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Another Inconvenient Truth: Race and Ethnicity Matter

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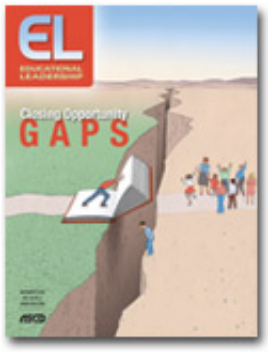

Race and ethnicity affect how students respond to instruction and their opportunities to learn.

Given the shameful differences in the academic outcomes and graduation rates of students of color compared to many Asian and white students, one would expect policies and practices related to students' race and ethnicity to be high on the reform agenda. Of course, there is widespread discussion of the "minority achievement gap," but solutions on the public agenda are invariably color-blind. It is widely assumed that what works for white and Asian American students will work for students of color—if only we did it more often.

We need, however, to recognize an inconvenient truth—that when it comes to maximizing learning opportunities and outcomes for students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, race and ethnicity matter. Race and ethnicity influence teaching and learning in two important ways: They affect how students respond to instruction and curriculum, and they influence teachers' assumptions about how students learn and how much students are capable of learning.

Being more conscious of race and ethnicity is not discriminatory; it's realistic. Research on race- and ethnicity-related dispositions suggests that almost all of us, regardless of our skin color, are biased against, or at least relatively uncomfortable with, people whose race and ethnicity are different from our own (Greenwald, Pohlman, Uhlman, & Banaji, 2007). Moreover, people of different races and ethnicities see the incidence of discrimination and the availability of educational and economic opportunity differently (McIntosh, 1988; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter, 1994).

Clarifying Terms

We use the expression *race- and ethnicity-responsive* rather than more comfortable terms like *diversity* or *cultural responsiveness* to draw attention to the importance of addressing issues related to skin color in improving students' learning opportunities. Also, when we focus on race alone, we sometimes see only black and white, neglecting the wide range of ethnicities in our schools and society.

Effective implementation of race- and ethnicity-responsive approaches to school improvement that benefit all students requires that educators take three steps.

Step 1: Understand how race affects teaching and learning.

Commitment to race- and ethnicity-conscious strategies for school improvement begins by understanding the influence of race and ethnicity on behavior and on attitudes about racial and ethnic differences.

There are three important lessons in this regard. First, differences among people to whom we assign racial and ethnic identities have no biological bases and are, instead, the product of socially constructed beliefs. When these beliefs disadvantage one group more than another, we can change them through social action. For example, one study found that teachers who became active in antiracist projects broadened their understanding and were able to use their new skills in creating affirming learning environments for all their students (Donaldson, 2001).

Second, most of us are not fully aware of our dispositions toward people of races and ethnicities different from our own (Ayres, 2001). Thus, we do not understand how others see our behavior or the extent to which latent beliefs shape our actions. Learning how to question our beliefs is essential.

Finally, despite progress in race relations, many people of color see their opportunities as limited and fear they will experience discrimination. Given years of neglect and discrimination in public education, these perceptions are neither surprising nor unwarranted. Nevertheless, communities of color have, in general, great faith that education is their best hope for improving their children's life chances.

Examining Some Common Nonproductive Beliefs

This first step involves looking at some common beliefs about teaching and learning that often undermine students' opportunities to learn but which we sustain because they seem sensible and are, in many cases, well-meaning.

- *To be fair to all students, one should be color-blind and ignore racial differences.* To acknowledge that focusing on students' race or ethnicity affects how one should teach is to acknowledge that racial and ethnic discrimination has been, and continues to be, a significant influence on what and how students learn. This is not a comforting thought in a nation whose public stance is one of equity and fairness for all. Indeed, it is quite common to hear educators say that they are color-blind, as though this were a positive value. Although color-blindness is a good thing when it means that people do not discriminate on the basis of race, it can have negative consequences when educators refuse to see their students' racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. Instead, teachers need to respect and build on differences to foster student learning.
- *One can build student self-esteem by reducing academic rigor.* This particularly harmful belief leads to lowered expectations and, inevitably, to lower academic outcomes. Compelling evidence shows that when teachers hold high expectations for students who have been marginalized by their schooling experiences, student learning is enhanced, *as long as high expectations are linked to greater resources and support* (Ferguson, 2004). Without appropriate support in place, the often-stated "all students can learn" is an empty slogan.
- *Teaching should be adapted to students' learning styles.* A simplistic understanding of learning styles often leads to stereotypes about students from particular backgrounds, as though all students from a shared background learn in exactly the same way. Not only do students learn in different ways, but also students of color are often more dependent on school for learning *how* to learn than are more economically advantaged students who may have had more varied learning opportunities. Although differentiating instruction is important, ultimately teachers' misuse of the term *learning styles* may limit the cognitive development of students from disadvantaged groups.
- *Students must have good basic skills before teachers can engage them in more complex learning activities.* This belief belies the reality that even the youngest students can learn complex material while at the same time developing basic skills. For example, in her thought-provoking book about her work with 1st and 2nd graders from culturally diverse backgrounds, Mary Cowhey (2006) shows that while the students were learning to read, write, add, and subtract, they were also having conversations about philosophy, learning about the civil rights movement, and even engaging in a successful voter registration drive—activities that not only are cognitively demanding but that also make the curriculum more pluralistic and engaging.

Step 2: Use race- and ethnicity-responsive teaching practices.

Despite the research-based and commonsense proposition that the key to effective schools is effective teaching—particularly in racially and ethnically diverse schools—public policy focuses more on teacher qualifications than on teaching quality. Efforts to improve teaching are often generic ("good teaching is good teaching") and typically are based on the idea that what works for one student works for another. A concomitant belief is that struggling students just need more of the same. Unfortunately, most measures of good teaching do not deal explicitly with culturally relevant pedagogy, in spite of the fact that research has documented that this approach to teaching can be effective with all students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Murphy & Alexander, 2006).

Numerous researchers have investigated the kind of teaching that makes a difference, particularly for students whose culture, race, and language differ from the majority (Garcia, 1999; Gay, 2010; Haberman, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Michie, 2009; Nieto, 2003). The following practices illustrate the interdependence of good instructional practice and of caring and trustful relationships among students and teachers:

- Respecting and being interested in students' experiences and cultural backgrounds.
- Supporting higher-order learning (for example, engaging students in complex problem solving while developing basic skills).
- Building on students' prior knowledge, values, and experiences.
- Avoiding stereotyping of students.
- Using ability grouping flexibly and sparingly.
- Adapting instruction to students' semantics, accents, dialects, and language ability.
- Applying rules relating to behavior fairly and sensitively.
- Facilitating learning of challenging material by knowing how to deal with *stereotype threat*, that is, some students' beliefs that cultural myths about racial differences in abilities may be valid.
- Engaging families directly in their children's learning.

Step 3: Promote supportive school conditions.

Looking at School Culture

School structures, processes, and cultures affect student dispositions and their opportunities to learn. Under the best of situations, these racially and ethnically responsive conditions are aligned and reinforcing. The source of this coherence is a belief shared by teachers, administrators, and school staff that they have both the ability and the responsibility to significantly influence student learning, regardless of students' backgrounds.

We call such coherent sets of understandings and commitments *race- and ethnicity-responsive school cultures*. School practices in such cultures include targeted and flexible grouping for instruction; access to and support for learning high-level content (such as advanced placement courses); inclusive and affirming curriculums; and fair disciplinary rules and processes.

In schools with race- and ethnicity-responsive school cultures, teachers and administrators demonstrate respect and affirmation for their students' identities and experiences and make it clear that *drive*, or what

Jaime Escalante called *ganas*—the desire and motivation to succeed—can overcome even brutal structural inequalities. Numerous studies have found this to be the case. For example, in a three-year investigation of academic achievement among Mexican American students in a Texas high school, Valenzuela (1999) located the problem of student underachievement not in students' identities or in family culture or poverty, but rather in uncaring school-based relationships and ineffective organizational structures.

Seeing Assets, Not Deficits

All students bring cultural values and experiences to their education, yet schools frequently disregard them, particularly teachers who are unfamiliar with their students' cultures. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) show teachers how to investigate, document, and use students' *funds of knowledge*—their experiences, skills, and competencies—through home visits and interviews with families. Teachers have found that families' competencies range from medicinal know-how to skills in arts and crafts to literary expertise to entrepreneurial knowledge, yet these funds of knowledge are frequently overlooked simply because of families' social class, ethnicity, or race.

A belief in students' identities also includes knowing something about their cultural and historic experiences. Working with a group of Latino and African American incarcerated young men, artist-educators Patty Bode and Derek Fenner developed a study of public murals and street art in the United States. They initiated the unit with Aaron Douglas's Harlem Renaissance era murals. Making authentic cultural connections to the artists and their work supported the young men's academic achievement; they expressed their learning in vibrant paintings, collages, and documentaries (Bode & Fenner, 2010).

But there is a danger in over-generalizing about cultural effects. What is needed instead is knowledge and awareness of the history and valued practices of students and their communities (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, it makes sense for teachers to learn about the students in their classrooms as well as about their families, prior experiences, cultural practices, and values.

Honoring Youth Culture

Many young people, regardless of their ethnicity or race, relate to today's youth culture; affirming this part of their identity is also a way of demonstrating a belief in students' identities.

For instance, in their research with high school students, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) used students' involvement with hip-hop culture to transform their curriculum and pedagogy and successfully engage students in literacy learning. At the same time, these researcher/ practitioners have taught urban high school students such texts as *Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet*, and the *Odyssey* because they believe that all students should engage with demanding material whether it is based on urban and popular culture or on canonical texts that can—and indeed must—be made relevant and exciting for students.

Engaging Students in Race- and Ethnicity-Related Inquiry

Teachers and schools can also show respect for students by involving them in classroom-based research. Using participatory action research as a pedagogical approach, researcher Jason Irizarry (in press) and a group of high school students with whom he was working conducted a two-year ethnographic study examining the policies and practices that affected their education experiences. Irizarry and his students created a curriculum that focused on learning about Latinos' historic struggle for equal education and on developing the skills needed to conduct research relating to Latinos' education experiences and academic outcomes.

Demonstrating skills that schools purport to be important—such as the ability to analyze information and use data to construct written and oral persuasive arguments—students presented the findings of their

research as well as recommendations to inform school reform efforts at various conferences and professional meetings. Recommendations to teachers included holding students to high standards and providing supports for students to meet them, honoring students' cultural and linguistic diversity, and building mutually edifying relationships with students and families. Most notable, Irizarry and his students share this experience in *The Latinization of U.S. Schools* (in press), a book they wrote to inform the work of educators and policymakers.

Developing a Responsive School Culture

Changing a culture requires changing more than just attitudes and beliefs—it requires changing behaviors. Schools can accomplish this by focusing on the following practices.

Targeted Professional Development

People seldom believe in practices they don't know how to implement. It follows that urging teachers to have high expectations for themselves and students, without enhancing their expertise, is not only inadequate but may be counterproductive (Ferguson, 2004).

School-based professional learning communities can improve teaching and learning and lead to a fundamental change in teachers' work. To enhance their learning, teachers can, for example, shadow students during the day and do collaborative inquiry (Zemelman & Ross, 2009). By shadowing students, teachers can learn which content and activities most motivate students as well as how and with whom students prefer to learn. As a result, teachers could investigate what it would mean to create culturally responsive learning environments for particular students. Administrators could support teacher collaborative inquiry by providing needed resources, such as books and other materials, time before or after school, or simply moral support for teachers' work.

Surfacing Issues Related to Race and Ethnicity

When schools examine data on student achievement, they invariably look at differences among racial groups—although they may not look beyond superficial categories of racial difference, such as Asian American or Latino. But, ironically, proposals for improvement seldom suggest that student difficulties could be related to race or ethnicity. Nevertheless, instruction that is unresponsive to such differences and to ethnicity-related tensions in schools and classrooms may partially explain low achievement.

Most schools are not characterized by open discussions of issues related to race and ethnicity. Educators may believe that focusing on race and ethnicity could be divisive and that strategies to enhance the achievement of students of color will undermine other students' learning opportunities. Yet such discussions are essential to a race- and ethnicity-responsive school culture.

Professional learning communities can provide the structure, shared respect, and trust needed for collaboratively addressing these issues. Although many teachers and administrators may be reluctant to focus on the thorny issues of racism and privilege, most students are eager to begin the conversation. One helpful resource for surfacing these issues in the classroom is Mica Pollock's *Everyday Antiracism* (New Press, 2008), which includes insightful essays by more than 60 researchers who each propose a single action that educators can take to counteract racism in schools and society. These include such actions as challenging cultural messages about who can and cannot do science and using photography to wrestle with questions of racial identity.

Witnessing Effective Practice

Seeing is believing. Teachers need opportunities to witness diversity-responsive practices. By closely and openly examining evidence on student performance, schools can identify teachers who are more effective

than others with students of diverse backgrounds. In some cases, teachers will be more effective with students of one race than with students of another. School districts can identify people from whom and places in which others can learn, and they should provide time and resources to do so.

Engaging with Families

The families of students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds often feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in schools and can be reluctant to engage in the kinds of activities that schools sanction. As a result, teachers and other educators may conclude that these families do not value education. In fact, in general, African American, Latino, American Indian, and Pacific Island families have a great deal of respect for education and view it as the best way out of poverty and hopelessness (see Bouffard, Bridglall, Gordon, & Weiss, 2009).

Family involvement strategies that are responsive to racial and ethnic diversity reject the idea that language or cultural differences are insurmountable barriers. They encourage educators to

- Learn about their students' families by communicating with them consistently and respectfully.
- Learn about the communities in which they teach by becoming familiar with the community resources.
- Learn to speak at least one of the native languages of the students they teach.
- Learn how to engage families in their children's education in ways that enrich the curriculum, family support for learning, and teachers' knowledge of students.
- Listen to what the families need and want for their children (Hildalgo, Sui, & Epstein, 2004).

Good for All

Often, schools marginalize special efforts to meet the needs of students of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, treating them as actions that take time away from the central tasks of improving academic achievement.

But there is no zero-sum game here. Indeed, it is ironic that policies and practices that are particularly responsive to the needs of students of color are likely to be the best things we could do to enhance the learning of all students.

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Authors' note: The concerns addressed in this article are the focus of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Diverse Students Initiative. Extensive resources for improving the learning opportunities of students of color can be found on the initiative's website at **www.tolerance.org/tdsi**. Resources include articles, learning activities, interactive cases, interviews, and examples of promising practices.

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