Why has the achievement gap between the haves and the have-nots proven so persistent? Ask commentators on one side of the aisle and it’s about poverty, social injustice, and inadequate resources in minority schools. Ask on the other side of the aisle, and it’s about underperforming teachers, lack of accountability, and wagon-circling unions.

How much truth these accounts hold remains in dispute, but a third set of factors must be considered: educators’ beliefs about how learning works and how teaching should proceed.

CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Exploring these beliefs means looking at the culture in which education practices are situated — an enterprise known as cultural psychology. From this perspective, cultures provide cognitive tools with which people make sense of the world. For example, most Americans conceptualize large distances using the mile — a cultural product — but are at a loss when pressed to use the kilometer for the same job.

Some cultural tools deal with human behavior and thought. Jerome Bruner uses the term “folk psychology” to describe beliefs that help members of a culture make sense of how people tick. For example, swaggering after a sports triumph is considered appropriate boisterousness in America, but evidence of mental illness in Japan.

A culture’s folk psychology goes a long way to explain what happens in its classrooms, since all education practices are predicated on some kind of understanding of how the mind works and how best to teach. Educators are socialized into the culture’s beliefs about learning and teaching, which provide the basis for their

Unless teachers hold high expectations for all students, achievement gaps will continue to occur.

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Critical thinking is an essential life skill and a key element in rigorous curriculum.

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debate and in need of a simpler regimen of low-critical thinking activities, such as fill-in-the-blank worksheets.

Evidence of this pattern continues to mount. In survey research by Raudenbush and colleagues, teachers were significantly more likely to focus on high-critical thinking activities in upper-track classes (1993). Zohar and colleagues found that almost half the teachers they interviewed judged high-critical thinking activities to be inappropriate for low-achieving students (2001). And Torff and colleagues report a series of survey studies in which even teachers who work in minority schools were found to support a curriculum offering disadvantaged students reduced access to high-critical thinking activities (Torff, 2005, 2006, 2008; Torff & Warburton, 2005; Warburton & Torff, 2005).

A rigor gap emerges in which disadvantaged students are judged to require less rigorous curriculum than that afforded their more privileged peers. A self-fulfilling prophecy may result: The disadvantaged receive watered-down lessons that limit students’ academic growth, resulting in additional impoverished disadvantage receive challenging lessons that boost students’ academic performance, leading to additional rigorous curriculum down the road (Zohar, Degani, 2001). It’s easy to see how this rigor gap could fan the flames of the achievement gap.

TOO MUCH RIGOR?

It could be argued that disadvantaged students learn best when given a regimen emphasizing low-critical thinking activities, since such a regimen might be matched to their academic needs. In other words, perhaps disadvantaged students really can’t cope with high-critical thinking activities, and low-critical thinking ones are more appropriate.

But there is evidence to refute this claim. Zohar and Dori report that disadvantaged students benefited as much as advantaged students when immersed in a high-critical thinking learning environment (2003). Pogrow has published similar results (1990, 1994). And Torff found that expert teachers did not evince beliefs consistent with the rigor gap, while randomly selected teachers did (2006). Research shows that disadvantaged students could handle the rigorous curriculum if given the chance.

BELIEFS RESIST CHANGE

The verdict is in: Folk beliefs in our culture support less rigorous curriculum for disadvantaged students, and initiatives to encourage educators to rethink these beliefs are in order. But that’s not so easily accomplished. There’s ample evidence that all kinds of beliefs are resistant to change (Carey, 1985; Gardner, 1989; Schwitzgebel, 1999).
Beliefs that lead to the rigor gap are no exception (Torff, 2005). Prospective teachers’ lack of support for high-critical-thinking activities for disadvantaged students remained unchanged during preservice teacher education — despite considerable efforts of teacher educators to focus on social justice and multicultural education. Moreover, the combination of teaching experience and professional development made no appreciable difference. Once the inservice years begin, teachers’ beliefs tend to remain steadfast no matter what kinds of experiences they have, how long they have been teaching, or how much inservice education they attain.

As with other elements in folk psychology, beliefs about learning and teaching seem to be etched in stone and difficult to rewrite. Teacher education initiatives that promote belief change face an uphill battle, but a worthy one.

What to do about it? How can preservice and inservice education be crafted to encourage teachers and administrators to rethink their beliefs about what disadvantaged students can handle? Research can help here, too (Torff & Sessions, 2006). To begin, not all of the factors that might be expected to induce teachers to water it down actually do so. For example, it has been suggested that classroom management challenges are involved (Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1993), but the evidence indicates otherwise (Torff & Sessions, 2006).

There are, however, six factors that teachers do take into consideration when opting for less rigorous curriculum for disadvantaged students. In order of decreasing effect, these factors include students’ level of prior knowledge, time constraints, influence of parents, influence of colleagues, students’ level of motivation, and students’ level of academic ability. These are the triggers of the rigor gap. In preservice and inservice education, teachers and administrators might well be asked how these factors influence their judgments about teaching disadvantaged students.

Four sets of teacher-education activities seem helpful in this regard. The first entails conversations, journals, and assignments designed to encourage reflection on existing beliefs — since simply telling people what to believe is seldom effective over the long term (Gardner, 1989; Richardson & Placier, 2002). The second requires detailed analysis of case studies of curricula in which disadvantaged students are denied access to rigorous curricula. The third involves evaluation of models of best practice wherein challenging activities are directed appropriately to disadvantaged students. Finally, curriculum-writing projects can be explicitly designed to provide challenging curriculum for all student populations.

Taking aim at the beliefs underlying the rigor gap, these strategies have potential to help close the achievement gap. Of course, poverty and social injustice are problematic, as are underperforming teachers and lack of accountability. But at least part of the problem lies elsewhere: in our culture’s well-intended but off-target beliefs about appropriate curriculum for disadvantaged students.

References


