

The Greatest Teacher: Modeling Jesus in Urban Education

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Fall 2022

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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**Abstract**

Several key best practices from urban education research are reflected in the pedagogy of Jesus Christ, providing a practical foundation for Christian educators in urban schools. Related to the prevalence of poverty and trauma are the practices of learning students' backgrounds to better interpret behavior, which Jesus reflects by healing before teaching, and holding high standards, demonstrated in Jesus' interaction with the rich man and the Sermon on the Mount. Related to racial diversity are the practices of addressing implicit bias, a crucial part of being Christlike, and connecting instruction to students' culture, like Jesus did through parables. Christians can also model Jesus by acknowledging their students' spiritual need, setting boundaries, being experts in their content area, and implementing storytelling.

*Keywords:* urban education, Christian education, poverty, trauma, racial diversity, ethnic diversity, pedagogy, Christlike teaching

### **The Greatest Teacher: Modeling Jesus in Urban Education**

Urban education is known by many as a challenging field, and rightfully so. Poverty and trauma, which are common in students from urban communities, can cause cognitive and socioemotional deficits that create difficulty with academics and behavior management (Jensen, 2009), and the disparity of racial representation between the teachers and students often hinders the formation of positive teacher-student relationships, which are key to fostering resilience in students (Emdin, 2016). However, the challenges of urban education need not discourage educators from working in the field; rather, it is a privilege and an honor to enrich the minds of these historically underserved students. Christian teachers in particular, knowing that children of all backgrounds are valuable to God, ought to invest in the improvement of education in urban communities. Christian teachers can prepare themselves to make a difference in urban education not only by studying the best practices suggested by urban education research, but also by studying the teaching practices of the greatest teacher: Jesus Christ. Several of the key practices proposed by urban education experts align with the life and teaching practices of Jesus, creating a model for Christian teachers entering urban education.

#### **What Is Urban Education?**

Urban education seems like an easy term to define—teaching in a school located in a city. However, there is much more to urban education than just location. “Urban education” as a term carries with it all the complexities of the students’ realities as youth in urban communities. There are many positive and negative aspects of these realities, and they are far from unique to urban areas, but they do tend to be more common in these areas. The most prominent factors that stand out are poverty, trauma, and racial diversity.

Statistics reveal that poverty and trauma, which often coincide, abound in urban

communities. According to Martin (2015), 49% of American urban children come from low-income families, and this figure only increases in neighborhoods dominated by people of color (Schaefer, 2019). Poverty can put people at risk of extreme emotional, social, and cognitive challenges (Jensen, 2009). Additionally, studies show that students in urban areas are more likely to face adverse child experiences (commonly known as ACEs), with figures reporting that 1 in 4 school-aged children that have experienced at least one traumatic event that can affect their ability to learn as well as their behavior (Harris & Long, 2021; Yamashiro, 2018), another figure that increases when the group is narrowed down to Black and Latino families in inner cities (Martin, 2015; Sacks & Murphey, 2018; Schaefer, 2019). The chronic stress that comes with poverty and trauma can be a serious detriment to the brain's cognitive function (Jensen, 2009), and students in poverty have fewer opportunities for cognitive enrichment (Kumanyika & Grier, 2006), meaning that without intentional intervention, they are likely to maintain those cognitive lags.

Moreover, not only are children living in poverty and/or experiencing trauma more likely to face difficulty in academics, but they are also more likely to display behavioral issues. According to Martin (2015), chronic trauma can cause issues with children's executive functioning and self-regulation, which means that they are more likely to overreact to seemingly normal situations. Furthermore, students with ACEs are more likely to have lower standardized test scores, be designated to special education, have difficulties with communication, resort to violence, get suspended or expelled, and engage in health-compromising behaviors such as drinking and smoking, and overall, they are less likely to graduate high school (Grant, 2003; Martin, 2015; Schaefer, 2019). It is also important to understand that the behaviors that occur as a result of trauma often are neither identified nor treated as such, but rather are overlooked or

misunderstood (Emdin, 2012). Poverty and trauma can cause many issues in the classroom, both academically and behaviorally.

Urban districts also generally host a much more racially diverse community (Castillo & Cromartie, 2020; Parker et al., 2019; Schaefer, 2019), which is another important characteristic of urban education. However, while students in urban areas are more racially diverse, data from the Pew Research Center shows that, overwhelmingly, public school teachers are less diverse than the students they teach (Schaeffer, 2021). Figure 1 shows data from the National Center of Education Statistics that reveals that while there are higher percentages teachers of color in schools where the student body is more diverse, white teachers still make up the majority in almost all schools. In other words, even in schools where the majority of the students are people of color, they are still more likely to have white teachers.

**Figure 1.**

*Percentage distribution of race/ethnicity of teachers and student body racial/ethnic composition: 2017–18*



*Note.* U.S. Department of Education. (2020, September). [Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their Students.] National Center for Education Statistics.

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103/index.asp>

There is no fundamental problem with students of color having white teachers; however, misunderstandings are more likely to occur between these groups due to differences in lived experience and cultural expectations. Multiple urban education experts point out that far too often, students of color are taught by white teachers who, though well-intentioned, do not understand, and therefore do not respect, the realities of the children they teach, and thus fail to connect with their students (Delpit, 2012; Emdin, 2016; Blanchett & Wynne, 2007; Milner, 2012). This divide can inhibit the development of deep, meaningful relationships, which are key to student achievement (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015; Sparks, 2019). For example, in a study conducted by Finn and Voekl (1993), African American eighth-grade students in schools with fewer teachers of color said that they experienced lower emotional engagement than those in schools with more teacher diversity. This is the reality in many urban schools. The lack of racial representation among teachers in urban schools often hinders connections between students and teachers, which is detrimental to student success overall.

All of these challenges—poverty, trauma, and the cultural disconnect due to the lack of racial diversity among teachers—make urban education a very difficult field for unprepared teachers. Without proper training, teachers are likely to make many mistakes, contributing to the dismal rate of academic success seen in some urban schools. Emdin (2016) illustrates the cycle of problems the current urban education systems creates:

The structure of the traditional urban school privileges poor teaching practices, these practices trigger responses from students that reflect “poor behavior,” the poor behavior

triggers deeply entrenched biases that teachers hold, and when this triggering of biases is coupled with the cycling in and out of white folks who teach in the hood, former teachers with activated biases leave urban classrooms to become policymakers and education experts who do not believe in young people or their communities. (p. 41)

Historically, the various factors related to urban education have not been addressed correctly, creating a downward spiral of poor education.

However, the challenges of urban education do not make academic success unreachable; there is hope for success. While poverty and trauma can cause serious cognitive lags, Jensen (2009) shows that IQ scores can be raised, cognitive lags can be reversed, and students who once fell behind can excel with the right education. Furthermore, while trauma coming from any source—whether it be living in poverty, experiencing community violence, or being a victim of racism—makes it statistically more likely that students will fail, multiple sources have shown that all it takes is one positive relationship with a caring adult to turn that child’s life around (Bradwell, 2017; Brown, 2017; Harris & Long, 2021; Jensen, 2009; Reeves, 2019). Also, white teachers who struggle to connect with their students of color can mend this divide by learning to value their students’ culture and incorporating it into their classroom (Emdin, 2012; Delpit, 2016). Thus, there is a great deal of hope for success in urban education.

### **Biblical Analysis of Urban Education Best Practices**

Many scholars have devoted their lives to researching the best ways to improve urban education, and a study of that literature reveals several key practices: investigating the second backpack, holding high standards, addressing implicit bias, and connecting instruction to students’ culture. Moreover, while a knowledge of urban education research can help improve teacher practice to provide a better education to students, Christian teachers in urban education



have another source of educational practices to consider: the life of Jesus Christ. Among the many other roles he played, Jesus was a teacher, and he used many of the same teaching methods used by teachers today. Christian educators who wish to teach well and be Christlike ought to explore the ways in which Jesus taught and seek to imitate him. These two sources—urban education research and Jesus’s life—overlap in many ways; Jesus exemplified each key best practice of urban education in his ministry.

### **Investigating the Second Backpack**

Because of the prevalence of trauma in urban schools, experts in the field have pointed out that students in urban environments may need their more basic needs addressed before they are ready to learn in the classroom. A knowledge of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can bring clarity to this topic. Figure 2 shows the organization of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which begins with the more basic needs, which require attention before the higher needs.

### **Figure 2.**

*Maslow’s hierarchy of needs*



*Note.* Mcleod, S. (2022). [Maslow’s hierarchy of needs]. Simply Psychology.

<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

Ideally, students would come to school with their physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs met, and teachers would only be responsible for helping them achieve their self-actualization needs by imparting to them the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the academic and professional world. However, to expect this sort of situation when working in an urban environment is simply unrealistic. As previously stated, urban youth are disproportionately at risk of experiencing many types of trauma, such as community and family violence, as well as the chronic trauma that comes from the instability brought by poverty (Martin, 2015). Living in poverty and/or experiencing trauma like community violence means that physiological and safety needs are unlikely to be met, and experiencing family violence or gang activity makes it likely that love and belonging and esteem needs will not have been met in a healthy way. Thus, teachers in areas where these issues are more prevalent must be aware that the students entering their classrooms will bring these needs with them.

In light of this information, it is easy for teachers to become overwhelmed and unintentionally neglect those needs. Emdin (2016) states that “in schools, urban youth are expected to leave their day-to-day experiences and emotions at the door and assimilate into the culture of schools. This process of personal repression is in itself traumatic and directly impacts what happens in the classroom” (p. 23). Thus, asking students to ignore their outside lives during school is not only unrealistic but also insensitive and counterproductive. Asking students to leave their needs at the door does not improve their academic lives; it exacerbates their difficulties. The reality of these children’s lives is that they are forced to “spend less time finding out about the world around them and more time struggling to survive within it” (Jensen, 2009, p. 8). When a student is concerned that they will not be safe or provided for at home or in their community,

they are unlikely to be able to commit their energy to learning academic subjects that seem so far away from their current realities. Leaving these needs unaddressed is likely to increase the number of behavioral issues that arise because while students may know that they have experienced trauma, they do not know how to navigate and overcome those challenges (Emdin, 2016). Thus, teachers should seek to help their students address the many needs they bring with them into the classroom, rather than avoiding them.

This conclusion leads into the first best practice proposed by urban education experts: teachers should seek to discover the need that students communicate through their behavior and respond to that need. Adolph Brown (2017) refers to this process as “investigating the second backpack” (p. 8). He explains that every student enters the classroom with two backpacks: the visible, physical one for supplies, and the invisible, psychological one that holds their story—their cultural background, their trauma, their community experience, etc. When a teacher investigates the second backpack, they are learning students’ stories, which gives the students the space to acknowledge their trauma and helps the teacher understand and connect with their students (Brown, 2017). Other scholars refer to this process as “finding the antecedent” to a certain behavior (Burks, 2020; Cummings, 2022; Murphy et al., 2019). This theory, sometimes called the ABCs, outlines three stages to every behavior: the antecedent, the trigger or cause of the behavior; the behavior, what the student did; and the consequence, what happened after (Burks, 2020; Cummings, 2022; Murphy et al., 2019). Whatever one chooses to call the process, experts agree that teachers should seek to discover the need communicated by the behavior and respond to that rather than to the behavior itself (Burks, 2020; Cummings, 2022; Murphy et al., 2019). Thus, if a teacher can discover what need a student is communicating through their behavior and address that need, they can diminish occurrences of that behavior in the future. A

teacher cannot expect themselves to solve all of their students' problems, but they can support them and allow them space to process and address those issues.

Jesus enacted a similar process in his own teaching by addressing people's physical needs as well as their spiritual needs (Bensen, 2018; Carlson, 2006; Powell, 2016). The most prominent demonstration of this can be seen most prominently in John 5:1-17. In this passage, Jesus heals a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. Only after he heals the man does he instruct him, saying, "see, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016, John 5:14). The timing of this event is significant; Jesus understood that the man needed to be healed before he was ready to hear the instruction to stop sinning. In this way, Jesus acknowledged the man's traumatic background and addressed it in the same way that a teacher should give their students the appropriate space to process and address their physical and emotional needs before tackling their self-actualization needs. Jesus also follows this process in John 8:1-11, in which he saves an adulterous woman from being stoned by the Pharisees. In this passage, Jesus addresses the woman's physical needs, by preventing her stoning, and her self-esteem needs, by ensuring her that he does not condemn her, before he instructs her to "go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11). These passages clearly show that Jesus was aware of people's needs and sought to address all of them, not just their spiritual need. Powell (2016) claims that Jesus acknowledges and meets every level of need according to Maslow's hierarchy throughout his ministry. Jesus exemplifies the teaching practice of addressing students' pressing lower-level needs before teaching them, as urban educators should seek to do with students who have experienced trauma.

### **Holding High Standards**

While students in urban settings may need more support in these areas, experts also

fervently warn against lowering academic and behavioral standards, leading to the second main practice: teachers should hold their students to high standards and give them the support they need to reach them. As Brown (2017) and Jensen (2009) explain, while teachers may be tempted to lower their expectations for students who come from difficult backgrounds, having high expectations is the best way to set students on the path to success. Similarly, a study by Barton (2003) showed that having a rigorous curriculum was the strongest indicator of student achievement. Thus, holding students to high academic standards is absolutely essential, even more so in urban schools. Delpit (2012) explains that, to urban teachers who hold their students to high standards, “poverty is not seen as an excuse for failure... Although they recognize the difficult circumstances of their students, they demand that they can and will rise above them” (p. 78). In order to enable their students to succeed, teachers must make it clear that they expect them to achieve great outcomes.

However, holding students to high standards is not enough to ensure their success; teachers must also provide the support students need to meet those standards. Lisa Delpit (2012), in her book *“Multiplication Is for White People”: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children*, refers to the kind of urban educators that do this as “warm demanders:” those who “expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment” (p. 77). In other words, in addition to pushing their students to achieve their full potential, urban educators must also give them genuine kindness and support to help them reach that goal, setting high but achievable standards (Van Brummelen, 2009). Urban teachers must be warm demanders, holding students to high standards and providing them with the support they need to meet those standards.

This principle connects very naturally to Jesus’ teaching and ministry style; he

exemplified what it means to be a warm demander. First, Jesus held very high standards for his students, particularly when it comes to morality. For example, in Mark 10:17-31, Jesus encounters a rich young man who asks him, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). Jesus asks him if he has followed all the commandments, and when the man responds affirmatively, Jesus tells him to sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. The man leaves, “disheartened by the saying... sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:22). After this, Jesus remarks that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25), demonstrating the incredibly high requirement he has for righteousness. Jesus also demonstrates his high expectations in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, in which he calls the people not only to not murder, but to not hate; not only to not commit adultery, but to not lust; not only to love their friends, but to love their enemies, among other things—creating a strict, extremely high standard of righteousness. Nelson (2006) points out that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus extends the Old Testament law, raising the standard rather than lowering or abolishing it. Jesus calls his followers to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), and he tells them to “enter by the narrow gate” (Matthew 7:13). Jesus made it clear on multiple occasions that the standards for righteousness were high.

Nevertheless, not only did Jesus set high expectations, but he also gave grace and support, embodying the second aspect of being a warm demander. Schuppe (2006) explains that while Jesus challenged his students, he also understood their limitations, giving them encouragement and extra attention when necessary. These behaviors are demonstrated in Scripture. After his encounter with the rich man, Jesus assured his disciples that “with man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27), showing that

he freely gave the support they needed to meet his standards. Also, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assured the people that if they would be sustained if they depended on his word for their strength (Matthew 7:24-27), and he taught them exactly how they were to pray in Matthew 6:9-13, demonstrating how he gave care and support for those who chose to follow him. For another example, after Peter failed Jesus by denying him three times in John 18, Jesus restored him, forgiving him and giving him a chance at redemption in John 21:15-19. In all of these situations, Jesus demonstrated how teachers are to give their students the support and encouragement they need to live up to the high expectations.

Lastly, it is important to note that if teachers are to hold their students to high academic standards, they must be prepared for those students to meet them; that is to say, teachers must prepare for their students to excel by being experts in their content areas. Jesus modeled this as well; he was an expert in his content area (Zuck, 2002). He continually prayed and studied the scriptures (see Luke 2:46-52). This expertise that he developed is evident through his responses to Satan during his temptation in Matthew 4:1-11 and his thorough understanding of the meaning behind the scriptures (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, many of his conversations with the Pharisees). Jesus' constant study of his content enabled him to be confident and authoritative in his teaching, and he always knew how to answer questions or correct misconceptions (Matthew 12:1-14; Luke 22:24-30; Zuck, 2002). Modern educators should be similarly well-versed in their content areas so that they can teach with authority and be a resource for their students. This means being a lifelong learner by studying current research and engaging in professional development (Braley et al., 2003; Zuck, 2002). Being an expert in one's content area is especially important in urban education, as then teachers will be able to provide more opportunities for enrichment and be able to challenge their students more.

### **Addressing Implicit Bias**

These two practices, investigating the second backpack and holding high standards, relate closely to the poverty and trauma often associated with urban education, and the next practice—addressing implicit bias—provides a transition from poverty/trauma to racial/ethnic diversity. Implicit bias can affect a person’s idea of what living up to high expectations looks like, particularly when it comes to behavior. Many teachers, especially those who are not people of color, come into urban schools having a picture in their mind of what a “good student” acts like, but this picture is heavily affected by cultural expectations, and thus, when students of color act in a way that does not align with the teacher’s expectations, that student is labeled as a “bad student” and suffers for it (Delpit, 2012; Emdin, 2016; Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Gullo et al., 2018). Christopher Emdin (2016) explores this principle at length in *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*, in which he explains that “the reality is that we privilege people who look and act like us, and perceive those who don’t as different, and, frequently, inferior” (p. 19). Whether or not they intend to, it is natural for teachers to label students who remind them of themselves as “good” and those who behave differently as “bad.” Therefore, it is crucial that teachers entering urban schools examine their implicit bias when it comes to race, socioeconomic class, gender, etc. When these biases go unchecked, teachers tend to set low expectations for their students academically and behaviorally, which results in less rigor in the classroom, which then makes it unlikely that students will rise above the other challenges they face (Emdin, 2016; Gullo et al., 2018). Thus, it is altogether crucial that urban teachers examine and break down their implicit biases.

One of the most common types of implicit bias present in aspiring urban educators is the white savior complex. The white savior complex is complicated because those who exhibit it are



often well-meaning—they want to help those “less fortunate” than them—but subconsciously, they consider those people to be inferior to them, which results in them belittling the existing cultural practices of those whom they serve (Cortes, 2018; Willis & Brown, 2021). The white savior complex is also characterized by self-serving motivations, such as wanting to feel good about oneself (Poma, 2021; Willis & Brown, 2021). In *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*, Christopher Emdin (2016) describes an encounter with a teacher who claimed he was “cleaning these kids up and giving them a better life” (p. 20), and in his discussion of this conversation, he explains that the wording of this statement reveals that the teacher believes that the students are dirty and that their current life is not valuable. While the teacher that Emdin engaged with may have truly had good intentions, his statement made it clear that he saw nothing about the children’s current lives that was worth cultivating; there were only broken things to be fixed or altogether replaced.

In practice, these savior complexes—and the biases and prejudices that underlie them—often result in the teacher unintentionally belittling or erasing the students’ culture. Lisa Delpit (2012) discusses this issue in the context of Teach for America, a program that gives young, well-meaning college graduates a short period of teacher training and places them in low-income schools in hopes of raising achievement in those areas. While Delpit (2012) commends the program and its participants for their good intentions and dedication, she points out that these teachers are often unprepared to teach students from different cultural backgrounds, so they unintentionally reinforce the idea that “school reform means making everything whiter” (p. 118). In other words, they have not been taught to see their students’ lifestyles and communication styles as valuable in their own right, so in the process of teaching them academically, they also try to have them conform to a culturally insensitive standard of behavior. Cortes (2018) proposes

a solution, outlining how teachers and students should interact:

Our role is to serve as resources and support for our students who are on their way to reach their full potential. Our job is to respect our students and not enter any situation with preconceived notions about them and how they may behave due to their appearance, their socioeconomic background or where they may come from. Both teachers and students should be learning from each other, and teachers should foster an environment of cultural understanding and acceptance, which in turn will hopefully result in a more inclusive, successful, and productive learning environment. (para. 3)

White savior complexes hurt student-teacher relationships, and thus, these biases must be dismantled, and more culturally respectful partnerships must be built.

The idea of implicit racial bias may be new and intimidating to many people, but there is a biblical foundation for it. Romans 3:23 says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and there are many other passages that state that sin is pervasive in all human beings (1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 51:5; Ecclesiastes 8:11, 9:3; Romans 3:10-12, 7:18). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that people can be infected by a sin like racism without necessarily intending to. In an interview with the Gospel Coalition, Philip Holmes (2020) describes how in Acts 6, the Hellenists complain that their widows have been neglected by the system of food distribution run by the Hebrews, which demonstrates how people can unintentionally hurt others with their implicit bias. As such, the Bible does not rule out the possibility of individuals and organizations being inherently biased and corrupt regardless of their intentions. Furthermore, the Bible explicitly condemns favoritism (James 2:1, 8-9; 1 Timothy 5:21; Proverbs 24:23), which is often the result of racism and racial bias. Additionally, Numbers 12 clearly shows that God takes racism as a serious offense, and there are many verses, such as Proverbs 31:8-9, that contain

direct commands to stand up for the oppressed. Christians have a responsibility to fight “against any public policy that gives preferential treatment to any particular race or ethnicity or that implies that one is superior to another” (Longman, 2020, p. 292). Thus, in response to God’s call on their lives, Christian teachers must seek to tear down their implicit biases.

Breaking down biases that hinder one’s ability to show love and respect to everyone is a crucial part of becoming more like Christ. Jesus accepted and valued all people, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and even sinfulness (Roso, 2017; Van Brummelen, 2009). He loved and accepted children (Luke 18:15-17), and he commended the faith of many women, notably several who were not Jews, others who were poor, and others that were sinners (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 12:41-44, Luke 7:36-50). For example, in John 4, Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman, whom other Jews would have scorned due to the historical conflicts between them, and in doing so he “refuses to allow cultural prejudice to inhibit his communication or promote social distance” (Jones-Carmack, 2016, p. 46). Jesus had remarkable compassion for all people, which moved him to teach with patience and joy whenever he was approached with a question (Zuck, 2002). Jesus also challenged others to break down their biases against others. For example, in Luke 7, the Pharisees immediately judge a woman that washes Jesus’ feet because she was a sinner, but Jesus rebukes them, pointing out that she has expressed her love for him better than they did. In the same way, teachers should love all students regardless of their background or physical characteristics and seek to teach them all with equity, patience, and compassion. To become Christlike in this way, teachers must confront their own implicit biases and challenge others to do the same. All students are gifts from God regardless of whether they fit the teacher’s norms, and thus the teacher must learn to dissect their cultural assumptions of what is normal and reflect on how that affects their students (Miller & Harris, 2018; Van

Brummelen, 2009). Rather than allowing implicit bias to taint one's opinion of a student whose behavior does not match the teacher's expectations, teachers should seek to celebrate all kinds of diversity in the classroom, in the same way that Jesus loved and welcomed all people.

### **Connecting Instruction to Students' Culture**

If these biases are not addressed, a cultural divide can develop between teachers and their students, leading to a lack of meaningful relationships, which is detrimental to student achievement (Delpit, 2012; Emdin, 2016; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015; Sparks, 2019). Thus, in order to effectively reach students from different cultural backgrounds, teachers must design their classrooms and their instruction in a way that respects and welcomes their students' cultures (Emdin, 2016; Van Brummelen, 2009). This statement illustrates the third main principle of urban education: teachers must prioritize their students' culture in the way they teach.

### ***Differentiating Content and Instructional Methods***

There are two main ways of connecting instruction with students' culture: adjusting the content taught and adjusting the instructional methods used. Adjusting content often means choosing a curriculum that covers topics relevant to students' history and culture. Lisa Delpit (2012) claims there is little hope in the success of a given curriculum if it does not positively connect to the culture of the students. She then provides a great example of connecting content to the students' culture: in a certain middle school, the students were obsessed with doing each other's hair, and eventually the teachers gave up on trying to get them to stop and instead decided to incorporate content about hair into every subject. In this situation, the teachers connected their curriculum to the culture of the students. By doing so, they validated and celebrated the students' interests. Incorporating students' interests into curriculum has been

shown to increase student engagement (Ainley, 2012; Harackiewicz et al., 2016), and a study by Capper (2021) showed that this is especially true in urban environments. Therefore, by basing their curriculum on students' interests, teachers can increase overall achievement and form more meaningful connections to students in urban settings.

Teachers can also connect their instructional methods to students' culture. In this approach, content may stay the same, but it is taught in a way that aligns more with the students' communication styles. In *For White Folks who Teach in the Hood*, Christopher Emdin (2016) calls this method "reality pedagogy," a teaching philosophy that privileges the students' culture and communication methods even when they differ from those of the teacher. In the book, he outlines many different ways to incorporate students' culture into instruction, including holding feedback conferences with students to get their input, encouraging the productive use of vernacular as well as standard English in the classroom, incorporating competition into the classroom, and more (Emdin, 2016). Furthermore, Bingham & Okagaki (2012) suggest that teachers should emphasize communalism in the classroom, which is important in the cultures of many students of color (Tyler et al., 2005), and they suggest that teachers plan activities that involve more movement and auditory stimulation, as these activities connect more to African American ways of communicating (Boykin et al., 2005). Thus, not only should content connect to students' culture, but the way in which it is taught should also consider and prioritize the students' ways of communicating.

Both of these practices—connecting content and instructional methods to students' culture—can be seen in action in Jesus' teaching in the gospels. The stories Jesus used to teach always focused on some character or situation that was common or recognizable to his listeners. Many related to agriculture (e.g., the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-23), while others

related to currency (e.g., the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30), and still others related to cultural marriage traditions (e.g. the Great Banquet in Matthew 22:1-14). Telling stories using cultural archetypes and traditions, Jesus allowed his students to identify with the characters and make connections with their prior knowledge (James et al., 2015; Zuck, 2002). His use of parables also shows how he connects his instructional methods to his listeners' culture (Roso, 2017). Parables were commonly used as a teaching technique by rabbis in Jesus' lifetime (Edersheim, 1972; Zuck, 2002), so his audiences would have been very familiar with them and comfortable receiving information in this way. Thus, Jesus matched both the content and delivery of his message to the culture of his students.

Moreover, Jesus intentionally differentiated his content and methods depending on his audience, which demonstrates his ability to cater his instruction to the needs of his students and powerfully shows how cultural references can be used to make up for deficits in background knowledge. When Jesus taught the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who would have had a vast amount of religious background knowledge, Jesus referenced more obscure, complex aspects of the law that he would reference when speaking to the Pharisees (Matthew 12:1-8), and he used more rhetorical questions and called upon them to think logically (Mark 11:27-33). However, when he was teaching the common people, he used more parables and cultural images, as aforementioned. This contrast shows how Jesus differentiated his content and methods based on his students' background knowledge and culture. It is important to note that Jesus taught complex theological concepts to both groups, which has important implications for urban educators. Students that live in poverty and/or have experienced trauma may have significant deficits in background knowledge, because they may have spent more time focusing on survival than on learning in school. However, Jesus demonstrates that a lack of background knowledge

does not make learning impossible. Jesus' use of cultural images to make up for the lack of complex religious knowledge among the common people shows that not only is culturally relevant pedagogy important because it makes the students feel respected, but also because it can help them learn content.

### *Spending Time in Students' Communities*

The process of connecting content and instructional methods to students' culture requires learning about students' cultures, so teachers ought to spend time in their students' communities in order to learn and incorporate students' interests and communication styles. Emdin (2016) describes how in one of his first years of teaching, he was determined to make his lessons engaging for his students. His initial approach was to spend more time lesson planning, but one day, he decided to play basketball with the students outside of school instead, and he realized that he learned more about how to teach his students from that than from planning more because he knew how to communicate with them and built relationships with them. He uses this illustration to show that in order to truly reach students, one has to spend time in the places that are most important to the students. In order to do this, Emdin (2016) suggests that teachers visit churches, barber shops, and other neighborhood spaces that "share rules of engagement and general norms and traditions that... can be used to transform the classroom" (p. 46). By spending time with students outside of school, teachers can make personal connections with students and learn how to communicate in their culture, which will contribute to a more culturally sensitive classroom environment.

Similarly, Jesus spent a significant amount of time getting to know his students. While the gospels focus on Jesus' teaching and miracles and do not include every detail of his life, there are several instances where Jesus is pictured simply spending time with people. For example, in

John 4, Jesus attends a wedding with his disciples. Additionally, Mark 2:15-17 and Luke 5:29-32 tell of a time when Jesus was eating with sinners, and when the Pharisees—the religious teachers—criticized him for doing so, he responded by saying, “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). By responding in this way, Jesus revealed that he spent time with sinners because he came to call them, to teach them. Thus, Jesus highlighted the value of spending time with those whom one teaches. It is very possible that the amount of time that Jesus spent with the common people was what enabled him to cater his instruction so directly to their needs. In the same way, urban teachers ought to spend time in their students’ communities in hopes of forming meaningful relationships with them and learning how to prioritize their culture in the classroom.

### **Further Biblical Insight**

Thus far, it has been shown that the Bible affirms the main practices set forth by urban education literature, as shown by the intersections between urban education research and Jesus’ teaching methods. However, it is imperative for Christian educators not only to engage with the practices set forth by secular experts and affirmed by Jesus but also to go above and beyond by incorporating the practices that set Jesus apart from the average teacher. There are several principles and practices apparent in Scripture and in the life of Jesus and that should be emulated by modern urban educators.

### **Understanding the Image of God**

An understanding of the implications of the image of God, present in all students, should drive every Christian teacher’s practice. All human beings bear the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; James 3:9; Van Brummelen, 2009), which has enormous implications for what people can do and how they should be treated. As aforementioned, students in urban schools may have



profound cognitive deficits due to poverty and/or trauma, not to mention deficits in academic background knowledge. These difficulties are likely to frustrate teachers, who may conclude that these students simply cannot learn or that they are not interested in learning. However, according to Lee (2018), “being a child of God means having unbounded potential for growth” (p. 22). Thus, because all people have a propensity to growth and learning as a result of being made in the image of God, teachers must learn to see all students as capable of learning, regardless of the challenges they may face in the process. Furthermore, as image bearers, all humans have inherent value (Grant, 2003; Hulshof, 2022; Lee, 2018; Van Brummelen, 2002; Van Brummelen, 2009). If all students are inherently valuable, then their gifts, talents, cultures, and personalities should be treated with the utmost respect and care. Cox (2016) explains how students of color, in particular, are often not treated as valuable in school environments, but viewing them as made in the image of God will foster relationships between students and teachers that are characterized by respect and dignity. An understanding of the image of God has important implications for Christian educators, especially those teaching in urban environments.

### **Acknowledging Sinful Nature and Spiritual Need**

While a great deal of the negative outcomes in urban education are heavily influenced by teacher error, and many of them can be diminished with appropriate pedagogy, it would be easy for a well-meaning educator to believe that any and all mistakes or failures that occur in the classroom are the direct fault of the teacher. However, Christian teachers ought to look at their classroom struggles in light of the sinful nature that is pervasive throughout humanity.

Ecclesiastes 7:1 provides a reminder that “surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins,” and Romans 8:20-21 states that all of creation is subject to futility because of sin. Thus, whether or not a teacher does everything right in terms of pedagogy, there will

always be students who struggle, do not respond, are defiant, or are disrespectful (Van Brummelen, 2002; Van Brummelen, 2009). Knowing that sin creates difficulty throughout all creation and remains in all people, teachers who face these struggles can take some comfort in knowing that they are not responsible for every issue that arises in the classroom.

Furthermore, this knowledge should drive teachers to acknowledge (and address, when possible) the spiritual needs of their students and themselves. While discussions of the physical and psychological needs of students in urban schools often dominate the conversation, Christian educators must also keep in mind that students are just as desperately in need of salvation and spiritual development. In public schools, there will not be as many opportunities to share the gospel with students, but Christian teachers should be vigilant in prayer and intentional in modeling Christ's love and grace to their students. Van Brummelen (2009) reminds teachers that teaching is a ministry, and he states that teachers are "priests... [who] represent God to [their] students, model a holy lifestyle, intercede for them with God, and prevent and heal broken situations" (p. 51). Thus, regardless of whether teachers find themselves in a public or Christian school, they are called to consider the spiritual wellbeing of their students. Lastly, Christian educators must keep in mind that they themselves also have a sinful nature, which continues to taint their decision-making (Van Brummelen, 2002). Therefore, Christian teachers must recognize their own spiritual need in addition to that of their students, and they must learn to give grace both to themselves and their students.

### **Setting Boundaries**

One of the greatest things that educators can learn from Jesus is not from his teaching methods, but his way of life—specifically, his intentionality in setting boundaries. On several occasions, before or after teaching, Jesus left to be alone and pray (Luke 5:15-16, Mark 1:35,

Mark 6:30-34). In doing so, Jesus was setting boundaries with his ministry, taking time to take care of his own spiritual life so that he would be better prepared to help others. It can be difficult for teachers to set appropriate boundaries with work in order to rest due to the many extra time commitments that come with being a teacher. Nevertheless, boundaries are crucial to the wellbeing of the teacher, and thus also to the wellbeing of the students (Craig, 2008; Cloud & Townsend, 1992; Rauhala, 2018). Just as Jesus prepared himself to teach by taking time to rest, teachers should set boundaries in order to be ready for teaching with energy and compassion when the time comes.

There are many ways to set boundaries, mostly involving time, but urban teachers especially must also learn to set emotional and mental boundaries. Working with students from difficult backgrounds can place a large emotional burden on teachers who feel a great deal of sympathy for their students. However, if teachers get too wrapped up in these issues, they will burn out and be unable to help their students. Unless they have a deep-rooted savior complex, Christians should have the understanding that God is the only one who can truly save their students in a way that matter, so by rooting themselves in his word and praying for their students, Christian teachers can help themselves make emotional boundaries with their work.

### **Storytelling**

Storytelling is not emphasized much in modern teaching methods, but it was used time and again by Jesus in the form of parables (McCoy, 2016; Van Brummelen 2002), so teachers would be wise to experiment with it. There are many benefits to using storytelling. First of all, Jesus' parables were immediately engaging to the listeners because of the familiarity of the characters and scenarios (James et al., 2015). Because his students could recognize aspects of their own life in the story, they were naturally engaged. Additionally, the parables demanded that

the listeners decide on their own interpretation and response, which made them even more engaging (James et al., 2015; Manson, 1935; Van Brummelen, 2002; Van Brummelen, 2009; Zuck, 2002). This characteristic of Jesus' parables—their demand for a response—is also an exercise in critical thinking (Sabdon et al., 2021), which Delpit (2016) argues is especially crucial in urban education today. Furthermore, a study on Luke 10:25-37 showed that using parables as a teaching method improves students' intercultural competence and stimulates active engagement (Sabdon et al., 2021). As Brandon Fleming (2022) says, “stories change people more than information ever will” because they are engaging and, in the way that Jesus used them, demand a response that requires thought and reflection. Jesus used storytelling a great deal in his teaching, and modern teachers would be wise to do the same, especially in urban settings, as they can provide an opportunity to connect instruction with students' culture, encourage critical thinking, and spark active engagement.

### **Conclusion**

There is a great deal of overlap between secular sources on urban education and Jesus' teaching practices as shown in the Bible, creating a collection of principles that should guide Christian teachers' practice in urban schools. Though the field may be challenging, Christians should not fear the difficulties but should study the Scriptures and current urban education research to build upon the firm foundation that is built by depending on God. In spite of the challenges students may face as a result of poverty, trauma, and racism, Christian educators should seek to emulate the greatest teacher and bring light into spaces where love and support are so desperately needed.

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