Teach Up for Excellence

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All students deserve equitable access to an engaging and rigorous curriculum.

Within the lifetime of a significant segment of the population, schools in the United States operated under the banner of "separate but equal" opportunity. In time, and at considerable cost, we came to grips with the reality that separate is seldom equal. But half a century later, and with integration a given, many of our students still have separate and drastically unequal learning experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Many of our schools are overwhelmingly attended by low-income and racially and linguistically diverse students, whereas nearby schools are largely attended by students from more affluent and privileged backgrounds (Kozol, 2005). Another kind of separateness exists *within* schools. It's frequently the case that students attend classes that correlate highly with learners' race and socioeconomic status, with less privileged students in lower learning groups or tracks and more privileged students in more advanced ones (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The logic behind separating students by what educators perceive to be their ability is that it enables teachers to provide students with the kind of instruction they need. Teachers can remediate students who perform at a lower level of proficiency and accelerate those who perform at a higher level. All too often, however, students in lower-level classrooms receive a level of education that ensures they will remain at the tail end of the learning spectrum. High-end students may (or may not) experience rich and challenging learning opportunities, and students in the middle too often encounter uninspired learning experiences that may not be crippling but are seldom energizing. No group comes to know, understand, and value the others. Schools in which this arrangement is the norm often display an "us versus them" attitude that either defines the school environment or dwells just below the surface of daily exchanges.

Difficult to Defend

Research finds that sorting, this 21st century version of school segregation, correlates strongly with student race and economic status and predicts and contributes to student outcomes, with students in higher-level classes typically experiencing better teachers, curriculum, and achievement levels than peers in lower-level classes (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2003). Further, when lower-performing students experience curriculum and instruction focused on meaning and understanding, they increase their skills at least as much as their higher-achieving peers do (Educational Research Service, 1992).

These findings are even more problematic when combined with our current understanding that the human brain is incredibly malleable and that individuals can nearly always outperform our expectations for them. The sorting mechanisms often used in school are not only poor predictors of success in life, but also poor measures of what a young person can accomplish, given the right context (Dweck, 2007). Virtually all students would benefit from the kind of curriculum and instruction we have often reserved for advanced learners—that is, curriculum and instruction designed to engage students, with a focus on meaning making, problem solving, logical thinking, and transfer of learning (National Research Council, 1999).

In addition, the demographic reality is that low-income students of color and English language learners will soon become the majority of students in our schools (Center for Public Education, 2007; Gray & Fleischman, 2004). Given that low-level classes are largely made up of students from these groups and that students in such classes fare poorly in terms of academic achievement, the societal cost of continuing to support sorting students is likely to be high (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Finally, Americans tend to be justly proud of the democratic ideals that represent this nation. We nourish those ideals when we invest in systems that enable each individual to achieve his or her best (Gardner, 1961). In contrast, we undercut those ideals when the systems we create contribute to a widening gap between those who have privilege and those who do not (Fullan, 2001).

Too few students—including those who excel academically—regularly have education experiences that stimulate and stretch them. *Teaching up* is one key approach that teachers can use to regularly make such experiences available to all students, regardless of their backgrounds and starting points.

Seven Principles of Teaching Up

To create classrooms that give students equal access to excellence, educators at all levels need to focus on seven interrelated principles.

1. Accept that human differences are not only normal but also desirable. Each person has something of value to contribute to the group, and the group is diminished without that contribution. Teachers who teach up create a community of learners in which everyone works together to benefit both individuals and the group. These teachers know that the power of learning is magnified when the classroom functions effectively as a microcosm of a world in which we want to live. They craft culturally and economically inclusive classrooms that take into account the power of race, culture, and economic status in how students construct meaning; and they support students in making meaning in multiple ways (Gay, 2000).

2. Develop a growth mind-set. Providing equity of access to excellence through teaching up has its roots in a teacher's mind-set about the capacity of each learner to succeed (Dweck, 2007). It requires doggedly challenging the preconception that high ability dwells largely in more privileged students. The greatest barrier to learning is often not what the student knows, but what the teacher expects of the student (Good, 1987).

A teacher with a growth mind-set creates learning experiences that reinforce the principle that effort rather than background is the greatest determinant of success, a notion that can dramatically help students who experience institutional and instructional racism. A growth mind-set also creates classrooms that persistently demonstrate to students and teachers alike that when a student works hard and intelligently, the result is consistent growth that enables people to accomplish their goals.

Teachers who teach up provide students with clear learning targets, guidelines, and feedback

as well as a safe learning environment that supports them as they take their next steps in growth, no matter what their current level of performance is. Through words, actions, and caring, the teacher conveys to students "I know you have the capacity to do what's required for success; therefore, I expect much of you. Because I expect much, I'll support your success in every way I can. I'm here to be your partner in achievement."

3. Work to understand students' cultures, interests, needs, and perspectives. People are shaped by their backgrounds, and respecting students means respecting their backgrounds— including their race and culture. Teaching any student well means striving to understand how that student approaches learning and creating an environment that is respectful of and responsive to what each student brings to the classroom.

Many of us know the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated. In classrooms that work for a wide spectrum of people, the Platinum Rule works better: Treat others as *they* want to be treated. This principle relates not only to teacher and student interactions, but also to teacher choices about curriculum and instruction.

For teachers who teach up, understanding students' learning profiles is the driving force behind instructional planning and delivery. A learning profile refers to how individuals learn most efficiently and effectively. How we learn is shaped by a variety of factors, including culture, gender, environmental preferences, and personal strengths or weaknesses. Teachers can talk with their students about preferred approaches to learning, offer varied routes to accomplishing required goals, and observe which options students select and how those options support learning (or don't). Teachers who teach up select instructional strategies and approaches in response to what they know of their students' interests and learning preferences, rather than beginning with a strategy and hoping it works. Teaching up is not about hope. It's about purposeful instructional planning that aims at ensuring high-level success for each student.

4. Create a base of rigorous learning opportunities. Teachers who teach up help students form a conceptual understanding of the disciplines, connect what they learn to their own lives, address significant problems using essential knowledge and skills, collaborate with peers, examine varied perspectives, and create authentic products for meaningful audiences. These teachers develop classrooms that are literacy-rich and that incorporate a wide range of resources that attend to student interests and support student learning.

Teachers who teach up also ensure that students develop the skills of independence, self-direction, collaboration, and production that are necessary for success. They commend excellence as a way of life and demonstrate to learners the satisfaction that comes from accepting a challenge and investing one's best effort in achieving it. They know that when tasks help students make sense of important ideas, are highly relevant to students' life experiences, and are designed at a moderate level of challenge, students are willing to do the hard work that is the hallmark of excellence. These teachers scaffold each student as he or she takes the next step toward excellence.

For example, a high school teacher began a study of *Romeo and Juliet* by having students think of instances in books, movies, TV shows, or their own lives when people's perceptions of others made it difficult to have certain friends, be in love with a particular person, or feel supported in their marriage. In this culturally diverse class, every student offered examples. They were fascinated with how often this theme played out across cultures, and they eagerly talked about what the examples had in common. As the teacher continued to guide them in relating the play to their own examples, the students remained highly engaged with a classic that might otherwise have seemed remote to them. When students make cultural and linguistic connections with content, they display more sophisticated thinking about essential learning goals (Gibbons, 2002).

5. Understand that students come to the classroom with varied points of entry into a curriculum and move through it at different rates. For intellectual risk-taking to occur, classrooms need to feel safe to students from a full range of cultural, racial, and economic backgrounds. Teachers who teach up understand that some students may feel racially and culturally isolated in their classes. Therefore, they find multiple ways for students to display their insights for the group. These teachers understand that every student needs "peacock" moments of success so classmates accept them as intellectual contributors.

For instance, a teacher might observe a student in a small-group setting who is questioning his peers about the solution to a math problem they are pursuing because it does not seem correct to him. A teacher who overhears the exchange might simply say to the group, "It seems important to me that Anthony raised the question he posed to you. His thinking brought to your attention the need to think further about your solution. The ability to ask a challenging question at the right time is a good talent to have." Elizabeth Cohen (1994) calls that *attribution of status*.

Teaching up means monitoring student growth so that when students fall behind, misunderstand, or move beyond expectations, teachers are primed to take appropriate instructional action. They guide all students in working with the "melody line" of the curriculum —the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills—while ensuring ample opportunity for individuals and small groups to work with "accompaniments"—that is, scaffolding for students who need additional work with prerequisites and extending depth for students who need to move ahead. For example, some students might need additional work with academic vocabulary, the cornerstone skills of literacy and numeracy, or self-awareness and self-direction. Other students will explore and apply understandings at more expert levels.

Teaching up also calls on teachers to use formative assessment data to guide instructional planning, scaffold the learning of struggling students, and extend learning for advanced students. In other words, teaching up requires both high expectations and high personalization.

For instance, in a middle school science study of simple machines, the teacher made certain to preteach key vocabulary to students who found academic vocabulary challenging. Students then examined and analyzed several Rube Goldberg contraptions, watched and discussed a video, and read designated sections from a text. This multimodal approach ensured that everyone had a solid baseline of experience with concepts they would then explore.

Following a formative assessment on the topic, students worked on one of two tasks. Students who needed additional reinforcement of how simple machines worked went on a guided tour of the school and speculated which simple machines were involved in mechanisms they came across in their tour, such as an elevator. Later, they used print and web sources to confirm or revise their projections. Students who had already demonstrated solid mastery of the topic worked in teams to identify a problem at school or in their lives that three or more simple machines working together could solve; they also used web and text sources to confirm or revise their projections.

6. Create flexible classroom routines and procedures that attend to learner needs. Teachers who teach up realize that only classrooms that operate flexibly enough to make room for a range of student needs can effectively address the differences that are inevitable in any group of learners. They see that such flexibility is also a prerequisite for complex student thinking and student application of content (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, LePage, & Hammerness, 2007). Teachers who teach up carefully select times when the class works as a whole, when students work independently, and when students work in groups. They teach their students when and how to help one another as well as how to guide their own work effectively. This

kind of flexibility is commonly found in kindergarten classrooms—a strong indication that it's within reach of all grade levels.

An elementary math teacher in one such classroom regularly used formative assessment to chart students' progress. On the basis of what she learned, she built into her instructional plans opportunities for small-group instruction in which she could teach in new ways concepts that some students found difficult, extend the thinking of students who had mastered the concepts, and help students connect what they were learning to various interest areas. Occasionally, she modified the daily schedule so she could work with a portion of the class more intensively. In those instances, some students might work on writing assignments or with longer-term projects in the morning while the teacher met with a given group on a math topic and guided their work. In the afternoon, students would reverse assignments so that she could work with the morning's writers on math. She found that working with the small groups at key times in the learning cycle significantly increased the achievement of virtually all the students in the class.

In the same vein, a team of high school teachers took turns hosting a study room after school on Monday through Thursday. They expected students who hadn't completed their homework to attend. They also invited students who were having difficulty with course requirements and encouraged all students to come if they wanted additional support. Many students did. The sessions, which were less formal than class, also promoted sound relationships between the teachers and their students and among the students themselves.

7. Be an analytical practitioner. Teachers who teach up consistently reflect on classroom procedures, practices, and pedagogies for evidence that they are working for each student—and modify them when they're not. They are the students of their students. They are vigilant about noticing when students "do right," and they provide positive descriptive feedback so students can successfully recall or replicate the skill, knowledge, or behaviors in question. They empower students to teach them, as teachers, what makes students most successful. They share with students their aspirations for student success. They talk with students about what is and isn't working in the classroom, and they enlist students' partnership in crafting a classroom that maximizes the growth of each individual and of the group as a whole.

Consider a group of primary teachers who conducted individual assessments of kindergartners' understanding of symmetrical and asymmetrical figures and then discussed what they observed. They realized that vocabulary played a large role in the success of students who mastered the concept. As a result, they were better positioned to support the growth of students who were initially less successful by adding vocabulary practice to math instruction.

Or, consider a middle school teacher who talked often with his students about his confidence that they were engineers of their own success. To reinforce that point, he carefully observed students during whole-class, small-group, and independent work. He'd make comments privately to students as he moved among them or as he stood at the door when they entered or left the room: "Josh, you provided leadership today when your group got off task. I wanted you to know it made a difference." "Ariela, you stuck with the work today when it was tough. Good job!" "Logan, are you still on track to bring in a draft of your paper tomorrow so you'll have a chance to polish it before it's due next week?"

A Challenge Worth Taking

In her provocative book, *Wounded by School*, Kirsten Olson (2009) concludes that perhaps the deepest wounds schools inflict on students are wounds of underestimation. We underestimate students when they come to us with skills and experiences that differ from the ones we expected and we conclude they're incapable of complex work. We underestimate students

when they fall short of expectations because they don't understand the school game and we determine that they lack motivation. We underestimate them when we allow them to shrink silently into the background of the action in the classroom. We underestimate them, too, when we assume they're doing well in school because they earn high grades, and we praise them for reaching a performance level that required no risk or struggle.

Classrooms that teach up function from the premise that student potential is like an iceberg—most of it is obscured from view—and that high trust, high expectations, and a high-support environment will reveal in time what's hidden.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1965) reminded us that human beings are

> caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

That truth has never been more evident than it is today. Schools have the still-untapped possibility of helping all kinds of learners become what they ought to be by developing the skill—and will—to proliferate classrooms in which equal access to excellence is a reality for all learners.

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