social competency and emotional regulation (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009).

Experience

Subbing was really interesting during this juncture in my career. Waking up to the phone call at 5:30 A.M. wasn't always a delight but it literally meant that I had a job for that day. The new temporary employees (substitutes) of the district were usually assigned to the most difficult schools as veteran substitutes usually avoided these assignments. Walking into my first opportunity, I was met by the Principal as I entered the building. "It's a tough class Mr. Benigno", he mispronounced my name and it sounded like "Big Nose". I corrected him on the pronunciation and he continued, "Jimmy hasn't been here in a while", "I think that he is having some personal problems at home." "Anyway, they're good kids and if you love them, they will love you." I met the secretary, Sandy at the front desk and she provided me with a schedule and a set of keys. She smiled and asked me if I had ever worked at Frontier Middle School before. I told her I had not and she again smiled and gave me some verbal directions to the classroom.

Frontier had a predominantly Hispanic and African-American student population. Sprinkled among that student population was a significant (25%) number of white students who lived in a nearby community affectionately called "Okieville". Having grown up in Stockton and having attended school in the area, I was familiar with the unique demographic make-up of this part of town. The white students who were identified as inhabitants of Okieville were mostly descendants of the white population that moved from Oklahoma to California during the drought and Great Depression of the thirties. Ironically, I'd just moved from Oklahoma myself!

As I walked into the classroom, a seventh grade social studies class, I met two students engaged in a profanity laced argument about a missing bicycle. Before I knew it, both students were on the ground engaged in a tug-o-war with each other's hair. I quickly separated the students, took them to the office and I returned to my class prior to the ringing of the first bell. Students soon entered the class running from seat to seat oblivious of my presence until I was able to get their attention. My experience as a football coach came in handy and with a series of abrupt shouts, orders and threats and I was able to gain control of the class. The entire day was spent creating lesson plans (none were available), assigning work and bluffing the students into thinking that the assignments

were valid and important. During the course of the day, as I meandered through the halls on my way to lunch, the faculty room and the bathroom, I encountered multiple altercations between students. The students seemed to welcome the intervention. I was the lucky interventionist of the day! We were six weeks into the second semester of the school year and the teacher of record in my class had been present one week. The students had been without the teacher of record for the majority of the school year. At the end of the day the Principal again met me as I was leaving the office and complimented me on my effectiveness in the class. “Mr. Big Nose, we didn’t see one student out of your class today”. “Can you come back tomorrow?”

Discussion

Future efforts at educational reform should provide teachers with the training they need to adequately respond to the needs of traumatized children, while protecting their own emotional well-being (Craig, 2016). Unfortunately Urban Schools are notorious for operating without certified and qualified personnel. The shortage of teachers during the beginning of the 21st Century has exasperated an already dire situation in the urban environment. Teachers in the areas of science and math are very difficult to find and are even harder to place in urban schools. Substitutes are provided by the district (when they are available). When they are not provided it is usually up to the Administration to come up with a solution that will provide supervision (not instruction) for the students in the affected class. Different states have different requirements with respect to class coverage. Ironically, in some states, the substitute is not even required to have a bachelor’s degree. Sixty college credits is usually the minimum requirement but in the state of Georgia I found one district that only required a warm body without a criminal record. Often classified aides employed in the building are the individuals of choice when the district is unable to find a substitute.

Some states mandate that a certified employee must be present in the absence of the teacher of record. In the State of California, substitutes must be certified by the district and in the absence of the certified substitute an Administrator is required to cover the class. When it is impractical for an administrator to cover a class some of the solutions involve, blending of classes, sending the students to the gym (supervised by the P.E. teacher), dividing the students from the classes without supervision and sending them to other classes or utilizing the services of the friendly librarian. Needless to say, none of the solutions involve the emphasis and implementation of instruction.

The lack of qualified personnel in an urban environment can exasperate an already taxed discipline policy. Most urban schools are understaffed with respect to security and administrative personnel. Absence of competence in the classroom can “spill out” into the rest of the building. Students are often removed from class officially but more often than not they are “kicked out of class” by overwhelmed teachers. These students are set free to often occupy the

bathrooms or the hallways. The Administration is often unable to keep up with the increased traffic in the halls. The perception of anarchy often fuels unrest among students and teachers alike. As an Assistant Principal in a small urban high school, I noticed the number of students frequenting the halls increased as the school year progressed. I began to investigate the migration from the classrooms to the halls and that investigation revealed that many of the students escaping to the halls and the bathrooms were failing their classes and had been informed by their teachers that they had “already failed the class”. The teachers stopped short of telling the students not to come to class but from the student’s perspective, why would you attend a class that you have already failed?

Experience

Permanent employment was my goal so I investigated every possible opportunity that availed itself. My position as a substitute teacher was somewhat precarious and I really wanted something as permanent as possible. A position as a teacher became available with the California Young Men’s Authority, a youth prison just outside of the city. It housed youthful offenders from the ages of 11 to 19. I was assigned as a social studies teacher to one of the housing blocks. All of the students in this institution were former urban school students. The students (Wards) would attend class for one half of the day and undergo counseling and recreation the second half of the day. I was expected to attend the counseling sessions and participate in the recreational activities of the day. The school day was a little longer than the public school day but the money was good and it was a 6 month assignment. The institution was a state maintained facility so I was provided with benefits and a retirement plan if I was to receive permanent employment in the position after the probationary period.

Most of the students in the class were serious offenders, rape, murder, and gang related offenses occupied my front row of seats. All of the students were products from public schools in Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Francisco. None of the students were on track to graduate with their class on the “outs”(outside the institution) but the students who attended the institutional classes were on track to achieve a high school diploma prior their release date (which varied). Amazingly, the students were very cooperative and respectful during instruction. The red button above my desk and my ability to push that button had an influence on student behavior and diligence in the class. In the event that a student decided to be “out of character”, I only had to push the button which would summon two security guards from down the hall. If the button was pushed, the student in question would be detained for up to 24 hours in a padded cell with no privileges or access to normal daily routines. I avoided the use of the button and I would allow the students in the class to have a lot flexibility with respect to communicating with me and other students. I believed that the least restrictive environment in my classroom could have a lasting effect on their behavior when they returned to normal

society, but the button was still there. I quickly understood that it was very important to keep the students on task, any task. One unfortunate day, I decided to provide the students with a break in the monotony (which they preferred) and have a discussion regarding current events in the world. The discussion quickly escalated into an argument with racial overtones. Pencils started flying and the button was pushed. The next day my class was incrementally smaller and I was smarter for the experience.

Discussion

The institutional treatment of the students at the Youth Authority and the treatment of urban students in urban schools can be very similar. The students in the Youth Authority wore t-shirts and tan brown pants. Most urban schools now require students to wear prescriptive uniforms. The uniform policies in urban schools range from extremely lax to “over the top” restrictive and inflexible and failure by a student to adhere to the policy often results in suspension or in-school suspension. The institutional student is searched before and after he enters the class in an effort to monitor what the student brings and what he takes with him. The urban student is often submitted to the same procedure prior to entering the building and often may be searched during class. Many times those searches are based on reliable information and sometimes based on rumors. Institutional students are searched because they have a proven propensity for deviant behavior. Urban students are searched because of their proximity to a social environment that may be conducive to violence and deviant behavior.

Urban students and teachers struggle with many of the same dilemmas faced by teachers and students in the institutional environments. Many teachers are hesitant to create a learning environment that is conducive to collaboration and interaction. Many of the students who attend the urban schools are poorly equipped to handle group and collaborative assignments and many of the teachers are poorly trained to facilitate the implementation of those assignments. The result is often a curriculum of worksheets, lecture and movies.

The process of curriculum development begins with choosing what to teach (Richert, 2012). Through my experiences within the juvenile institution, I developed instructional strategies that would encourage participation and at same time provide the students with an opportunity to create portfolios of work related to the instructional content of the course. It was obvious that I could require the students to sit in their seats and fill out the worksheets but I quickly realized that the reception of the content and the presentation of the information that they were receiving was directly related and correlated with their ability to retain information. In other words, if they had the opportunity to tell me and communicate with each other about what they learned from the curriculum they would, through the process, authentically engage in self-assessment. This instructional pedagogical knowledge would benefit my future

endeavors as an educator in the urban environment. Learning research has shown that students learn best by actively “constructing” knowledge from a combination of experience, interpretation, and structured interactions with peers and teachers (Bransford, Brown, Cocking 1999).

Curriculum and instruction in the urban school environment is becoming progressively more prescriptive. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), states and school districts are emphasizing mandated assessments for all students and an increased accountability for teachers in those environments. A factor in the curriculum negotiation process in urban schools is the set of district, state, and in some instances national guidelines that outline what teachers should teach and what students should learn (Richert, 2012). The results of that emphasis have created an instructional design strategy that is focused on teaching to the assessment. Teachers in English, Language Arts, Science and Math are forgoing a holistic approach to instruction and they are focusing on incrementally achieving bench marks on the way to the assessment. At the elementary level, teachers and administrators are so pre-occupied with assessment improvement strategies they have begun to departmentalize subjects in grades as low as the second and third grade. In addition to the lack of holistic and integrated instruction, the curriculum is shrinking, especially in urban environments that have large numbers of students who need remediation. Electives for these students are being eliminated and many of these students are being required to take remedial courses in the content areas that they have demonstrated a lack of proficiency. Some of these remedial courses do not even provide the students with credit toward graduation or promotion.

Experience

Fights and disruptive behavior on the urban school campus are often common ground. The office is an ongoing, revolving door of disruptive students who are apprehended in the halls, kicked out of classes or found wandering on the streets by the local police force. Teachers continually complain about student behavior and the students’ inability to conform to the classroom expectations. On one occasion, as I was walking to the cafeteria during lunch, I spotted two students jumping a fence in a restricted area near the gym. The gate was locked and the area housed the outside compressor of an air conditioning unit. As I approached the area I noticed that the students were squaring off, preparing to knock each other’s block off. I quickly ran to the locked gate and ordered the students to cease and desist. That was a laugh! The students jumped the fence because they knew that they could fight and nobody would be able to stop them! What they didn’t know was that I was totally capable of jumping the fence too! I jumped the fence and as I was reaching the top, the brawl ensued. I found myself trapped in an enclosed cage with two irate middle school students bent on killing each other. I was able to contain both students and prevent them from doing too much harm. I on the

other hand, tore my pants, cut my hand and ruined a perfectly good lunch period.

As an administrator in one urban school, I was often charged with supervising the searches prior to students entering the building. These searches were extremely invasive, involving wanding (waving a metal wand over a student's body), pat downs (in the event of a wand signal), back pack searches and interviews. Students would have to stop and line up prior to entering the building. The search procedure would begin approximately thirty minutes prior to the beginning of class when the doors were opened to allow student access. Security guards, administrators and sometimes teachers would greet the students, take their backpacks and physically search through the backpacks. Students would pass through metal detectors (that may or not be working), subjected to the wanding and would then wait in a line for their backpacks to be returned. The process would become increasingly more intense as the line of students began to grow. Time was also a factor because many of the students desired to eat breakfast prior to beginning their first class.

The traumatic environments in which many of the students reside coupled with the invasive searches can create a school climate that is filled with tension and apprehension. It was not uncommon for tempers to flair. On a good day only one student would have to be restrained and removed from the building. The process definitely set the tone for the day. On one occasion a female student took issue with a male security guard searching through her wallet. Before I could intercede, the security guard had accosted the girl, thrown her to the ground and had begun to restrain her. Needless to say the screaming and the obvious struggle caught everyone's attention. I attempted to calm the student and relieve the tension between the two parties but to no avail. The security guard had an agenda. I found out later that he was told to make an example of a student that day and unfortunately the young lady won the prize. The principal later told me that it was necessary to make a statement on occasion to let the students know who was in charge. Searching students at the door prior to the beginning of school is unfortunately a necessary strategy in some urban environments. In addition to the searches, several school districts currently use dogs to search lockers and sometimes backpacks. Contraband is sometimes discovered during the searches and many districts and police departments perceive the searches to be a deterrent.

Mondays and Fridays were not good days. On Mondays, you could count on a lot students coming to school in a foul mood. The weekend had not been good to them. Maybe they slept at home and maybe they had to stay at a neighbor's house or the home of a relative. Often they came to school in dirty clothes, the same clothes they wore on Friday. Administrators and teachers struggled with dealing with the angry students. During breakfast, which was extremely important to the students, you could feel the tension in the air. You could hear brief terse conversations, laced with profanity. As the administrator on duty, I trained myself to recognize conflict before it escalated. I would walk from table to table, encouraging, praising, conversing and doing my best to avert a major confrontation or outburst. As the year went on I became more

creative. I bought checkers, dominoes and chess sets. I set them out for the students to use and explore. Many of the students got into the games and for a brief moment they were distracted from that weekend.

Fridays were also a challenge, many of our severe school wide disruptions took place on Friday. Many of the students did not want to go home for the weekend. School, as much as they resented it, was a sanctuary. They knew that they could get a meal, they knew that they would be safe, they knew that they had some sort of support system around them. They could talk to a coach, a teacher, a friend or even an administrator. People did care.

On Friday, they knew that they had to spend two days and three nights in uncertainty. Additionally, on Friday, many teachers would call out. Classes would be supervised by substitutes and when substitutes could not be found, classes would be blended or sent to the gym. Many of the substitute lesson plans called for movies and unfortunately many of the movies were not related to the curriculum. Students would often become bored, disruptive or not go to class at all. "We're not doing anything, why should we go". As an administrator and a teacher, I recognized this phenomena early in my career. As a teacher, I would create engaging lessons, provide students with the opportunity to recover their grades by finishing missed assignments. I would allow other students to engage in critical discussion with me concerning current topics related to their areas of interest within or outside of the curriculum.

From the administrator's perspective, Fridays could be a nightmare. In one of my administrative assignments the school year began with overtones of gang activity permeating through the building. The Crips and the Neighborhood Crip Gang (Hoovers) had a significant representation in the building. The administration and the Resource Officers were aware of the representation but nothing significant had happened during the first three weeks of school. Interestingly, both groups coexisted because the school was a sanctuary and perceived as a safety zone away from the social forces of the neighborhood. On occasion one individual may call out another individual but coexistence was the norm and not an anomaly.

On one particular Friday morning, I sensed more tension than usual at breakfast. Earlier that morning, at the entrance to the building, during the search, one student had to be cuffed (handcuffed) and escorted to the Police Office. There had also been a shooting in the neighborhood the night before. The entire building was tense because of the outburst and subsequent arrest. I walked into the cafeteria to supervise breakfast. I would usually station myself in one location as the students were entering the cafeteria and then as the students moved through the food line I would begin to mingle with the selected tables as they seated themselves. On this particular morning, I noticed rival individuals separating themselves on either side of the cafeteria. At the same time, two individuals who happened to be brothers entered the food line. I also noticed two other individuals from the rival gang of the brothers entering the food line. Sensing trouble, I called for assistance from security. I immediately headed for the food line to establish a presence and attempt to avert any confrontation. Before I could reach the food line and before additional security

could arrive, the cafeteria exploded into a chair throwing, food flying, fist throwing riot. Simultaneously, security arrived but the calamity had begun. Pepper spray was being dispersed and students engaged in the activity and students trying to eat breakfast were all under siege. I was on the ground restraining one of the brothers as the security and co-administrators were attempting separate individuals involved in the altercation. Happy Friday!

Discussion

The level of violence in urban communities in general is a constant concern for teachers. Most children in urban classrooms are familiar with violence, as they have seen it on the streets where they live (Richert, 2012). Teacher orientation and preparation for the urban school environment is often completely neglected. Resources and strategies for that preparation are often non-existent. The difficulty in finding qualified teachers to work in the urban environment has forced some districts to depend on long-term substitutes and enlist the assistance of organizations like “Teach for America”. While Teach for America teachers are enthusiastic, motivated and intelligent, they lack the formal preparation, cultural awareness and pedagogical strategies to be consistent and successful in the difficult urban environments. The limitations of their training and their inexperience working with other teachers and in schools sometimes becomes a liability for these individuals. Additionally, many districts opt to place these individuals at the elementary level where knowledge of pedagogical strategies is critical, especially in the area of literacy.

Handling discipline in the urban school is handled on two fronts, one in the classroom environment and the other from the school wide perspective of the administration. Obviously to have a coherent discipline strategy in the urban environment, school wide discipline and classroom management have to work in conjunction. Teachers and the school leaders have to be on the same page with regard to policies and the implementation of the strategies related to those policies. The only way to develop coherent and consistent policies and implementation practices is to collaboratively embrace, define and identify the roles of the teacher and of the school administration in the process. Teacher turnover is high in schools that serve large shares of poor or nonwhite students because the work is difficult, and the teachers who undertake it are often the least equipped to succeed (Murnane and Steele 2007). Many urban school administrations do not take the time to include the faculty and the support stakeholders in the development of the classroom and the school wide discipline plan. Consistent, transparent and culturally sensitive strategies must be developed and those strategies can only be formulated through knowledgeable conversations and collegial interactions with all stakeholders. In one particular administrative position, in an urban middle school in Central California, mutual combat between boys had become the norm on a daily basis. It had become a “right” of passage. Through the collaboration between the school administration,

teachers, students and parents, we decided on a no-tolerance policy regarding mutual combat. An incrementally progressive discipline policy was established which involved, in-school suspension, counseling, conflict resolution and out of school suspension. Fights stopped almost immediately, all parties had input, all parties had ownership.

In addition to the humanistic approach to urban school discipline, school administrations must maintain an environment that is safe, secure and flexible enough to provide students and teachers an opportunity to engage in and create authentic learning experiences. In many cases selected individuals must be removed from the school environment to insure that this learning process can be accomplished. The development of the discipline policy must involve the utilization of all campus and community resources. All stakeholders, parents, students, teachers, community leaders and district and school administrators must participate in the process. Alternative options must be created to accommodate those students who cannot cope with the structure of the school environment. Impeccable documentation, ongoing intervention and a continual supportive presence in the building is essential to accomplishing that environment conducive to learning, teaching and nurturing.

Conclusion

So, where do we go from here? What can we do to allow the students in these schools the opportunity to become successful? What can we do to make these students safe? How do we encourage more qualified teachers and administrators to practice in these environments?

Literature and research have indicated that by creating an environment that is safe, nurturing, challenging and culturally responsive, the urban school teachers and administrators can overcome some of the trauma that besets students in that environment. Literature and research indicates that by providing valid and current professional development and resources to the teachers in these environments, instruction and the delivery of the curriculum will improve. We know that the data driven analysis of student and teacher performance can provide insight into the necessary changes that are required for improved instruction and learning. We also understand that the constructivist approach to the development and implementation of the curriculum can enhance the ability of the students to grasp, retain and apply knowledge. Successful urban schools have implemented restorative opportunities for students to reclaim credit deficiencies and get back on the road to success. We also understand that there are specific policies related to school attendance and student behavior that precipitate the “pipeline to prison” concept and how we can improve on those policies. So what’s the problem?

Social forces, political agendas, racial power struggles and economic priorities are all taking their toll on the urban educational environment. Many of these urban schools are located in high crime, high unemployment and low income communities. Most of these communities are predominantly poor

people of color. These communities and the people who live in these communities are not empowered and woefully represented on the political stage. School administrators who are placed in these environments are often chosen by default and not their professional expertise. Teachers who work in these environments are not provided with ample tools to meet the needs of the student population who attend these schools. They are often not trained or educated with respect to the fundamental academic and culturally responsive obligations of their positions. Many feel like they are “up to their neck in alligators and don’t remember that they have to drain the swamp”, they are overwhelmed. Formulas for providing the necessary qualified staffing and the resources for running the schools are often not adjusted by school leaders to accommodate the specific challenges of the student population and of the community. Those of us who have spent most of our careers in urban schools recognize and are cognizant of the changes that need to take place for urban schools to be successful. “Continued advocacy for the rights of disenfranchised children and recognition of the risks they face if their needs are left unattended or ignored emerge as fundamental issues” (Craig, 2016). Unless we address and promote advocacy for urban schools we will continue to face failure within the urban school experience.

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