When Avoiding Confrontation Leads to Avoiding Content: Disruptive students' impact on curriculum

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Ennis, C.D. (1996). When avoiding confrontation leads to avoiding content: Disruptive students' impact on curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 11,* 145-162.

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Article:

In some high schools, teacher-student confrontations constitute a typical, if unwanted, aspect of the school context. These confrontations are situations in which individuals disagree and are unwilling to negotiate or compromise their positions. Confrontations can range from loud, verbal disagreements to subtle refusals, such as ignoring directions or exhibiting noncompliance.(FN1) Confrontations occur between students, between students and teachers, and between students and administrators. They appear to arise when students perceive they are not being treated fairly, or because they do not find the content useful, or simply because they are bored and recognize that confrontations add excitement to an otherwise humdrum school day.(FN2) Confrontations heighten the stress in teachers' lives. They create an unpleasant context by requiring teachers to assume a defensive posture that directly affects their ability and desire to serve or care for the students in their classes. Confrontations are a negative aspect of context that have the clear potential to limit students' opportunities to learn.

Increasingly, context is viewed as an integral and influential factor in the development of effective school programs. Context has been defined as any of the diverse and multiple environments or conditions that intersect with the work of teachers and teaching--such as the school, subject area, department, or district.... The term context effects implies the influence of particular context conditions--values, beliefs, norms, policies, structures, resources, and process--on teaching practice and, in turn, students' educational outcomes.(FN3)

Teachers' descriptions of context in high schools range from highly positive climates that provide numerous opportunities for student growth to intensely negative barriers that limit the extent to which the learning environment can be shaped.(FN4) Often, urban high school teachers perceive context as layers of administrative and student-created barriers that limit their ability to teach effectively. Context barriers, or constraints within the educational setting, serve to preserve or protect the social or educational status quo perceived by some to be important.

The research reported here focused on the impact of student confrontation on teachers' intended curriculums. When left unexamined, this phenomenon becomes a pervasive force, or hidden curriculum, that distorts the teaching-learning environment. In this study, the school context was examined through the discourses of 10 urban teachers. The impact of confrontations on public high school curriculums was investigated through the following research question: To what extent do teacher-student confrontations influence teachers' abilities to provide effective learning environments for their students? Specifically, in what ways do confrontations or threats of confrontation influence teachers' class management and content decisions in their classrooms?

The significance of this research is derived from its focus on teachers' perspectives of curriculum

implementation within a context of disruptive student behaviors. Confrontation demeans and frightens teachers. Teachers commonly need support to assess the problem and to work toward solutions. When administrators and parents are preoccupied with their own problems, they can offer little assistance. Teachers often withdraw into their classrooms, avoid the offending or controversial content, and rely on routines and lessons that have been successful in the past.

Strategies to diminish confrontations usually begin with efforts to structure a more meaningful learning environment. Although tighter controls on students may be expedient, efforts to understand and resolve the cultural and curricular sources of student-teacher confrontation may offer the brightest opportunities for success in urban schools.

In this research, the school context had been shaped by complex factors into a series of confrontations. These confrontations occurred between teachers and students, between students in different curriculum tracks, and between students from different neighborhoods. While teachers tried to maintain effective class management and control, students attempted to assert their own form of control and to create school environments different from those found in traditional school settings.

SETTING AND RESEARCH METHODS
This research was conducted in 10 urban high schools in a school district in the eastern United States. The school district enrolled approximately 110,000 students, 69 percent of whom were African American. Students' families were predominantly lower to middle class. The majority (80 percent) of the teachers in the school district were European American. A total of 10 teachers participated in the study, 2 each from the following subject areas: English, mathematics, science, music, and physical education. Their teaching experience ranged from 21 to 38 years. Seven European American teachers (3 males and 4 females) and three African American teachers (2 males and 1 female) made up the study group.

The investigator had worked as a consultant with teachers in the school district for five years before conducting this research. Throughout this period, she talked to teachers' groups and offered workshops on topics such as curriculum development and student motivation. Teachers agreed to participate in the research as one way of providing information to inform future staff development sessions and to contribute to materials being prepared for new teachers in the district. The participating schools were located in diverse areas of the district and were selected randomly. Principals were asked to recommend several teachers in the five subject areas represented in the research. The teachers volunteered to participate in the observation and interview components of the research.

In each teacher's class, field notes were taken during approximately 20 hours of observation over a six-week period.(FN5) Observations were conducted in classes that teachers considered to be their "best, average, and most difficult." Teachers were interviewed on three separate occasions: once during the observation period, at the conclusion of the observation, and two months following the last observation. Specific references to situations observed in the teachers' classes formed the basis for the interview questions. Each interview was semistructured to include both demographic information and teachers' perceptions of events and rationales for specific content selections. Probing questions encouraged teachers to assess their effectiveness and to suggest reasons for both success and failure. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis.

Data were analyzed using constant comparison both during and after the data collection process.(FN6) Field notes were reviewed for tentative assertions, common themes, and discrepancies. At the conclusion of the observation and second interviews, 10 case studies were written to organize the data into broad categories. Categories differed across high schools and subject areas. Although some themes appeared to relate to one another, participating teachers used different analogies or examples, largely depending on their curricular subject. Participants reviewed their case studies and responded to additional questions during the third interview.

FINDINGS

Confrontation with students was a concern stated explicitly by each teacher in this study. Men and women teachers alike reported numerous instances in which they had confronted students. Confrontations occurred over class management concerns, such as student misbehavior. Disputes also arose when students questioned why they were required to learn specific content or to participate in a particular activity. The research also examined situations in which teachers reported that they had altered the required curriculum or their preferred curriculum to avoid confrontations with students. Teachers avoided or chose not to teach content that (1) they believed students were disinterested in learning, (2) students refused to learn or to participate in learning, or (3) generated discussions that the teachers felt unprepared to moderate.

Associated with their avoidance of confrontation was the teachers' perception that their building-level administrators were unwilling or unable to support or assist them with difficult confrontations. Teachers perceived that they were abandoned to handle the situation by themselves. Rather than addressing student confrontation, they reported that they chose to avoid the situation and circumstances that contributed to confrontation.

This article reports and discusses only the teachers' accounts of confrontations with students and the extent to which these confrontations were perceived to influence the learning situation. Consequently, it does not include students' perceptions of the learning environments or issues surrounding their role in the development of context. These issues are important and are presented elsewhere.(FN7)

STUDENT DISINTEREST

Teachers find it especially difficult to work with students who are disinterested in the content that the teacher has spent a professional life learning to teach and teaching. Even teachers who reported they began the school year motivated and interested became increasingly frustrated when students appeared to be disinterested, despite the teachers' best efforts to involve them in class activities. This disinterest appeared to be a subtle, socially appropriate form of student confrontation. Although disinterest did not create the same overt reaction as public, vocal confrontations, disinterest acted as a pervasive disease that gradually diminished the teachers' energy and effort. Teachers who perceived students' disinterest with their curriculum reported that they began to avoid content. They pointed out that when students were disinterested, teaching degenerated into nagging. Subsequently, they enjoyed little success in efforts to motivate students to participate in their classes. Sharon Ross, a mathematics teacher, explained,

> It used to be they would come to class and they would do everything they were told. They didn't like algebra a whole lot better then, but they didn't question [its value]. I covered the content that I was supposed to and most of them learned it. If you told them to do something, they did it. If you taught them a topic, they tried to learn it. Some were successful and very pleased with themselves when they were able to accomplish it. They didn't always care too much, but you never really knew they didn't like it. Everybody seemed to get along. Now it is a totally different attitude. They don't care to learn. They figure what they currently know is good enough. They don't want to know how to perform better. They don't want to know anything more. The ones that you can get to answer a question don't seem to gain any satisfaction when they answer correctly, and they don't seem concerned when their answer is wrong.

JoAnne Wright, a physical education teacher, also focused on the low motivation and interest level of students in her classes:

> In the last five or six years, students have changed. I'm talking about both physically and mentally. Our physical education students are lazy. You try to teach them important skills they need, but they don't want to participate. Things are just too hard for them, and a lot of kids say, "Why can't we do basketball? We know how to play basketball." They don't want to learn anything new. Their motivation is so low. You try to give them everything you can to motivate them, but if they don't want to do it, I can't make them.

When asked how his program had changed over the last decade, John Sloan, a life science teacher, replied,

> I think the major change has been in my expectations for myself. Knowing that my young people are not the least bit interested in grades ... they could care less if they get an A or a D as long as they get the credit. It matters not to them. If students come to class with their homework completed, even if it is not correct, I am very pleased; I praise that student. But most don't complete homework assignments, most do not participate in class. I teach only the most basic concepts in my classes. And I teach them over and over to the same students. I try to use different tasks and different assignments, but they don't learn even the simplest concepts. They are not dumb; they just aren't interested.

Alan Forrest, a music teacher, explained that he had difficulty in the selection of music for students in his music appreciation class:

> I begin by talking about their music--but I think they should also listen and become knowledgeable about music from other cultures as well. This year I tried to include Japanese, Russian, and Austrian composers, but it was a battle from the start. The students were disruptive. It was clear that they were not interested in the characteristics of music from other cultures. I finally just gave up. I just skipped that part of our music curriculum. Thank goodness we don't have standardized tests in music.

The mathematics teachers explained that they did not check homework in some classes because they simply did not want to argue with students who had not completed their assignments. Steve Nesbitt described the situation in his "most difficult" geometry class:

> It has gotten to the point where I just don't want to come to my sixth period class anymore. The students don't care about their grades, and they certainly don't care about geometry! I have tried to do interesting things ... you know, like measuring and calculating angles in different parts of the building or talking about triangles that are part of everyday life. But the students just look at me. They don't participate in class questioning. They simply do not answer the questions. They don't do the homework and they fail the tests. Now I am beginning to get pressure from my principal. He blames me because they are failing. I am teaching; I am trying. But with these kids, it is very difficult. They have been turned off to math and turned off to school. I have stopped even trying to teach more than just the basics.

To be critical of adolescents who are not interested in learning and teachers who believe they have tried everything to motivate students to learn is as easy as it is unproductive. Subtle, nonviolent forms of confrontation suggest underlying problems of social importance. Assigning blame to teachers, parents, or students will not solve nor even illuminate the problem. Most teachers are deeply concerned when students do not eagerly anticipate the future. Students spend time in classes that require them to listen to lectures and participate in activities that they may not value as part of their present or future lives.(FN8) Solutions to these problems appear to be lodged deep in a complex social order. Blame seems particularly unrewarding. Further, it does not address the social and economic problems that underlie the confrontations.

Student-teacher confrontation is particularly insidious when teachers perceive that they have tried to connect the curriculum to students' lives, but students remain unresponsive. Kantor and Brenzel have argued that student disinterest is rooted in decades of cultural and economic subservience.(FN9) Peer norms associated with low achievement and underemployment of high school graduates appear to adversely affect students' classroom performance. Students do not perceive that their efforts to learn yield social or economic rewards. Several researchers have pointed out that schools with high percentages of low-income students are more likely to offer irrelevant, fragmented curriculum; employ a rigid retention policy and disciplinary practices; and have low expectations for student success.(FN10) These factors blend negatively to affect classroom performance and student perceptions of their own efficacy.

Often, teachers' status is associated with the accomplishments of their students. Teachers of academically gifted students appear to remain motivated and to hold high academic standards.(FN11) Conversely, when less academically oriented students are not exposed to motivated teachers, the quality of their education is jeopardized. Even when they worked to develop connections between their subject matter and students' lives, teachers in this study felt their efforts were unrewarded. They acknowledged that their enthusiasm and motivation were sapped by disinterested students. Unlike public confrontations that often occur unexpectedly, explosively, and quickly, student disinterest appeared to act more subtly and slowly to drain teachers' excitement from their teaching.

In situations that create and nurture positive contexts, students are more likely to engage the content and to become interested in the school setting.(FN12) Stinson identifies four characteristics of contexts that provide meaning and value to students.(FN13) The first characteristic is the creation of settings in which students are stimulated to learn. In many situations, this can be accomplished by a motivated, enthusiastic presentation of the content with an emphasis on students' transformation of the information into connections to their lives. In other situations, however, creation of stimulating settings remains a very difficult task. For example, when the background and recent experiences of teachers and students vastly differ, teachers must do more than simply explain student misbehavior as a problem of culture. They must go one step further to understand how students' present lived experiences influence their perspectives on content. Then teachers must find ways to present content that is meaningful.(FN14)

Stinson argues that when students are stimulated to learn, they are more likely to find a sense of meaning in the content.(FN15) They participate in classroom activities and become more aware of the natural connections between their lives and the content taught in schools. They are more likely to become involved in schools and classes and to engage actively in the learning process.(FN16) Stinson suggests that when students are treated with understanding (are cared for), they are allowed to be themselves.(FN17) They are permitted to act in a manner consistent with their culture. Their behavior is authentic and associated with a classroom context in which one's culture is valued.(FN18) Students experience both the security of learning within a school or class family and the freedom to express themselves in ways consistent with their culture and home environment.

REFUSAL

Teachers explained elaborate procedures they used to avoid confrontations with students. Most indicated that they "could not win" public confrontations. Instead, they attempted to avoid situations they believed would prove confrontational. These situations included ones in which students refused to participate in course activities. Harry Thompkins, an English teacher, pointed out the consequences of confronting students individually or in a group:

> You try to deal with them on a one-to-one basis. They are different then, than when you deal with them in front of a group. You can't confront them in front of their peers and expect to get compliant behavior. That is when you're going to get defiant behavior. They say, "You are disrespecting me." That's when you have the confrontation followed by the refusal.

Teachers pointed out that student refusal often occurred when students believed they could not be successful. Their public displays of failure resulted in student embarrassment and diminished status with peers. In some instances teachers refrained from questioning students whom they believed did not know the answer. Also, they did not ask students to write on the chalkboard or to present material to the class. Math teacher Sharon Ross explained,

> I really don't have much sympathy for them in my class. I am teaching the simplest material, and they don't choose to learn it. But I am not going to confront them about it. I am not going to get into an argument ... or worse, with a student who has not completed the homework, I am not going to ask them to put their work on the board. That is embarrassing, and I know the student will refuse. Instead, I

usually let them work in groups to complete the assignment. They usually turn it into a social gathering, but at least I can keep the class orderly and pleasant.

Physical education teachers encouraged, but did not require, students to change into "gym clothes" largely because of the confrontations they had experienced in the locker room and when checking the class roll. Ron Wiggins discussed these problems in his physical education program:

> Dressing is another whole problem. They hate it. There is always one reason or another not to get dressed. I spend half my time tending to problems associated with dressing. Students today don't work hard enough in class to get hot and sweaty. So they don't understand why they can't keep their school clothes on. In the past, we have argued that you need loose-fitting, safe clothes to move and play effectively. It is also important for good personal hygiene. But I guess they really don't sweat much anymore regardless of the clothes they are wearing. They just don't put out the effort ... except in basketball. Often, they lose their uniforms or say they lost their uniforms, so right away we say, "Well, bring in something temporary until you can buy a new one." But they never do.

Half the teachers interviewed admitted that they did not teach particular content topics because of the confrontations such topics generated with specific students. Mathematics teachers, for example, reported avoidance of the more difficult algebra functions because such a focus "embarrassed students when they could not give the right answer." Music teachers avoided selections of classical music and other music that African American students "classified as white." These teachers attempted to select music that they believed would be of most interest to their students. Physical educators reported that most African American boys wanted to play basketball. Typically, these students were unskilled in other team and individual sports, such as soccer or tennis, and were easily embarrassed when they appeared unsuccessful in front of peers or rival groups from other neighborhoods. In these schools, physical education was a curriculum area where students demonstrated their athletic talents, not where they learned new skills.

Erickson and Shultz and others note that teachers often are constrained by a curriculum that is prescribed for them by district or state guidelines.(FN19) The mandates may include detailed descriptions of content that should be taught to and learned by students, or textbooks selected by committees distant from the classroom. Routinely, neither the teachers nor students establish a sense of content ownership. When classroom work is repetitive, students often perceive it as irrelevant and boring. Thus, teachers' efforts to assist students to learn may not be perceived as helpful by students. The sense of ownership derived from the identification and engagement of centrally important issues in students' lives appears to be rarely addressed in school curriculums. As Erickson and Shultz explain,

> In certain classrooms presided over by warm or charismatic teachers, affiliation with the teacher as an attractive figure appears to justify or ameliorate in some way the structurally alienated character of the students' work. If those students like and trust the teacher they may do the work assigned even if they do not understand or own its purposes. But if students have not bonded with the teacher and the assigned work lacks intrinsic interest for them, they may withhold efforts on the tasks assigned or go through the mere motions of learning. Collusions develop, in which teachers do not press students to learn what may be meaningless or face-threatening for them and students do not press the teacher by disrupting the class.(FN20)

In the classrooms studied in this research, teachers admitted that they had tried, often unsuccessfully, to provide meaningful curriculums for students. Student refusal may have been the result of teachers' inability to develop the bonds discussed by Erickson and Shultz.(FN21) Or both teachers and students realized that the rules and curriculum did not provide the educational environment needed or valued by these students. Fine(FN22) and Wehlage and his colleagues(FN23) describe alternative schools for students at risk of failure. These programs emphasize a negotiated curriculum in which students have opportunities to invest in and own the knowledge

they are learning. In situations such as those described in this study, both teachers and students were disengaged. Their lack of ownership heightened their risk of failure.

MEDIATING CLASS DISCUSSIONS

Half the teachers interviewed described situations in which class discussions had evolved into shouting matches between students or confrontations in which students "ganged up" on the teacher to dispute the content. Other teachers reported that students worked together to subvert (i.e., change or distort) the topic in the academic curriculum. Teachers reported that students tried to change the curriculum to reflect more of a social focus in which they could link the content to friends or acquaintances. Sara Jarvis, a science teacher, explained the difficulties she faced teaching science:

> I am about ready to give up. I came into this profession to try to help some of these students, but I am having difficulty teaching the subject that I love to students who don't seem to care about anything. Last week, we were talking about the skeletal system and how bones serve as supporting structures for the muscular system and the organs of the body. It is usually a lesson that students seem to like because it is about their bodies. I have them feel their own bones, and we talk about the muscles that attach and move the major bones. Unfortunately, students started asking their favorite questions ... and the one I hate the most ... "Why do we have to learn this?"
>
> Well, you would think that this lesson would be easy to justify ... but not to these kids. All of the standard answers about learning about your own body and preventing injury did not seem to be the least bit interesting.
> One student said, "Real men don't get hurt--but they do get killed!" Well, I didn't know how to respond to that. I tried to change my lesson, but the class was more interested in talking about the people they knew who had been shot. I was so upset that the next period I avoided discussing the topic altogether. I had the next class trace a skeleton in the text book and label the different bones in the picture. They were a little restless, but at least they stayed on the topic. These students' experiences are becoming more bizarre. I have no idea how to teach them anymore.

English teachers reported that they purposely avoided discussions about race and ethnicity. They felt attention to these topics "just caused problems" in their classrooms and "led to hard feelings." Jennifer Cotsworth, an English teacher, described her classroom:

High school students can sometimes be quite unkind to their peers. This year our new curriculum includes more literature from black authors to help black students connect with their heritage. But students can be so intolerant. We have a few white students and a few Filipino students in my classes, and they appeared to be totally turned off by these writings. They are not highly vocal like the black students, but they do let their dissatisfaction be known. They use cutting comments that are very derogatory toward black English. I am trying to help all of my students value others' cultural heritage, but it is very difficult. They bring so much baggage with them into the classroom. I find that I can smooth some of this over by simply not asking questions about grammar, for example. I try not to focus too much on the unique aspects of the culture because that is an invitation to intolerance.

Delpit describes this strategy as a "silencing dialogue."(FN24) It occurs when those with power in the classroom attempt forcefully or subtly to determine which "view of the world" will be presented. She describes the culture of power articulated through codes or rules "related to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and the presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing and ways of interacting." Some students come to school knowing how to work successfully within a culture of power, whereas others must learn these strategies to gain power within the system.

In the interviews conducted for this research, teachers appeared unable or unwilling to permit students to influence the curriculum with their own perspectives. These teachers were concerned that students were not

learning when they were not engaged with the prescribed curriculum. They appeared to believe that part of their role was to be a messenger of the curriculum.(FN25) They understood their primary function to be communication of prescribed content to students. Spring argues that control over a curriculum is the primary power held by school teachers and administrators.(FN26) He asserts that once this power is eroded, chaos results. Even efforts to make the central curriculum more inclusive become exclusionary when teachers are unable or unwilling to open and facilitate discussions between students who hold various levels of classroom power.

In the schools discussed here, African American students controlled the frequency and volume of classroom discussions by their numbers and vocality. Teacher management of classroom discussions on volatile topics in potentially explosive settings seemed more difficult than these teachers felt prepared to manage. They readily admitted that leading discussions with "25 to 30 students from diverse backgrounds and varying levels of satisfaction" with school and their current status often was more challenging than they could handle. These teachers needed assistance to open forms of dialogue in the classroom and manage them in democratic ways.

ADMINISTRATOR "NONSUPPORT" FOR CLASSROOM CONFRONTATIONS

Every teacher interviewed in this study commented on the current role of administrators in urban high schools. They perceived that their principals no longer served as the school's instructional leader. Simply, principals' roles have been shaped by more critical demands. In these schools, principals commonly served as security officers and mediators of disputes. This circumstance became immediately evident in visits to several of these schools. An assistant principal with a two-way radio met school visitors just as they turned in the driveway. Visitors were asked to describe their business in the school and to provide the teacher's name and the location of the intended visit in the school. The assistant principal recorded the car's license plate number and instructed the visitor where to park. In each instance, the parking place was centrally located and clearly visible to the assistant principal and the office personnel.

Teachers described the principal's role as one of "monitoring disputes between students and trying to keep unauthorized individuals off the school grounds." They reported that, five years ago, they sent students to the principal's office for disruptive or insubordinate behavior. Now, however, they believed their best alternative was to ignore problems they could not control personally. The teacher called the principal only when fights occurred or when drugs or weapons were suspected or found.

Teachers acknowledged that fighting generally occurred between students who lived in different neighborhoods. They admitted that they avoided getting involved in fights because they had been hurt in the past. Biology teacher Sara Jarvis was particularly concerned with school violence. She had been involved in violent student confrontations and felt it was a particularly negative part of her current job:

> Fighting usually occurs between two groups of students. Oh, it might start as an argument between one or two students, a "he said, she said" kind of thing, but it can escalate into a group fight ... and it escalates quickly. Last week two students started yelling in the back hall and within 30 seconds there were 20 students yelling and punching each other. When I see these things start to happen, I run the other way.

Math teacher Sharon Ross described the role of the administrator in her school. She was aware of pressing problems that drew the principal away from the role of instructional leader. She appeared to speak with some frustration:

> Our administrators just don't back up the teachers' attempts to discipline students. I think it is because they have so many other more serious things to deal with. They feel [student-teacher confrontations] are a classroom management problem. True. Maybe it is. But if there is nobody backing you up anywhere down the line, then students know they can act any way they please. In our district, [the administrators] don't want so many suspensions. The students causing the problem are the ones they don't want to

suspend. So basically they are willing to let the kids get away with disrespect and misbehavior. I think this is the beginning of the end. As a teacher you can only enforce it so much by yourself. You need somebody to back you up. It is very tough.

Physical education teacher Ron Wiggins echoed this frustration. He reflected the views of several other teachers who questioned the ability of the school to teach difficult students:

It all depends on which administrator we send them to. Some of them only give students a slap on the wrist; some do in-house detention. The higher-ups do not want these kids suspended. If it is publicized, it might become a racial thing, suspending more blacks than whites or vice versa. [Administrators] are not backing us, and they want us to keep these kids in school. Save the kid ... well some of these kids can't be saved, not in a public high school. They need to go somewhere else. That is where the problem is; the administration doesn't back you when you need it most.

Teachers in these urban high schools explained that student-student confrontations were mediated by the principal or the conflict resolution team. However, teachers were expected to resolve student-teacher confrontations (except those that involved physical abuse or fighting). Four principals were interviewed at the conclusion of the field work to discuss administrative issues surrounding student-teacher confrontations. They agreed that teachers were responsible for settling the disputes and disruptions that occurred on a daily basis in their classes. One principal said,

I am constantly monitoring the halls and working with our security guards and assistant principals to keep students in class. We also ask teachers to patrol the halls during class changes. At times just before and after holidays and large school functions, we conduct hall sweeps to move students out of the halls and into their classrooms. My assistant principal for instruction tries to assist teachers with curriculum, but that is not my major function at present.

Data compiled by the school district indicated that weapons, especially knives, were increasingly a problem in middle and high schools.(FN27) Confrontations between teachers and students stretch and distort traditional lines of power that have permeated schools. As students become increasingly willing to question adult authority, the power struggles continue with an additional social and political turn. The need for student control and discipline remains, but administrators appear increasingly less willing to reprimand, suspend, and fail African American students because of pressures from community groups to keep these students in school.

The responsibility for the design of an effective educational context rests with each member of the school community. Principals and teachers have the moral authority and responsibility to convey educational goals to students within a safe and orderly environment. Parents and students have an obligation to assist in the shaping of these goals and then to comply with the policies established by school personnel to promote the educational goals of the community.(FN28)

Metz argues, however, that this social agreement is threatened when one or more of these groups (administrators, teachers, parents, or students) is unwilling or unable to accept this responsibility.(FN29) In situations in which parents and students fail automatically to acknowledge their moral authority, principals and teachers must establish disciplinary control, often at the expense of educational goals. Teachers may feel pressured to provide a managerial or controlling context at the expense of the development of academic goals and positive, interpersonal relationships.(FN30) In these instances, their intentions to teach content may collapse.

Although classroom management concerns often are salient in the school context, questions of curriculum ownership may be at the heart of many confrontations.(FN31) Currently, district-level administrators and curriculum developers appear to be working to make curriculums more inclusive. To what extent, however, does this process help develop a sense of ownership in the students who have the most to gain or lose from

these curricular decisions? Although feelings of ownership can lead to engagement and school bonding,(FN32) engagement of students who have been disenfranchised in many aspects of their lives remains difficult. Both administrators and teachers should initiate efforts to enhance school and curricular ownership by students. District-level administrators can provide administrative flexibility in curricular decisions that enable teachers to negotiate the content with students and help them connect this content to their lives. When teachers also have a sense of curricular ownership, they can share content decisions with students. In this situation, students may be afforded the opportunity to create aspects of the curriculum that are important to them.

CONCLUSIONS

As educators become more experienced in the identification and analysis of context factors, they can better determine where, how, and why particular effects of context influence the quality of education.(FN33) Some barriers to student learning in urban schools require efforts by administrators and teachers to maintain order and prevent violent acts from filtering into schools from surrounding neighborhoods.(FN34) Other barriers originate with students who do not perceive that school--or life, for that matter--has much to offer. In these situations, encouraging students to participate in the learning process is more difficult than simply managing or controlling class groups. The school day can dissolve into a series of nagging, prodding experiences that neither the teacher nor the student finds rewarding. In such a situation, teachers gradually pull away from the teaching process. Certainly, they are less likely to take a personal interest in students who appear to reject their efforts to teach.

Teachers may disassociate themselves from their students and assume an adversarial role of police officer or manager. They become increasingly more disconnected from the teaching act. As Noddings aptly described, teachers move from "caring for" students to simply "caring about" the extent to which they conform to school expectations within an increasingly violent and emotionally reactive community.(FN35) Urban high school personnel often must react to social and economic problems with diminishing resources. These reactions can translate into an increased emphasis on record keeping, hall monitoring, and the use of fences across hallways and doors locked with chains to restrict student access to parts of the school buildings or grounds--all ineffective efforts to shore up erosion of programs.(FN36) Far from the democratic processes envisioned by scholars,(FN37) these events often result in negative confrontations between teachers and students in adversarial roles. At the very least, confrontation requires additional time in the class setting to argue with or cajole students into compliance with the desired teaching format. On a larger scale, these efforts siphon time from teachers' efforts to think reflectively about their curriculum and to find better ways to match the content and presentation with their students' educational goals.

Contexts that contribute to learning are those in which the learner is valued within a substantive curriculum. Stinson holds that these contexts are stimulating, meaningful, and relevant to students.(FN38) Student contributions are valued as a primary component of the educational process. Creation of stimulating contexts is difficult in the best of circumstances. In some urban high schools, in which administrators, teachers, and students bring a history of confrontation to the negotiation of learning opportunities, this task remains awesome. Confrontation can be understood to signal the need for greater control, or viewed as a symptom of educational malaise. In the former, school personnel make an effort to limit the content and to control the students. In the latter, they strive to understand the issues that concern students. They help students express their concerns in appropriate, yet powerful, ways. In these situations, school personnel, parents, and students cooperate to create substantive, meaningful curriculums within a supportive educational environment.

FOOTNOTES

1 Nicholas C. Burbules, "A Theory of Power in Education," Educational Theory 36 (Winter 1986): 95-114.

2 Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Shultz, "Students' Experience of the Curriculum," Handbook of Research on Curriculum, ed. P. E. Jackson (New York: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 468-471.

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WBN: 9601502453004