

## Effective Teachers in Urban School Settings: Linking Teacher Disposition and Student Performance on Standardized Tests

Susan Thompson  
The University of Memphis

Mary Ransdell  
The University of Memphis

Celia Rousseau  
The University of Memphis

*This study examined the teaching dispositions of 14 elementary (K-6) urban teachers designated as effective by their principals to determine the classroom practices that promote academic success for students based on standardized test scores. Investigators used the Teacher Quality Measure (TQM), an instrument aligned to the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), in addition to field notes, in observations of the teachers. The results of this study suggest that effective teachers whose students score high on standardized tests in urban school settings actively engage their students in learning in a teacher-centered classroom. These teachers are consistent in following set rules and procedures resulting in instructional flow as students stay on task. The teachers have developed rapport with their students through good verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Their focus on instruction seems to be linked with seamless classroom management. These teachers are committed to helping students learn through the use of repetition as a means of ensuring student understanding of concepts and skills. These dispositions run counter to constructivist theory as it is taught in most teacher preparation programs, causing concern that although students may perform adequately on current standardized tests, they may not be acquiring needed problem-solving skills necessary for long-term achievement.*

---

In the aftermath of *No Child Left Behind* (Public Law 107-110, 2001) and the rush for designating “highly qualified” teachers, state departments of education, institutions of higher learning, and school districts around the country are struggling to set criteria for designating educators as highly qualified. Rice (2003) reported five categories of teacher attributes that appeared to contribute to teacher quality as presented in a meta-analysis of empirical studies of teacher qualities. Rice identified these attributes as experience, preparation programs and degrees, type of certification, coursework taken in preparation for the profession, and teachers’ own test scores. Wayne and Youngs (2003) also focused on teacher quality in their analysis of studies that examined the characteristics of effective teachers and their link to student academic

success. They examined ratings of teachers’ undergraduate institutions, teachers’ test scores, degrees and coursework, and certification status. They concluded, “students learn more from teachers with certain characteristics [teachers’ college ratings and test scores]...Teachers differ greatly in their effectiveness, but teachers with and without different qualifications differ only a little” (p. 100-101). Berry (2002) challenged the attribute lists by highlighting that while these attributes are important they appear to have a “singular focus on content knowledge” (p. 1). Highly qualified teachers must also know “how to organize and teach their lessons in ways that assure diverse students can learn those subjects...Highly qualified teachers don’t just teach well-designed, standards-based lessons: They know how and why their students learn...” (p. 2).

This study began as a result of an attempt to redesign the elementary education program at a larger, urban, Mid-South university. Principals, classroom teachers, school district administrators, and elementary education faculty met to discuss the teacher characteristics necessary for student academic success and to ensure that those characteristics aligned with the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Standards that guided the curriculum of the elementary education program. After lengthy discussion, the group reached a consensus of the knowledge and pedagogical skills teachers should possess, but kept returning to the dispositions of effective teachers. Taylor and Wasiesko (2000) concluded that there is a relationship between teacher effectiveness and the dispositions of teachers. They define dispositions as perceptions or beliefs that guide actions. What dispositions did effective teachers possess that enabled their students to be academically successful? We determined that the best way to find out about the dispositions of effective teachers was to observe them teaching. This study, therefore, involves the collection of data from observations using a pilot instrument that addresses dispositions called the Teacher Quality Measure (TQM).

### *Judging Effective Teaching*

Rice (2003) and Wayne and Youngs (2003) discuss teacher quality as teachers having certain characteristics that enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. Seeking to uncover those characteristics, we began looking at those teachers who were considered effective by their principals. For the purpose of this research, "effective" was defined as teachers whose students were academically successful based on state standardized test scores. Principals chose teachers whose students' test scores were

higher than others and teachers the principals perceived as being successful according to their own criteria. While "effective" teaching becomes difficult to define, we operationalized a definition of *effective* meaning that students in the teachers' classes received a passing score on the state standardized test for academic achievement and the teachers were perceived as effective by their principals.

Currently, standardized test scores along with perfunctory observations by one's supervisor(s) and notes about student progress are the most accepted way to determine effectiveness of new and veteran teachers. Mayo (1997) offers nine ways to evaluate teachers, which include classroom observation, partnerships, mentoring, coaching, portfolios, action research, self-evaluations, parent/student evaluations, and collections of artifacts.

The INTASC Standards, created in 1987 by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, are part of teacher licensure criteria and professional development; INTASC Standards suggest certain dispositions that every new teacher should demonstrate. The operating premise of INTASC is that an effective teacher must be able to integrate content knowledge with pedagogical understanding to ensure that all students learn and perform at high levels. INTASC standards also state that teachers must hold certain dispositions that are congruent with effective teaching and those dispositions are included as a part of each of the ten INTASC principles. Wasiesko (2002) reports that not only has teacher effectiveness research provided little in the identification of dispositions, but also there is inherent difficulty in evaluating what he refers to as "perceptual orientations" or dispositions. We can measure a teacher's content knowledge and pedagogical skills. What we have not been able to measure and,

therefore, evaluate, are the teacher's dispositions as they relate to student success.

Currently, research has not clearly delineated a definition for disposition. The general consensus (based on experience, discussion with colleagues, and attendance at a national dispositions conference) focuses on terms like innate qualities, learned qualities, habits of mind, ways of behaving, values, belief, and attitudes; these ideas are supported in the literature (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000). No common language currently exists to consistently and universally describe dispositions, thereby making it difficult to recognize and document them. Because of this elusive quality, it becomes even more difficult to determine teacher disposition effect on student achievement, but there is a sense of connection.

To connect dispositions and student success, we explored demonstrators or indicators of dispositions in a teacher's overall makeup, just as a test or observation provides demonstration of knowledge or skills. For example, INTASC Standard 6 reads, "The teacher uses knowledge of effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom." A teacher who creates a media-rich environment via colorful posters, print material, computers, talking books, bulletin boards, or graphics is demonstrating a disposition. This example does not demonstrate knowledge but rather a value/belief that a teacher can convey through such actions because the teacher understands the need for communication and the development of language in young children. The teacher supports the students' active inquiry by enticing and engaging their natural inquisitiveness, thus creating an environment in which the children are receptive to learning.

## **Review of Literature**

According to Bulger, Mohr, and Walls (2002), teaching effectiveness is grounded in the connection between a teacher's subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. They explain, "1) an individual may possess a substantial amount of subject-matter knowledge, yet be unable to design and implement instructional methods to enhance student learning due to a lack of pedagogical ability; and 2) conversely, an individual may possess some generic pedagogical skills, yet have limited subject-matter knowledge and again be predisposed to ineffective teaching" (Research on Teacher Effectiveness section, ¶ 1).

Many studies conclude that effective teachers must understand pedagogy (Bohn, Roehrig & Pressley, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Franklin, 1992; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher & James, 2002; Stewart, Evans, & Kaczynski, 1997; Thibodeau & Hillman, 2003), or optimize the time they spend actually teaching (Bohn et al., 2004; Stewart et al., 1997) This suggests that teachers understand the connection between textbook theories and how those theories play out in the classroom. Teachers also need knowledge of and skills in classroom and behavior management (Bohn et al., 2004; Minor et al., 2002; Stewart et al., 1997; Thibodeau & Hillman, 2003). This suggests teachers need organization and a thorough understanding of children.

Another theme pertains to whether instruction is student-centered (Minor et al., 2002), appropriate for students' level of development (Franklin, 1992), or supportive of their needs (Wentzel, 2002). This suggests a thorough understanding of child development. Not surprisingly, content knowledge should be a part of the knowledge a teacher possesses (Minor et al., 2002) and that teachers employ outside

resources to assist them (Franklin, 1992). Finally, effective teachers are good communicators (McKay, 1997; Sachs, 2004; Thibodeau et al., 2003).

Other aspects that have been suggested as characteristics of effective teachers include respecting students (McKay, 1997; Thibodeau et al., 2003), being enthusiastic (Minor et al., 2002), and having high expectations for students (McKay, 1997). Effective teachers motivate students (Bohn et al., 2004), are aware of socio-cultural differences (Sachs, 2004), and act professionally and ethically (Minor et al., 2002).

Additionally, perceived efficacy (Enderlin-Lampe, 1997; Sachs, 2004; Wasicsko, 2002), taking risks (Sachs, 2004), and mentor support (McKay, 1997; Halford, 1998) are seen as characteristics of effective teachers. Finally, it seems good teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Evans, Stewart, Mangin, & Bagley, 2001), and a conviction that teacher knowledge and skills are linked are both important (Cooper, 2003; Enderlin-Lampe, 1997).

Yet, there does not appear to be a consensus about what makes a teacher effective and how that effectiveness is related to teacher dispositions. We attempted to determine demonstrators or indicators of qualities /dispositions according to INTASC standards to provide some continuity in language. We created an instrument from the disposition strand of the INTASC Standards. We determined a logical set of activities that would provide us with evidence that each disposition was incorporated into the teacher's instruction. According to Freeman (2004), dispositions have come to mean "expected behavior, belief, or attitude" (p. 5). He contends that dispositions appear to be synonymous with learning outcomes and that "the assumption appears to be that there are 'dispositions'

appropriate to all possible learning and school situations" (p. 4).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the teaching dispositions of fourteen elementary (K-6) urban classroom teachers designated as effective teachers by their principals to determine the practices in their classrooms that enable their students to be successful. This study reports on two guiding questions:

1. What classroom dispositions do effective classroom teachers have in common?
2. How do the dispositions of effective classroom teachers compare with dispositions as set out by INTASC standards?

### **Methodology**

This study had a basic qualitative research design with descriptive statistics used to report observational data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Teachers were approached at the recommendation of their principals; fourteen teachers consented to participate in this study. Each participant signed informed consent documents at the time they agreed to participate in the study. We observed these kindergarten through sixth grade classroom teachers for approximately 45 to 60 minutes using the Teacher Quality Measure (TQM), described below, and recorded field notes. Observations were unscheduled. We determined indicators of dispositions, (perceptual orientations of teachers based on our understanding of INTASC standards and dispositions research), to examine the connection between teacher effectiveness and student success as measured by standardized scores.

### *Instrumentation*

We created an instrument from the disposition strand of the INTASC Standards called Teacher Quality Measure (TQM). We interpreted the INTASC dispositions based on our understanding of dispositions research, our years of classroom teaching experience, and from observing teachers in our roles as university teacher educators. We determined a logical set of activities to provide us with evidence that the teacher incorporated dispositions into instruction. The TQM (Appendix A) denotes the frequency and quality of observable behaviors that, according to INTASC, are demonstrators of effective teaching. We grouped together dispositions and examples of observable behaviors. We quantified these behaviors with a rating scheme of 0 (never observed) through 4 (observed extensively). We observed each of the teachers at a variety of times and weekdays, observing each teacher three times. We conducted forty observations; one teacher dropped out of the study after one observation.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study include a nonrandom sample of approximately fourteen kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom educators currently teaching in four urban schools. All participants teach in Professional Development Schools (PDS), which are partner schools with the university. We invited these classroom teachers to participate in this study because their principals perceived them to be effective classroom teachers and to have high student achievement rates based on standardized test scores. The teachers in the study were eight Euro-Americans and six African Americans. Six taught kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade while eight taught 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Ten teachers had five or more years of teaching experience and four had less than five years documented

teaching experience. All of the teachers were female.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis followed a general qualitative process (Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam (1998), the key philosophical assumption of qualitative research stems from the view that individuals interacting with their social world construct reality. We observed teachers as they taught lessons and orchestrated learning in their classrooms. From an analysis of field notes, patterns began to develop. We unitized, coded, and grouped data for similarities and then assigned categories.

### *Limitations of the Study*

This study is limited by the perceptions of the researchers as to their understanding of dispositions, and by the fact that the participants were all teachers in urban classrooms. The teachers may hold beliefs about the low socio-economic status (SES) of students and the impact of SES on their ability to learn in certain ways. This study was further limited by the fact that the TQM was a pilot instrument being used for the first time.

## **Findings**

We conducted forty observations of fourteen teachers over a seven-week period. We used the TQM to measure the frequency of observable teacher behaviors that align with dispositions of the INTASC Standards. The results of the observations are presented in Tables 1-6. The tables denote the number of times we observed each behavior and the percentage of time we observed a behavior in relation to all forty observations. Several behaviors surfaced as dispositions that most participants held in common. We observed teachers most often in the early mornings to avoid lunch, pull-out programs and other

activities, and because we taught on campus in the afternoons.

The participants in this study were excellent communicators. The teachers modeled respectful communication over 90% of the time. They spoke to students using a polite tone, saying such things as “please tell us...,” “thank you so much...,” and “yes sir.” They used appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication, were active listeners, and 100% of the teachers created classroom environments full of books and tools for learning. Computers were found in all classrooms but were used infrequently. We observed teachers engaging all students in learning 90% of the time. They used effective feedback and probes, motivated students by using a variety of strategies within their lessons, gave encouraging feedback, and drew on students’ prior knowledge. The teachers enforced classroom rules at least 85% of the time.

Teachers in this study used direct instruction to convey knowledge. They did not allow students to make decisions, did not vary instructional techniques, or use cooperative/collaborative methodologies. With the exception of one teacher, the participants did not integrate subject content. For all tables, frequency represents the cumulative number of times the behavior was observed out of forty observations.

TABLE 1. Learning Outcomes

Engages all students	Frequency	Percent
Never	0	0.0
Rarely	0	0.0
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	6	15.0
Extensively	30	75.0
Total	40	100.0
Uses effective feedback and probes	Frequency	Percent
Never	1	2.5
Rarely	1	2.5
Occasionally	2	5.0
Frequently	14	35.0
Extensively	22	55.0
Total	40	100.0

TABLE 2. Tools of Inquiry

Employs constructivist techniques	Frequency	Percent
Never	25	62.5
Rarely	5	12.5
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	5	12.5
Extensively	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0
Links new learning to prior understanding	Frequency	Percent
Never	7	17.5
Rarely	1	2.5
Occasionally	12	30.0
Frequently	10	25.0
Extensively	10	25.0
Total	40	100.0
Uses authentic examples and materials	Frequency	Percent
Never	14	35.0
Rarely	1	2.5
Occasionally	6	15.0
Frequently	13	32.5
Extensively	6	15.0
Total	40	100.0

TABLE 3. Instructional Strategies

Uses higher order questioning strategies	Frequency	Percent
Never	14	35.0
Rarely	2	5.0
Occasionally	11	27.5
Frequently	2	5.0
Extensively	11	27.5
Total	40	100.0
Varies role (teacher, coach, facilitator)	Frequency	Percent
Never	21	52.5
Rarely	5	12.5
Occasionally	5	12.5
Frequently	4	10.0
Extensively	5	12.5
Total	40	100.0

TABLE 4. Instructional Opportunities

Engages students in active learning	Frequency	Percent
Never	7	17.5
Rarely	2	5.0
Occasionally	3	7.5
Frequently	5	12.5
Extensively	23	57.5
Total	40	100.0
Uses differentiated learning	Frequency	Percent
Never	18	45.0
Rarely	1	2.5
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	10	25.0
Extensively	7	17.5
Total	40	100.0
Draws from students' prior knowledge	Frequency	Percent
Never	2	5.0
Rarely	3	7.5
Occasionally	9	22.5
Frequently	5	12.5
Extensively	21	52.5
Total	40	100.0
Models respectful communication	Frequency	Percent
Never	0	0.0
Rarely	1	2.5
Occasionally	2	5.0
Frequently	4	10.0
Extensively	33	82.5
Total	40	100.0

*Field Notes Data*

The field notes indicated specific teacher behaviors in the classroom. Comments about environmental aesthetics such as “classroom attractive,” “dressed professionally,” “class orderly” appeared often. In one instance the classroom teacher was observed chewing gum. Teachers were patient, pleasant, and calm with the exception of one teacher who was characterized as “edgy” and “high energy” as well as another teacher who “yelled” at her students.

Student behavior was appropriate and on task (Table 2). Generally, students were engaged in learning (i.e., class instruction or independent work) as supported by the TQM findings (Table 3).

Some teachers used “excellent questioning” strategies where students were challenged to think critically and the majority of the lessons were “teacher-centered.” Teachers questioned, probed, and redirected students’ understanding when necessary. We observed teachers reviewing prior knowledge and helping students make connections to current learning. Many of the teachers used positive reinforcements, complimented students, and spoke very respectfully to students (Table 3). Most instruction was whole group with some cooperative/ collaborative partner or group sharing (Table 5). Some small group instruction occurred when students worked with teachers in reading groups.

TABLE 5 Verbal, Nonverbal, Media Communications

Uses appropriate oral/written communication	Frequency	Percent
Never	1	2.5
Rarely	0	0.0
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	8	20.0
Extensively	27	67.5
Total	40	100.0
Provides media-rich environment	Frequency	Percent
Never	0	0.0
Rarely	0	0.0
Occasionally	0	0.0
Frequently	5	12.5
Extensively	35	87.5
Total	40	100.0
Employs active listening	Frequency	Percent
Never	4	10.0
Rarely	2	5.0
Occasionally	3	7.5
Frequently	6	15.0
Extensively	25	62.5
Total	40	100.0
Models appropriate nonverbal communication	Frequency	Percent
Never	0	0.0
Rarely	0	0.0
Occasionally	3	7.5
Frequently	3	7.5
Extensively	34	85.0
Total	40	100.0

TABLE 6. Motivation

Enforces classroom behavior rules	Frequency	Percent
Never	2	5.0
Rarely	0	0.0
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	10	25.0
Extensively	24	60.0
Total	40	100.0
Allows students to make some decisions	Frequency	Percent
Never	35	87.5
Rarely	4	10.0
Occasionally	1	2.5
Frequently	0	0.0
Extensively	0	0.0
Total	40	100.0
Uses cooperative/collaborative techniques	Frequency	Percent
Never	29	72.5
Rarely	3	7.5
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	3	7.5
Extensively	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0
Employs encouraging feedback	Frequency	Percent
Never	3	7.5
Rarely	4	10.0
Occasionally	5	12.5
Frequently	14	35.0
Extensively	14	35.0
Total	40	100.0
Uses two or more motivational strategies	Frequency	Percent
Never	6	15.0
Rarely	4	10.0
Occasionally	4	10.0
Frequently	9	22.5
Extensively	17	42.5
Total	40	100.0

### Analysis

Based on the observational data and field notes, commonalities in the dispositions of effective teachers emerged. The findings of this study were surprising to us and we suspect to the readers as well. The participants of this study taught in urban schools where students come from low-

income households where they most likely are living with one parent, an aunt, or grandmother. Students in such schools often do not have proper nutrition, supervision, or social skills. Yet in the classrooms we observed these issues did not appear as barriers for teachers and students. When examining teacher dispositions in connection with the INTASC Standards, it is important to note that while we did not observe many of the dispositions, it does not mean that the dispositions do not exist or that these teachers perform contrary to the standards. We restate that all of the participant teachers were regarded as effective teachers, have successful students, and teach in urban classrooms of some very poor schools. We firmly believe that the dispositions of these teachers derive intrinsically out of their beliefs about their students. From the interviews, we concluded that the teachers believed that their students could learn, were capable of expressing their ideas, and were capable of academic success. They valued the students as individuals, and believed that the students deserved respect from themselves as the teacher and from their classmates.

### Teacher-centered Classrooms

Based on the data, all teachers participating in this study appeared to conduct teacher-centered classrooms. The teachers were in control of academics and classroom management (INTASC Principle 5). Lessons were either direct instruction or “teacher-tell”, even in small group instruction that we occasionally observed. The lessons in these classrooms were fast paced with students being on task and engaged in learning most of the time (INTASC Principle 5). The participants of this study often used repetition within the lessons to ensure that students either understood or could recall the information under discussion. We noted that teachers

may have adjusted lessons when we came into the room which may have resulted in lessons appearing more teacher-centered than usual.

During a discussion of our initial impressions of the teachers and their classrooms, one professor stated, “It really sounds like Sesame Street—fast paced, lots of repetition, and teachers giving instruction.” What has been successful for Sesame Street appears to be successful for classroom teachers as well!

#### *Established Rules and Procedures*

Students in these classrooms were on task and engaged in learning most of the time (INTASC Principle 7). We concluded that the teachers had established rules and procedures in their classrooms. There were routines in place to deal with behavior (such as “pulling clips”) and when teachers employed these tools, the lesson continued to flow. Students working alone did not have to interrupt instruction to ask questions as to “what to do next.” Once an assignment was completed, students knew to either begin other work or read a book. Students knew where to get books and supplies, how to take the restroom pass to leave the room if needed, and where to turn in completed work. In one classroom, one student was vacuuming when the class transitioned from one lesson, to a restroom break, and into another lesson. She did this without asking permission from the teacher and the teacher gave a sign of approval as the student quickly completed the task.

#### *Communication*

The participants of this study were excellent communicators (INTASC Principle 6). Teachers used positive reinforcement extensively and emphasized positive behavior. Teachers used nonverbal communication to minimize potential behavior problems. A teacher would widen

her eyes, subtly shake her head, or remove an object from a student’s hands, all without breaking the pace and flow of the lesson. Teachers also gave explicit directions and patiently answered any clarifying questions. The teachers appeared to be good listeners, nodding their heads, waiting patiently for students to formulate answers, and generally encouraging students in a positive manner (Principle 7). Except for one teacher, we heard no yelling or fussing during observations.

The participants in this study appeared to have developed positive rapport with their students (INTASC Principle 10). This rapport was evidenced in the manner in which they addressed students; the expressions of pleasure on teacher and student faces, humor used by the teachers, and a general sense of caring about their students (INTASC Principle 3). Only one teacher appeared to have a lack of rapport with her students. During one observation, we noted her having a conversation with another adult while students visited at their desks. There appeared to be no set classroom routine, she was inconsistent in upholding her classroom rules and had the largest number of inappropriate behavior problems as compared to other participants in this study. The teacher appeared to pull a lesson together when we entered her room. She put students in a small reading circle to reread a story that the students had read the day before. This teacher seemed unenthused about the lesson and students were inattentive. It is to be noted that although this teacher was the “outlier” because she contradicts effective dispositions she was deemed successful by her principal and in terms of standardized test scores.

#### *Constructivism*

Data collected during this study indicate that, contrary to theory taught in teacher education programs across the

country, use of constructivist strategies and techniques were not evident in the teaching techniques of the participants. Students had few opportunities to construct their own knowledge and understanding. We observed few cooperative or collaborative learning strategies. Students sat at tables or groups of desks. Occasionally teachers directed students to turn to their partners to share some information but that activity was limited overall.

Teachers in this study, for the most part, used direct instruction and “teacher tell” as a means of conveying the information to be learned during the lesson. The participants of this study were in control of their classrooms at all times and did not encourage students to make curricular choices or behavior decisions. The teachers expected immediate obedience to their directions and the established rules and procedures.

Standardized tests, the student assessment used to determine whether the teachers were effective or not, do not generally measure deeper levels of understanding. “Standardized tests tend to measure the temporary acquisition of facts and skills, including the skill of test-taking itself, more than genuine understanding” (Kohn & Henkin, 2002, p. 252). Kohn and Henkin also observe that high-stakes use of standardized testing “accelerates a reliance on direct-instruction techniques” (p. 252). Students who have memorized facts and procedures may be able to perform at acceptable levels on standardized tests, but if a different measure of student understanding were used, constructivist teaching and deeper understanding of content would be necessary for adequate student performance.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the teaching practices of elementary classroom teachers in an attempt to connect their dispositions for teaching to student success based on standardized test scores. Principals recommended the fourteen participants in this study because their students have achieved some level of academic success and therefore, principals considered them to be effective teachers. This study attempted to answer the questions: 1) What classroom dispositions do effective classroom teachers have in common; and 2) How do the dispositions of effective classroom teachers compare with dispositions as set out by INTASC standards?

The results of this study suggest that effective urban teachers in our study (as defined by student performance on standardized tests and principal recommendations) enable their students to achieve academic success by actively engaging their students in learning in a teacher-centered classroom. They have set rules and procedures and consistently follow them resulting in a successful instructional flow and students who are on task. The teachers have developed rapport with their students through good verbal and nonverbal communication skills. There appears to be a link between their focus on instruction and seamless classroom management. These teachers are committed to helping students learn through the use of repetition as a means of ensuring student understanding of concepts and skills. Although teachers evidenced genuine caring for students, displayed tremendous classroom organizational skills and helped students perform at acceptable levels on standardized tests, it is of concern that many of the dispositions observed were counter to constructivist learning theory.

Kohn and Henkin (2002) lament the use of standardized testing as a primary measure of achievement in urban schools. "The more that poor children fill in worksheets on command..., the further they fall behind affluent kids who are more likely to get lessons that help them understand ideas. And if the drilling does result in higher scores, the proper response is not celebration but outrage: The test results may well have improved at the expense of real learning" (p. 252).

As teacher educators at an urban university, we are left with one overriding question based on the results of this study: How do we reconcile what we observed as the dispositions of effective urban teachers with the constructivist, student-centered practices that we try to encourage our teacher candidates to use? If effective teachers in urban schools construct highly teacher-centered learning environments and focused on direct instruction, should we not be incorporating these practices into our teacher education programs?

We argue that there are at least three reasons why these results, while interesting and worthy of consideration, should not be seen as an indication that constructivist practices should be abandoned in teacher education programs. First, there clearly needs to be further study on the teaching practices of effective teachers in urban schools. The sample was limited to fourteen teachers observed a total of three times each. It is possible that with a larger number of participants or with more extensive observation of the current sample, other patterns may emerge.

A second caveat relates to the reasons for the practices that we observed. It is possible that the master teachers used these instructional practices because these were the activities that had proven successful in the past. However, it is also possible that these instructional choices

were tied to the beliefs of the teachers about their students. We do not have clear evidence on this issue because the teachers' practices rather than their beliefs were the focus of the study.

However, as previously noted, the students in these classes were predominantly from low-income backgrounds and were often low-achieving. It is possible that the teachers' practices reflect not simply what had proven effective in the past, but also what teachers believe to be appropriate for this particular population of students. The structure and organization of the teachers' classrooms could reflect their belief that urban students lack experience, basic knowledge, and an acceptable set of social skills when entering the school culture. It is possible that these teachers believe that the children in their classrooms are unprepared for school and need direct instruction and teacher control to bring some sort of structure to the students' lives. Therefore, they carefully control their classrooms, limiting the independent actions, choices, and activities of the students.

The participants' focus on consistency and routine could be a response to the belief that such practices are especially important for urban children as their lives outside of the school context may be quite different and often chaotic. We do not know precisely the motivating factors behind the use of the practices we observed. We need more information about the reasons and beliefs related to the teachers' practices in order to fully understand and interpret the appropriateness of including them as a focus of urban teacher education. We might find that rather than teaching future teachers to create teacher-centered classrooms in all cases, we should be focusing on the beliefs of teacher candidates about the students with whom they will be working.

Finally, we have to consider the long-term efficacy of these instructional practices. We recognize that these teachers are assisting their students to be academically successful by using more traditional, “non-constructivist” strategies. We express concern, however, that students in these classrooms may be successful on standardized achievement tests and in the classroom in general, but may not be attaining the skills necessary for critical thinking and problem solving.

This goes back to the definition of teacher effectiveness. In the era of high-stakes accountability, effectiveness is clearly tied to student achievement on standardized tests. However, at some point, students need to be moved to a more challenging academic setting where they are asked to think and problem-solve on a regular basis. We have data to support the effectiveness of a teacher-centered classroom characterized by direct instruction for the purpose of promoting high test scores. What we do not know is whether this is more or less effective than a more constructivist classroom either for achieving success on the tests or for promoting higher-order thinking in the long-term.

It is clear that students can be successful with talented and dedicated teachers using more traditional methods, but what would happen if those same teachers used more of the practices that we currently advocate in our teacher preparation programs? We need to take into consideration the possibility that, while these teachers are clearly effective at one level, there might be another level of effectiveness and a different route to get there.

While the teachers in our study operated in teacher-centered classrooms, used mostly direct instruction or lecture, and controlled the flow of instruction, they appeared to genuinely respect and

acknowledge their students as learners and as human beings. They created the rapport necessary for a nurturing, emotionally safe environment that fosters natural inquiry and authentic learning. The teachers through their actions demonstrated the belief that all children can learn and that they are capable of making decisions and defending their ideas. The teachers demonstrated the dispositions of effective teachers and as a result their students were successful learners. Learning that occurs for the sake of learning, not for the sake of a standardized test score, is valuable to our children and to our society as a whole.

### References

- Berry, B. (2002). *What it means to be a “highly qualified teacher”*. Southeast Center for Teaching Quality. Retrieved October 13, 2004, from <http://www.teachingquality.org/resources/pdfs/definingHQ.pdf>
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and method* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bohn, C. M., Roehrig, A. D., & Pressley, M. (2004). The first days of school in the classrooms of two more effective teachers and four less effective primary-grades teachers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 104(4), 269-278.
- Bulger, S. M., Mohr, D. J., & Walls, R. T. (2002). Stack the deck in favor of your students by using the four aces of effective teaching. *Effective Teaching*, 5(2). Retrieved May 25, 2005, from <http://cte.uncwil.edu/et/articles.htm>
- Cooper, P. M. (2003). Effective white teachers of black children: Teaching within a community. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 54(5), 413-427.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(1). Retrieved May 25, 2005, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n>

- Enderlin-Lampe, S. (1997). Shared decision making in schools: Effect on teacher efficacy. *Education, 118*(1), 150-156.
- Evans, C, Stewart, P. M., Mangin, M. & Bagley, C. (2001). Teacher quality: Issues and research. *Education, 122*(1), 200-204.
- Franklin, M. E. (1992). Culturally sensitive instructional practices for African-American learners with disabilities. *Exceptional Children 59*(2), 115-122.
- Freeman, L. (2004) Dispositions in teacher education: Some of the unresolved issues. Retrieved May 25, 2005, from <http://larryfreeman.net/aactedisp0207.pdf>
- Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (1992). *Model standards for beginning teacher licensing, assessment and development: A resource for state dialogue*. Retrieved March 2, 2004, from <http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/corestrd.pdf>.
- Kohn, A., & Henkin, R. (2002). Poor teaching for poor kids. *Language Arts, 79*(3), 251-255.
- Mayo, R. W. (1997). Trends in teacher education. *The clearing house, 70*(5), 268.
- McKay, J. W. (1997). Examining the elusive essence of a superlative teacher. *Education, 117*(3), 433-439.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Minor, L. C., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Witcher, A. E., & James, T. L. (2002). Preservice teachers' educational beliefs and their perceptions of characteristics of effective teachers. *The Journal of Educational Research, 96*(2), 116-127.
- Rice, J. K. (2003). Teacher quality: Understanding the effectiveness of teacher attributes. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.
- Sachs, S. K. (2004). Evaluation of teachers' attributes as predictors of success in urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(2), 177-187.
- Stewart, S., Evans, W., & Kaczynski, K. J. (1997). Setting the stage for success: Assessing the instructional environment. *Preventing School Failure, 41*(2), 53-56.
- Taylor, R. L., & Wasiesko, M. M. (2000). *The dispositions to teach*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Region Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE) Conference, Lexington, KY.
- Thibodeau, G. P., & Hillman, S. J. (2003). In retrospect: Teachers who made a difference from the perspective of pre-service and experienced teachers. *Education, 124*(1), 168-181.
- Wasiesko, M. (2002). *Assessing educator dispositions: A perceptual psychological approach*. Retrieved December, 2004, from <http://www.education.eku.edu/Dean/DispositionsManual.pdf>.
- Wayne, A. M., & Youngs, P. (2003). Teacher characteristics and student achievement gains: A review. *Review of Educational Research, 73*(1), 89-122.
- Wentzel, M. R. (2002). Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development, 73*(1), 287-301.

### About the Authors

Susan Thompson received her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A&M University, served as Assistant Professor at the University of Memphis, and is now an Associate Professor at Lynchburg College. Mary Ransdell earned her doctorate in Elementary Education at the University of Kentucky and is an Assistant Professor at The University of Memphis. Celia Rousseau was awarded her Ph.D. in 2002 from The University of Wisconsin-Madison and is an Assistant Professor at the University of Memphis.

**Appendix A**  
**Classroom Observation Comments for Teacher Quality Measure**

School \_\_\_\_\_ Observer \_\_\_\_\_ Time in \_\_\_\_\_  
 Teacher Code \_\_\_\_\_ Observation Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time out \_\_\_\_\_  
 Subject/Activity overview \_\_\_\_\_

*Directions: Comment on whether the following items are present or not during your observation.*

Tools of Inquiry	Noted	Comments
Employs constructivist techniques	_____	_____
<i>Concept attainment/formation</i>	_____	_____
<i>Cooperative learning</i>	_____	_____
<i>Discussions/debates</i>	_____	_____
<i>Inquiry</i>	_____	_____
<i>Learning centers</i>	_____	_____
<i>Problem solving</i>	_____	_____
<i>Projects/research</i>	_____	_____
<i>Role play/simulations</i>	_____	_____
<i>Other</i>	_____	_____
Links new learning to prior understanding	_____	_____
Uses authentic examples and materials	_____	_____
Learning Outcomes	Noted	Comments
Engages all students	_____	_____
Uses effective feedback and probes	_____	_____
Instructional Opportunities	Noted	Comments
Engages students in active learning	_____	_____
Uses differentiated learning	_____	_____
Accommodations	_____	_____
Adaptive technology	_____	_____
Alternative activities	_____	_____
Inclusive instruction	_____	_____
Independent study	_____	_____
Learning contracts	_____	_____
One on one	_____	_____
Peer support	_____	_____
Small groups	_____	_____
Varied activities	_____	_____
Varied assignments	_____	_____
Varied texts	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____
Draws from students' prior knowledge	_____	_____
Models respectful communication	_____	_____
Listens closely	_____	_____
Makes eye contact	_____	_____
Pleasant vocal tone	_____	_____
Pleasing facial expression	_____	_____
Uses students' names	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____

Instructional strategies	Noted	Comments
Uses higher order questioning strategies	_____	_____
Varies role (teacher, coach, facilitator)	_____	_____
Motivation	Noted	Comments
Enforces classroom behavior rules	_____	_____
Allow students to make some decisions	_____	_____
Uses cooperative/collaborative techniques	_____	_____
Employs encouraging feedback	_____	_____
<i>Compliments sincerely</i>	_____	_____
<i>Praise for accomplishment/achievement</i>	_____	_____
<i>Other</i>	_____	_____
Uses two or more motivational strategies	_____	_____
<i>Appropriately challenges</i>	_____	_____
<i>Creates curiosity</i>	_____	_____
<i>Meaningfulness</i>	_____	_____
<i>Relevance to students</i>	_____	_____
<i>Gives students limited control</i>	_____	_____
<i>Students involved</i>	_____	_____
<i>Other</i>	_____	_____
Verbal, nonverbal, media communications	Noted	Comments
Uses appropriate oral/written communication	_____	_____
Provides media-rich environment	_____	_____
<i>Books</i>	_____	_____
<i>Posters/pictures</i>	_____	_____
<i>Computers/software</i>	_____	_____
<i>Videos</i>	_____	_____
<i>Other</i>	_____	_____
	Noted	Comments
Employs active listening	_____	_____
Models appropriate nonverbal communication	_____	_____
Exhibits positive body language	_____	_____
Makes eye contact	_____	_____
Nods	_____	_____
Pleasing facial expression	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____
Planning instruction	Noted	Comments
References units of study or projects	_____	_____
Announces changes in lesson plan	_____	_____
Plans lessons with colleagues	_____	_____
Assessment strategies	Noted	Comments
Uses 2 or more formal assessment strategies	_____	_____
Learning logs	_____	_____
Performances	_____	_____
Portfolio/work samples	_____	_____
Posttest	_____	_____
Pretest	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____
Uses informal assessment strategies	_____	_____