Promoting Academic Engagement Through Insistence: Being a Warm Demander


Abstract
A positive psychological environment characterized by respectful interactions, a calm tone, minimal student resistance, and a clear academic focus (Patrick, Turner, Meyer, & Midgley, 2003) will help achieve increased student engagement and decreased task avoidance. Literature on positive classroom environments (Patrick et al., 2003), the development of resilience (Benard, 2004), culturally relevant pedagogy (Irvine, 2002, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and culturally relevant classroom management (Brown, 2003; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004) reveals four attributes of classrooms that scaffold high achievement: * A strong, caring, respectful relationship between each student and the teacher * Caring, respectful relationships among peers, creating a culture in which everyone feels safe enough to take risks * A task-focused, calm environment that enables everyone to concentrate and learn * High and clear expectations for academic performance. Insistence for its own sake or in the service of rules that are not linked to creating a psychologically supportive environment in which students can succeed would create a culture focused on teacher power and control, a non-supportive environment that would increase student resistance and undermine engagement and achievement motivation (Patrick et al., 2003).

Full Text
If educators are to bridge the black/white achievement gap, they must find a way to engage low-income and minority youth in academic learning. While ample evidence indicates that some teachers are highly effective in engaging students (e.g., Bempechat, 1998; Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994), the persistence of the achievement gap suggests that most are far less effective at engaging African American students. A positive psychological environment characterized by respectful interactions, a calm tone, minimal student resistance, and a clear academic focus (Patrick, Turner, Meyer, & Midgley, 2003) will help achieve increased student engagement and decreased task avoidance. One key strategy in creating a positive psychological environment is the teacher's capacity to "insist" that the students meet established academic and behavioral standards. This paper describes the purposes, structure, and tone of insistence, with examples from three low-income, predominantly African American classrooms on the first day of school. The teachers—one white (a 3rd-grade teacher, "Ms. Third"), one black (a 2nd-grade teacher, "Ms. Second"), and one Asian (a 5th-grade teacher, "Ms. Fifth")—were novices, with fewer than five years of classroom experience, who were selected based on observations during the previous year. Each was observed to set high academic and behavioral expectations and then insist firmly yet respectfully that students meet those expectations. Some have referred to this kind of teacher as a "warm demander" (Irvine, 2003; Kleinfeld, 1975).

THE PURPOSES OF INSISTENCE
The primary purpose of teacher insistence is to create a supportive psychological environment that scaffolds student engagement and achievement. Literature on positive classroom environments (Patrick et al., 2003), the development of resilience (Benard, 2004), culturally relevant pedagogy (Irvine, 2002, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and culturally relevant classroom management (Brown, 2003; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004) reveals four attributes of classrooms that scaffold high achievement:
* A strong, caring, respectful relationship between each student and the teacher
* Caring, respectful relationships among peers, creating a culture in which everyone feels safe enough to take risks
* A task-focused, calm environment that enables everyone to concentrate and learn
* High and clear expectations for academic performance.
Through their daily interactions with children, teachers who create such psychologically supportive environments communicate that they know and value the children, their families, their cultures, and their communities. In addition, the classrooms are characterized by a strong commitment to student learning and a pervasive belief in the children's strengths and capabilities.

In examining teachers' use of insistence, it is critical to remember its purpose. Teachers who are warm demanders model and insist on a culture of achievement, equity, and mutual respect. They insist that children treat the teacher with respect, treat one another with respect, and participate in ways that give every child an equal opportunity to learn. They insist that children try hard, encourage others to try hard, and give their best effort every day. Most important, they work tirelessly and consistently to ensure that children's efforts are successful. Just as they insist that children never give up on themselves, these teachers never give up on children. As such, the teachers illustrate Noddings' (1984) view of care as actions focused on the needs and goals of those who are being cared for—namely, the students.

Clarifying the difference between the authoritative insistence on effort and appropriate behavior and the authoritarian use of power is important in understanding the purpose of "insistence." Delpit (1995) notes that students of color respond to authoritative classroom management, because they expect a teacher to act with authority. She describes the authoritative teacher as exhibiting personal power, earning respect rather than demanding it, setting standards and pushing students to meet them, and believing all students can learn. In contrast, an authoritarian teacher is indirect in expressing expectations and expects obedience from students without justification.

Delpit further argues that the authoritative teacher holds students' attention by using a communicative style that appeals to affiliation rather than authority to maintain order, and believes it unnecessary to use coercive means to control behavior. The teacher avoids an authoritarian atmosphere that communicates "because I said so" and finds ways to allow students to vent frustrations and disagree with school- or teacher-imposed constraints, while building a community that works together to find a solution acceptable to all. Insistence for its own sake or in the service of rules that are not linked to creating a psychologically supportive environment in which students can succeed would create a culture focused on teacher power and control, a non-supportive environment that would increase student resistance and undermine engagement and achievement motivation (Patrick et al., 2003).

THE STRUCTURE OF INSISTENCE: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Insistence begins from the first moment of the first day of school. Through insistence, the teacher conveys her expectations, her authority, and her intention to be consistent. The teacher is neither authoritarian nor heavy-handed. She simply conveys through actions and words that students WILL meet her expectations. Let's look at some of the different ways that teachers insist.

Make Expectations Clear

Being explicit about expectations is a standard recommendation from the literature on classroom management (Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, 1980). However, it is easy to underestimate how many times a teacher must communicate expectations before they are clear to students. In addition, it can be hard for novice teachers to understand the level of detail required before expectations are "clear." For example, a teacher might state, "When I give the signal, get in line." While this statement is direct, it is not detailed enough to make the teacher's expectation clear. If the teacher's only strategy were this statement, it is unlikely every child would demonstrate appropriate behavior.

The three teachers focused on here do more than "state" expectations; they make sure students hear them, understand them, and practice them. Also, they use varied strategies so that students stay engaged during instruction about expectations. Note the use of detailed and direct language and the varied format and purposes of the following communications:

The teachers clearly state their expectations.

* The rule is going to be that once Ms. Second starts talking and giving directions, you are not allowed to get up and go get water and go to the rest room, so do that first thing in the morning. (Ms. Second)
* Every time you're in here and my door shuts, your eyes should be following where I am. (Ms. Fifth)
* When I call your name, you may either say "Here" or you may raise your hand. (Ms. Third)

The teachers provide demonstrations or examples.

* I have a question for you, and raise your hand to give me an answer [raises own hand]. (Ms. Fifth)
Give me an example of good manners... and another ... and another. (Ms. Second)

Put your papers in one pile on your table. So we have one pile here, one pile here, one pile here [designating a spot for papers at each table]. (Ms. Third)

You know, . . . just then I said I hope none of you like Pokémon. It's an opinion of mine, but I should be very careful when I voice my opinion because I could hurt someone's feelings. So we can learn from that,... I make mistakes, too. (Ms. Fifth)

The teachers provide negative examples, thereby enabling them to demonstrate appropriate behavior with humor and to help students anticipate possible instances of inappropriate behavior:

[Our next rule is] work quietly and do not disturb others. Okay, let's say, for example, Keon was absent and we took a test, and he comes back, and he needs to make up the test, and he goes over to this area to make up his test. If you are finished [with] your work, should you be snapping and singing? No, because it will throw him-AAGGG [he'll say], I can't think! So make sure you are courteous when people are working. (Ms. Second)

When we are in line, do we talk? ... So do you think you should be standing next to someone that you know you would talk to? (Ms. Fifth)

Let's say we are working in groups and three [vote] to use the purple marker and Dwight wanted to use blue. Should he sit there and look like this [she pouts]? No, he shouldn't. He should say, "Oh well, I didn't win that time, but maybe next time." (Ms. Second)

The teachers also require student restatement of expectations and that students practice the appropriate behavior:

My hand goes up, your hand goes up [waits to see every hand is up]. (Ms. Fifth)

Now, I want you to put up your markers. What do I want you to do? [Students respond chorally-"Put up the markers!"] (Ms. Second)

If you have a question, raise your hand [teacher raises her hand]. Let me see everyone raise their hand. Oooh, I see two people [who] don't have hands. (Ms. Second)

Note that in these last examples the key word is "require." The teacher not only states the expectation and models it, but she also makes it clear that she expects each student to practice the appropriate behavior. And the teachers wait until the appropriate behaviors are demonstrated. In some cases, this means practicing behaviors repeatedly. For instance, all three teachers require students to practice the lining up procedure multiple times until student performance matches the teacher's expectation. And the teachers make it very clear that "almost" is not good enough. "Almost" means practice again!

Repeat, Remind, Reinforce

In most elementary classrooms, one can observe numerous instances of one or more students ignoring the teacher's first (or even second) request. Our teachers respond to these students firmly and respectfully. One kind of response is to calmly repeat their request or remind students of the relevant expectation. Ms. Second often used repetitions. These often-verbatim repetitions are delivered matter-of-factly. The repetition is delivered in the same tone of voice as the initial request and continues until students comply. It almost sounds like a broken record:

Eyes on Ms. Second. Eyes on Ms. Second. Eyes on Ms. Second.

I want everyone to stand, pushing in your chair. Stand and push in your chair. Stand and push in your chair. (Ms. Second)

What happens when my hand goes up? What does that mean, Sean? What happens when my hand goes up? Yes, and your hand goes where? (Ms. Fifth)

Another way to respond when students ignore a teacher request is with a reminder:

What kind of folder is this? Does it come back to me? (Ms. Fifth)

If you have a question, raise your hand. Let me see everyone raise their hand. (Ms. Second)

Charles, which way should you turn in line? There you go. Thank you. (Ms. Fifth)

It is important to note that throughout the first two or three weeks of school, our teachers' initial response to student lapses is repetition, re-teaching, and reminding. Not all reminders are verbal. Sometimes, a teacher reminds by miming the appropriate action (e.g., raising her hand when students forget to raise theirs). Often, the teachers use their physical presence as a way to remind. They may move close to a forgetful student, which often serves as sufficient reminder of the appropriate procedure or encourages more focus on an academic
task. Being insistent does not mean being punitive. Being insistent simply means using varied strategies to communicate that the teacher means what she says-always.

Additionally, the teachers pepper their classrooms with reinforcement. While reinforcement looks different in the lower and upper elementary classrooms, all three teachers use reinforcement to increase appropriate behavior and encourage academic effort—Ms. Fifth's word, to reinforce "making right choices." In addition to repeatedly using words like, "That's right," "Excellent," "Exactly," "Good thinking," "Great example," and "Thank you," teachers also use explicit praise to reinforce behaviors that demonstrate core purposes:

* That shows a lot of respect, right? You show each other lots of respect, right? Right! (Ms. Fifth)
* See, that's a time when you don't laugh and you guys didn't laugh; good job! (Ms. Fifth)
* I like how you are being quiet and waiting for me to finish with my visitor. (Ms. Second)

Unfortunately, students sometimes continue inappropriate behavior despite reminders. An additional insistence strategy used by these teachers is the implementation of consequences.

Responses to Continued Inappropriate Behavior

The biggest challenge to any teacher is the student who repeatedly violates classroom rules and procedures. Our teachers respond in two ways. First, they do not hesitate to use consequences to reinforce their expectations; second, they view repeated infractions as a puzzle to be solved.

Using Consequences To Reinforce Expectations. Although the tone of the three classrooms is very positive, the teachers do not hesitate to use consequences when necessary. When one of Ms. Second's students resisted standing and looking at the teacher (a part of the lining up procedure), she reminded, repeated, and referenced the possibility of a consequence by saying, "Everyone should stand up nice and tall and your eyes should be on me. Eyes on me. I would hate to move a clothespin." She was referring to her "stoplight" system in which a student's clothespin could be moved from green light (ready to learn) to yellow (caution) to red (loss of privileges or parent notification). When the student continued to resist the procedure, she moved the student's clothespin. Similarly, when one of Ms. Third's students continued talking as the teacher was talking, she looked directly into his eyes and said, "Who's talking? Hmmmm, am I going to have to move somebody on the first day?" And when the talking continued, she calmly led the student to another desk.

Viewing Misbehavior as a Puzzle To Be Solved. For those students whose behavior gives the teacher concern, the teachers adopt a wait-and-see stance that includes observation and data collection. Before taking action, the teachers want to understand better the nature and extent of the problem. Ms. Third explained, "You know, I don't really know [what's going on with him], so I'm going to play it by ear for the rest of the week and just kind of monitor things, keep a log of different things that happen and different things that might concern me." Similarly, Ms. Second decided on the first day of school that she would find opportunities to talk privately with one of her students in an effort to understand her better. Although the teachers agreed with Ms. Third's assertion that it is important to "nip [a problem] in the bud in the very beginning of the year," they also agreed with her approach of studying the problem in order to determine appropriate action. They believed more information would help them solve the puzzle of a student's misbehavior.

THE TONE OF INSISTENCE

Insistence definitely means "demanding" appropriate behavior. However, the tone of insistence, although difficult to convey in a written format, is more important than the structure. The tone in these classrooms conveys the "warmth" that comes with mutual respect and a caring relationship between teacher and students. Insistence is authoritative, firm, and respectful, and never authoritarian, punitive, sarcastic, or demeaning.

One striking characteristic of these classrooms is that the teachers calmly, respectfully, and directly communicate their expectations and reminders, and even the consequences for misbehavior. The following teacher comments about interactions in their classrooms capture the tone of all three classrooms:

* I don't put on a façade. I'm just myself and, um, maybe they could just feel the genuineness. (Ms. Second)
* [I decided to have them sign a letter of commitment] because I think if they take ownership of something like a document, they truly understand what it means. (Ms. Fifth)
* I was real positive with the kids, and I think that's important because if they see that they are in a positive environment, they act positively ... as long as I had structure, and I had structure. (Ms. Fifth)
* When the kids come in I will say good morning to each [one] just so they feel that "someone knows I am here; someone knows who I am; it means something that I am here." (Ms. Third)
The teachers note that their management system is grounded in the personal relationships they develop with the children, but they also communicate verbally and nonverbally a view that children are children and teachers therefore must be authoritative adults who teach and insist on appropriate classroom interactions. Ms. Third articulated the dilemma:

I build a relationship with them and [I would like for them to do what is right] just out of respect, . . . but during the first week of class they don't know me yet and there are kids who want to push buttons and there are kids [who] want to get away with everything.

These teachers are not saints, and they are annoyed with student behavior at times. Yet a tone of anger or frustration almost never can be heard in the classroom. In fact, the pervasive tone in each classroom is respect and care. As Hall and Hall (2003) noted, an effective management system is grounded in gentle intervention that is respectful of student dignity and therefore "interrupts" misbehavior. In contrast, they noted, anger escalates inappropriate behavior.

INSISTENCE: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

The literature on culturally responsive pedagogy and management emphasizes the critical role played by insistence in scaffolding the success and achievement motivation of students of color. By clearly and consistently communicating expectations and insisting that students meet them, the teachers lay the foundation for a classroom in which task engagement can be maximized and task avoidance minimized. Given the clear links between task engagement and achievement (e.g., Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Furrer & Skinner, 2003), strategies that promote engagement certainly deserve teachers' attention. Interestingly, the teachers described here behave as warm demanders from the first moments of the school year. This is a critical period, note Patrick, Anderman, Ruan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) and Patrick et al. (2003), because classroom psychological environments take shape quickly and remain stable over time. What teachers do first matters. Insistence is an important component of culturally responsive classroom management, but it is not a stand-alone component. We have focused on insistence because a common problem for novice teachers who struggle in urban classrooms is that they incorporate many characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogy yet fail to demonstrate authoritative insistence. For example, Patrick et al. (2003) found clear distinctions among teachers who create supportive, ambiguous, or non-supportive environments. In ambiguous environments, the teachers are sometimes supportive and may set high expectations, but they fail to connect to students in a personal way because they are inconsistent in demanding effort and respect. In this way, they undercut their own efforts. The problems of many beginning teachers may be grounded in good intentions but result in the creation of ambiguous psychological environments.

The research of Patrick et al. (2003) clearly shows that inconsistent teachers fail to support achievement motivation. This is a particularly salient point for young, white, female teachers who have been socialized to speak softly and to be non-direct and non-assertive, and therefore may be perceived to lack authority by African American youth (Thompson, 2004). For this reason, it is especially important to help novice teachers learn the strategies of insistence that will help them convey their expectations to students. At the same time, we do not want to imply that insistence is the only strategy.

Using the strategies of insistence within a framework of culturally responsive pedagogy holds great promise for teachers and their students. It is especially encouraging to note that teachers with little teaching experience and who are of diverse cultural backgrounds can be warm demanders. As Irvine (2003) pointed out, the purpose of insistence is not to demand compliance. Rather, teachers insist that students are respectful and hardworking because respect and hard work create an environment in which academic engagement and success can flourish. In fact, insistence may be viewed as the teacher's expression of care for students who have no time to waste—students who "not only can learn but must learn" (Irvine & Fraser, 1998, p. 56).

One key strategy in creating a positive psychological environment is the teacher's capacity to "insist" that the students meet established academic and behavioral standards.

References
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