



THE EQUITABLE CLASSROOM

TODAY'S DIVERSE STUDENT BODY NEEDS CULTURALLY PROFICIENT TEACHERS

BY JON SAPHIER

We are sliding backward. Our country's schools are, in some cases, as segregated now as they were when Earl Warren's Supreme Court handed down the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision 63 years ago.

In fact, according to new federal data, poor black and Hispanic children are becoming more and

more isolated from their white affluent peers in our public schools. The data show that the number of high-poverty schools serving students of color has doubled in recent years. And since the 1990s, progress narrowing the achievement gap has plateaued nationwide and deteriorated markedly in urban schools (Reardon, 2013).

How is that possible when schools have been instituting

sweeping changes — some of them federally mandated — for decades? No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Common Core, Every Student Succeeds Act — I could go on and on listing the reforms and regulations tried out on our nation's students in our time.

But hallmark reforms of the 1990s and 2000s still have not budged student achievement significantly because we have

continuously and conspicuously left off the third leg of the stool in school reform: a carefully crafted personnel pipeline for constant, career-long learning about high-expertise teaching that recognizes the size and complexity of our knowledge base.

HIGH-EXPERTISE TEACHING

There are many outstanding professional teachers at work in our schools, including those serving our most economically disadvantaged children. They had to acquire their expertise over many years and usually alone through their own initiative and perseverance. But there are simply not enough of them.

The stark fact is that there are large numbers of underprepared teachers. And blaming them for skills they haven't had access to is unfair. There is a massive gap between the knowledge and skills new teachers bring to the classroom and the knowledge and skills they should and could have with proper training and continuous development. The fundamentals of high-expertise teaching have not been provided to or expected of large portions of our teacher corps.

In many ways, this is a policy problem. The officials we entrust with creating standards and policies to assure quality schools don't focus on high-expertise teaching and learning for all students. They don't acknowledge the significance and complexity of high-expertise teaching.

But it is also a school system and school building problem. In too many cases, the culture in the school district that comes from the central office and the school's front office has not been established to foster an expectation — and practical implementation — of continuous professional learning.

For those who believe that teaching is intellectually complex, difficult, and demanding and that, like any other true profession, its knowledge is based on repertoires and matching, then the doors of professional dialogue open wide.

The need to learn with colleagues in deep collaboration by examining situation-specific questions comes to the fore, as does the need to reach out for new strategies and ways of thinking in the established knowledge base about teaching and learning (Bellon, Bellon, & Blank, 1991; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Hattie, 2009; Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2018).

PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Think about why it is often so difficult for teachers to share their good ideas and successful practices openly at faculty meetings and other forums. Teachers who believe in the effectiveness paradigm assume there are right and wrong ways of doing things — effective and ineffective (or at least less effective).

Suppose you share a successful practice that is different from what I do. The tacit inference, based on my effectiveness belief system, is that

only one of us is right. You are either showing me up or trying to tell me how to do it right.

But if a school culture has internalized the belief in the complexity of teaching and the view of professional knowledge held as “repertoire and matching,” then I can view your successful practice as an interesting alternative for my consideration, not a prescription for how to do it instead. Here's why.

The effectiveness paradigm for pedagogical knowledge implies there are effective ways of accomplishing things. “Best practices” is another phrase that suggests this one-best-way. But true professional knowledge in any field acknowledges that, while there are constant tasks to accomplish (in teaching, e.g., to check for understanding, make expectations clear, maximize student engagement), there are many ways to accomplish them — a repertoire of ways, in fact. Skillful practice means choosing well from one's repertoire to match the student, the situation, or the curriculum.

That view of professional knowledge not only accepts the legitimacy of different ways of doing things, but also encourages debate and professional problem solving. Thus one belief essential to fruitful teacher learning and a strong professional community is about the nature of professional knowledge itself. It is based on repertoires and matching, not effective behaviors.

Fully professional teachers must

participate actively with their colleagues to shape the school as a learning environment for adults as well as for children. They must learn how to play a role in strengthening the institution and see themselves as players beyond the classroom, responsible for the system of the school.

For this to happen, collegiality and interdependence need to be built into the fabric of their working relationships. Interdependence requires that they function as both leaders and team players and that they support a balance of autonomy and cohesion in curriculum and teaching practices.

Fully professional teachers are leaders who take the initiative to influence colleagues toward ideas they value and move the school toward practices they believe will strengthen everyone. They are team players, collaborating with colleagues to improve the school and help individual students, and they are willing to give up some autonomy for actions implied by common visions and agreements.

The connection between teacher learning and this belief in interdependence and collegiality is that only teachers who have *regular interaction with their colleagues through joint work* can experience the benefit of their knowledge and the synergy of creating new knowledge with others. This is where the principal comes in.

Structuring interdependence means the charter of common planning time teams needs to attend to that. This important idea becomes even more important when it comes to a core component of successful teaching and learning in schools: cultural proficiency.

CULTURAL PROFICIENCY

Today, more than half of the children in American schools are children of color. Their families have come from Central and South America, Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa,

the Middle East, and the Caribbean. Like all children in all schools, they need to feel known and valued to have their energy available for learning (Hammond, 2015).

Such changing demographics have made a “should” into a “must” for American teachers. Cultural proficiency produces behaviors that acknowledge and value the culture of those different from oneself. It develops out of being curious and wanting to learn about other people and their cultures.

We are culturally improficient when we lack any understanding of people whose cultural backgrounds and traditions are not the same as our own. Cultural improficiency in the classroom leaves students who are culturally and linguistically diverse feeling misunderstood and excluded.

When a teacher is culturally proficient, all students feel that they have a place in the classroom because cultural difference is acknowledged and recognized as having value. This shows up in the artifacts of the class and the examples used in lessons. Cultural diversity is viewed as enriching the classroom experience for everyone.

As teachers of all children, each of us has an obligation to learn about the different cultures of our students and find ways to make their cultures appear in validating ways in our curricula and instructional examples. That is the starting point for cultural proficiency, and cultural proficiency is a new skill set that all American teachers must have to provide every student with the best learning environment.

How do school systems create a culture where these kinds of skills are expected, expertly taught, and honed over time?

That question has stumped many a school system — particularly because the very topic of race often brings discussions to a halt. In fact, too many times, the mention of culture or race

in schools immediately gets categorized — mistakenly — as an accusatory conversation about racism instead of an opportunity for learning about our students.

RACISM

Racism is certainly a first cousin of cultural blindness and cultural improficiency, but it is profoundly different. Cultural improficiency arises from lack of interest, awareness, and respect for other cultures. It assumes the dominant white culture is just “normal.” But racism comes from an ancient tradition of dominance and control.

Racism *is* something to tackle, to be sure. Racism is a social construct that operates as a system of oppression based on race. It operates everywhere, even inside the best-intentioned of educators.

Racism is built on stereotypes and expressed in various forms of oppression. It shows up as internalized racism in individuals belonging to marginalized groups, in micro-aggressions committed by unaware individuals, and in the implementation of school procedures for student placement into special education, tracking, and unequal application of discipline. Facing all this invites difficult conversations that need to take place in schools across the country.

The presumed inferiority of nonwhite racial groups also shows up in a range of places throughout our history. We can see this bias systemically in unequal distribution of governmental resources to schools. We see this bias compounded by views of intelligence as innate and fixed and consequently differential teacher behavior toward students believed to be less academically able.

One consequence of our history of racism is what Claude Steele identified 25 years ago as “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat induces an

unconscious loss of edge in performance based on racial cues. His 2010 book, *Whistling Vivaldi*, summarizes his research on this topic in engaging and nonjudgmental prose. I recommend it to anyone who wants to broaden understanding of this very important and challenging topic.

As teachers, we can deepen our understanding of racism by studying the manifestations of white privilege and racism from the beginning, in the history of our country and other countries. It is, in fact, an often unexamined history and one whose consequences for people of color can be hard for white Americans to comprehend completely without a conscious effort to learn and talk openly about it.

The quest for racial awareness and antiracist teaching should propel us to push back on negative stereotypes, correct distortions, and remedy omissions in our behavior and curriculum that stem from racism. Most powerfully, it should inspire us to ensure that if some students of color doubt themselves, it is our job to make them believe they can grow their ability and teach them how to act effectively from that belief. In the process, we will have to work hard to convince ourselves, since we are all, without exception, tainted by traces of racism and belief in the bell curve of ability. But we cannot, and should not have to, do this alone.

VULNERABLE AND STRONG AT THE SAME TIME

Schools and school systems ought to create a culture wherein this process of exploring one's own biases and assumptions — and working unflinchingly toward challenging them for the good of our students — is baked in, like flour in a cake.

I contend that it is crucial that teachers and school communities

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have important and often difficult conversations about cultural diversity and race. These ongoing conversations can and should lead to action that creates a more inclusive and productive school experience for everyone. Although this can be difficult work, the rewards are well-documented.

As teachers of all children, committed to equality of opportunity and raising capable and involved citizens, we must figure out how to make students from diverse cultural backgrounds believe that we, as individual teachers, and we, as a school community, know and value their cultures. This is where school systems and building administrators come in.

Districtwide professional development is important for showing commitments and creating common language and common understandings about the words we use when discussing cultural proficiency. But it is individual buildings and the teams within them that host conversations where views are shared honestly and opinions are challenged and shaped. The adult professional culture either invites these conversations and makes it safe to have them, or it walls them out.

Building such a culture comes from the top. And in my 50 years of being inside school organizations, I have consistently seen that leaders who build such cultures are vulnerable and strong at the same time. They are strong in that race and cultural proficiency must be topics we all learn about from the inside out. They are strong in that this learning has implications that must influence our teaching practices concretely. They are vulnerable in that

they acknowledge their own feelings of risk in taking this on, uncertainty about the best ways to proceed, and immersion in side-by-side learning with staff members.

Developing a full-fledged profession for educators based on high-expertise teaching is the missing link in our education reform movements. And our concept of high-expertise teaching must include cultural proficiency and antiracist teaching if education is to play the central role that is meant for it in our democracy — to ensure a fair chance at a good life for every child.

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