



September 2008 | Volume **66** | Number **1**
The Positive Classroom Pages 54-58



The Teacher as Warm Demander

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How can you create an engaging classroom? Convince students first that you care—and then that you'll never let up.

Consider this comment that a beginning teacher in an urban school recently made to us:

They are calling one another names and being really catty, and it wears me out. I mean, as soon as they walk in the door, someone is pushing ... or calling someone a name. So it's 8:00 in the morning, and I am already flustered.

Many teachers in high-poverty schools struggle to establish a positive classroom environment. These teachers know a great deal about their students, feel affection for them, and empathize with their struggles. Unfortunately, the way these teachers act on their caring is often not comprehensive enough to make a difference. The teachers work hard to design interesting lessons, but if students are disengaged, the quality of the lessons will be irrelevant and misbehavior will reveal students' underlying resistance.

What is missing is not skill in lesson planning, but a teacher stance that communicates both warmth and a nonnegotiable demand for student effort and mutual respect. This stance—often called the *warm demander*—is central to sustaining academic engagement in high-poverty schools.

The stakes are high when it comes to engagement. Studies have amply demonstrated a link between achievement and academic engagement, defined by Furrer and Skinner (2003) as "active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, and focused interactions" with academic tasks (p. 149). The consequences of disengagement are more serious for low-income students:

When students from advantaged backgrounds become disengaged, they may learn less than they could, but they usually get by or they get second chances. ... In contrast, when students ... in high-poverty, urban high schools become disengaged, they are less likely to graduate and consequently face severely limited opportunities ... [including] unemployment, poverty, poor health, and



Leadership for Change

involvement in the criminal justice system. (National Research Council, 2004, p. 1)

The good news is that although engagement is affected by students' economic and social conditions, teachers can organize the classroom in ways that dramatically increase student engagement.

What Is a Warm Demander?

Kleinfeld (1975) coined the phrase *warm demander* to describe the type of teacher who was effective in teaching Athabaskan Indian and Eskimo 9th graders in Alaskan schools. These teachers communicated personal warmth and used an instructional style Kleinfeld called "active demandingness." They insisted that students perform to a high level. Irvine and Fraser (1998) provide an example of how a teacher using this style might speak to a student who is slacking off:

That's enough of your nonsense, Darius. Your story does not make sense. I told you time and time again that you must stick to the theme I gave you. Now sit down. (p. 56)

This kind of communication is seldom described in the effective-teaching literature. Scholars who have investigated the warm demander stance have concluded that it is often an effective teaching style with many students, although it may appear harsh to the uninformed observer (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Ware, 2006). Let's look at what makes this approach effective and how more teachers might adopt it.

Becoming a Warm Demander

Becoming a warm demander begins with establishing a caring relationship that convinces students that you believe in them. The saying goes, "It's not what you say that matters; it's how you say it." In acting as a warm demander, "how you say it" matters, but who you are and what students believe about your intentions matter more. When students know that you believe in them, they will interpret even harsh-sounding comments as statements of care from someone with their best interests at heart. As one student commented, "She's mean out of the kindness of her heart" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 91).

This quote, pulled from interviews with 200 students in high-poverty middle schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, highlights the second part of being a warm demander. Warm demanders care enough to relentlessly insist on two things: that students treat the teacher and one another respectfully and that they complete the academic tasks necessary for successful futures. These teachers adopt what Wilson and Corbett (2001) call a "no excuses" philosophy.



Leadership for Change

Warm demanders approach students, particularly those whose behavior causes trouble in the classroom, with *unconditional positive regard*, a genuine caring in spite of what that student might do or say (Rogers, 1957). At the heart of unconditional positive regard is a belief in the individual's capacity to succeed. Teachers convey such an attitude by taking the following three actions.

Build Relationships Deliberately

Middle school students interviewed by Cushman and Rogers (2008) explained that they wanted teachers to "show us that you like us and find us interesting" (p. 65). One tactic is to give students "getting-to-know-you" questionnaires (see Cushman & Rogers, 2008, for examples), but such questionnaires will only work if students perceive that you are genuinely interested and if you subsequently use the information you gather.

Day-to-day interactions are more important than formal questionnaires. A smile, a hand on the shoulder, the use of a student's name, or a question that shows you remember something the student has mentioned—these small gestures do much to develop relationships. Don't underestimate their power.

Learn About Students' Cultures

Use your knowledge of culture and learning styles to increase your understanding of individual students. Warm demanders observe students closely to learn more about their idiosyncrasies, interests, experiences, and talents. They watch for clues to learning-style preferences: Does she work well independently? Does he need visual cues to process what he hears? These teachers become students of their students' cultures, learning about the music they listen to, the television shows they watch, and their after-school activities.

Warm demanders also recognize that their *own* cultural backgrounds guide their values, beliefs, and behaviors. Although it can be difficult to perceive one's own culture, culture consistently shapes an individual's behavior and reactions to the behavior of others. Gaining insight into cultural values and habits helps teachers monitor their reactions to student behaviors that they might deem "bad," but that are considered normal or even valued in the student's home culture. Without such reflection, a teacher's implicit assumptions can inadvertently communicate to students a lack of caring.

For example, an Egyptian man told us how a teacher punished his elementary-age son for pushing a classmate. When the man and his wife spoke with this teacher, they realized that playful pushing is not accepted in U.S. culture; in Egypt, it is an acceptable way for boys to communicate affection. Two aspects of this teacher's approach could have harmed the teacher-student relationship. First, she failed to ask either the boy or his parents why he had pushed another



Leadership for Change

boy. Second, she assumed that this student knew—and had chosen to disobey—her behavioral standards. Therefore, her first response was to punish him. Although this teacher is warm and friendly, her lack of deep knowledge of her student or his culture prevented her from conveying to him that she cared.

To gain cultural knowledge and competence, Ross, Kamman, and Coady (2007) recommend that teachers

- Learn about their own cultural beliefs and how those beliefs influence their interactions with students and families.
- Become curious about culture and difference; try to imagine how school experiences might feel different to different groups (such as males and females or native speakers and English language learners).
- Study examples of successful students whose backgrounds differ from the norm (see Corwin, 2001, or Esquith, 2004).
- Question their reactions to students' behavior to identify potential cultural misunderstandings.
- Monitor the tendency to judge differences as abnormal.

Communicate an Expectation of Success

In our recent study of three novice teachers of black elementary students, we watched teachers attempting to communicate this message on the first day of school (Bondy et al., 2007). The 3rd grade teacher read a story about the inevitability of mistakes and the importance of persistence. She shared her own experience with failure and her philosophy of optimism and perseverance. The 5th grade teacher repeatedly made encouraging comments such as, "How easy was that?"

A student Cushman (2003) interviewed summarized how teachers can create a culture of success:

Remind us often you expect our best, encourage our efforts even if we are having trouble, give helpful feedback and expect us to review ... don't compare us to other students, and stick with us. (pp. 64–67)

Beyond Believing to Insisting

Many teachers use motivational strategies such as these and believe that they have high expectations. What makes warm demanders different is that they *insist* on students meeting those expectations. They establish supports to ensure that students will learn, and they communicate clearly to students that showing respect to the teacher and to classmates is nonnegotiable. The following strategies help teachers become successful demanders.



Provide Learning Supports

The students Wilson and Corbett (2001) interviewed were clear that the teachers who helped them most never gave up; they provided a variety of activities to help different kinds of learners and taught until the light bulb went on for every student. These students preferred teachers who explained material thoroughly and in multiple ways; outlined steps for getting to an answer ("They do it step-by-step and they break it down"); moved to new material when they believed students were ready rather than according to an arbitrary timetable; and emphasized multiple ways of approaching a problem.

Support Positive Behavior

Although warm demanders may become frustrated by student behavior, they accept problems as normal, and they believe in students' ability to improve. When the effective novice teachers we observed confronted recurring behavior issues, they collected data to help them understand the situation before taking action (Bondy et al., 2007). These teachers approached problems reflectively, asking such questions as, What factors might influence this problem? or When does this behavior occur? They searched for solutions rather than blaming students or dismissing their concerns.

Warm demanders reach out to students for help in understanding behavior problems, which many well-intentioned teachers neglect to do. For example, when Ravet (2007) asked 10 highly disengaged students why they had disengaged, most of them explained that they were bored with the curriculum. When Ravet asked these students' teachers the same question, teachers blamed perceived deficits in students' attitude, ability, personality, and family background. If instead of blaming, these teachers had respectfully listened to students, they would have gained insight into how to intervene.

Be Clear and Consistent with Expectations

Warm demanders must "provide a tough-minded, no-nonsense, structured and disciplined classroom environment" (Irvine & Fraser, 1998, p. 56). In our study of effective teachers, we found that teachers used two main strategies to hold student behavior to a high standard. First, teachers respectfully but insistently repeated their requests and reminded students of their expectations. If students did not comply, teachers calmly delivered consequences. We concluded that

the teachers' assertive communication style, combined with their strategies for insisting that students follow through, created a climate in which teachers were taken seriously. Although teachers were warm and often funny, there was no question that they meant what they said. (Bondy et al., p. 344)



Leadership for Change

Charney (2002) discussed ways to convey expectations to students clearly: Keep demands simple and short; dignify your words with actions; remind students only twice (the third time, "you're out"); tell students what the "nonnegotiables" are; and use words that invite cooperation.

Although warm demanders must speak firmly, their tone should remain matter-of-fact; they should never threaten, demean, or create power struggles. Students will perceive such matter-of-fact demanding as evidence of their teacher's commitment. Many teachers believe they are showing students they care when they continually give "one more chance." Unfortunately, giving "one more chance" demonstrates that a teacher does not mean what he or she says, and this practice could be interpreted as a lack of caring.

Although classroom teachers have little control over many factors that affect student engagement, they do have the means to create a supportive climate that fosters engagement among high-poverty students. Warm demanders do so by approaching their students with unconditional positive regard, knowing students and their cultures well, and insisting that students perform to a high standard. Students have told researchers that they want teachers who communicate that they are "important enough to be pushed, disciplined, taught, and respected" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 88). Such is the stance of the warm demander.

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Leadership for Change

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