The Power of High Expectations: Closing the Gap in Your Classroom

Chapter Two

I. High Expectations: A Teacher's Primary Role in Closing the Achievement Gap
II. But What Do "High Expectations" Actually Look Like?
III. The Power of High Expectations—Students' Perspective
IV. Conclusion: High Expectations for You and Your Students

In the previous chapter, we surveyed some of the many reported causes of the achievement gap. Racism, inequitable funding, poverty, lack of political power, school structures, family structures, group culture—all are often blamed for the fact that your students in your classroom are academically behind where they should be.

Taken all at once and in such a grand scope, these many causes can be overwhelming. And yet, as thousands of corps members and millions of dedicated teachers before you have proven, it is well within your power to overcome one of the most potent and insidious factors perpetuating the achievement gap in this country—the pattern of low expectations that has been placed on our students *because* of their race and class. That is, our students are bombarded with messages and images—from grand but intangible forces like the media and from more familiar and trusted entities such as individual teachers or family members—that reinforce the idea that students in the communities where we are working cannot achieve at the same level as students in other schools and communities. Moreover, our students have often internalized these messages so that they, in essence, have low expectations of themselves. As teachers of students who are living under the burden of these lowered expectations, we have a special responsibility to fight such lowered expectations in ourselves and in others.

Additional Readings 🕮
Along with this chapter, please read the following selections found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- "Racism, Discrimination, and Expectations of Students' Achievement" from *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*
- "Equity Within Reach: Insights from the Front Lines of America's Achievement Gap," results of a survey of Teach For America corps members

I. High Expectations: A Teacher's Primary Role in Closing the Achievement Gap

In your lifetime and career, no matter what direction it takes, we hope that you will work to combat some of those big, systemic factors that are holding back minority and low-income students in this country. During your initial two-year commitment to your students, however, you may find it challenging enough to focus on all of the issues in your classroom, and tackling some of those broader forces may seem out of reach.

The good news is that you *can* tackle and overcome the achievement gap in your classroom for your students. A key to that success will be establishing and maintaining high expectations of your students.

The Power of High Expectations

In the *Teaching As Leadership* book, you are introduced to six principles that inevitably characterize the approach of teachers who lead their children to significant academic gains. We suggest that by modeling your own practice on those four principles, you too will essentially "close the achievement gap" for your students in your classroom. As you read that book, you undoubtedly noticed the central importance of high expectations.

> *Taking on every probable challenge and dilemma that comes with the task of being a teacher is not necessarily proactive or necessary, rather providing ALL your students with the concrete real-life experiences and high expectations for learning are the essential keys for creating an environment where anything is possible.*
>
> **Reid Whitaker, Houston '02**
> **Director, Online K-12 Curriculum Initatives**

Viewed through the lens of high expectations, successful teachers in low-income communities are those who:

(1) **Establish an ambitious academic goal for what their students' will accomplish that some may believe to be unreasonable.** In establishing those goals, teachers must look beyond traditional expectations of their students and instead benchmark their students' learning against the achievement of students in the most successful classrooms in the most successful schools in the country. Given your students' potential to achieve, why should they be deprived of learning at the rate and level of students in affluent communities?

(2) **Invest students in achieving the ambitious academic goal.** This investment process involves convincing your students that those big goals are possible. As discussed below, in doing so you harness the amazing power of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" of high expectations—students work harder and achieve more, simply because they *believe* they can and are *expected* to.

(3) **Work purposefully and relentlessly to achieve their goal overcoming all obstacles**. As an effective teacher, you will assume full responsibility for moving your students forward to meet their ambitious academic goals. Given the many unique obstacles your students may face, whether because of inequitable school resources or the challenges of poverty, determination to ensure students fulfill their true potential requires an unusual level of purposefulness and determination.

(4) **Deliberately and continually improve performance over time through a constant process of self-evaluation and learning.** As part of teachers' ongoing reflection process, they must work hard to combat the constant negative influences of messages of lowered expectations that eat away at their and their students' visions of academic achievement.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Low Expectations—Redux

So, a central tenet of this focus on high expectations is the idea that low, or high, expectations are a self-fulfilling prophecy. While this concept is discussed in *Teaching As Leadership*, the central relevance of this concept to our discussion of the causes of the achievement gap (and the sheer importance of this research) makes it worth revisiting here.

The dramatic positive and negative impacts of expectations are well established by education research. As education researcher and sociologist Sonia Nieto (whose work you will read along with this chapter) explains:

The term *self-fulfilling prophecy*, coined by Merton in 1948, means that students perform in ways in which teachers expect. Their performance is based on subtle and sometimes not so subtle messages from teachers about students' worth, intelligence, and capability. The term did not come into wide use until 1968, when the classic study by Rosenthal and Jacobson provided the impetus for subsequent extensive research on the subject. In this study, several classes of children in grades one through six were given a nonverbal intelligence test (the researchers called it the "Harvard Test of Influenced Acquisition"), which researchers claimed would measure the students' potential for intellectual growth. Twenty percent of the students were randomly selected by the researchers as "intellectual bloomers," and their names were given to the teachers. Although their test scores actually had nothing at all to do with their potential, the teachers were told to be on the alert for signs of intellectual growth among these particular children. Overall these children, particularly in the lower grades, showed considerably greater gains in IQ during the school year than did the other students. They were also rated by their teachers as being more interesting, curious, and happy, and thought to be more likely to succeed later in life.[38]

Because the teachers THOUGHT the students would be successful, the students WERE successful. The importance of this research cannot be understated. These results verify the incredible positive power of simply expecting the most out of our students. They also highlight the monumental potential for academic success that is lost when we succumb to common assumptions about the limits of students' abilities.

And, we are learning that teachers' faith in students' success is a particularly important element of improving academic achievement for Black and Latino students in particular. Focusing on teacher-student relationships in general, Harvard University economist and researcher Ronald F. Ferguson surveyed more than 30,000, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and mixed-race students. One of the most interesting results of this study is "the distinctive importance of teacher encouragement as a source of motivation for non-White students." The research found that to best lead minority students, teachers need to "inspire the trust, elicit the cooperation, stimulate the ambition and support the sustained industriousness" of those underachieving groups.[39]

My first year, the paperwork I inherited was such a mess that it wasn't until the third week of school that I finally had and was able to read all of my students IEPs. When I read Antoine's goals—"Antoine had proven himself to be a helpful, outgoing student"-- I actually cried. A third-grader, Antoine was supposed to learn to recognize and identify the letters of the alphabet and the numbers 1-20. I cried, because I was afraid of the idea that this might actually be an appropriate goal for him. Luckily, however, I didn't change my opinion that the student I was beginning to know just seemed capable of so much more. By the end of the year, Antoine was performing long addition and subtraction with regrouping and reading on a mid-first-grade level. The only thing I should have cried about, in retrospect, is that someone actually put in writing those inexcusably-low goals.

Lisa Barrett, Bay Area '02
Partner, The New Teacher Project

[38] Nieto, Sonia. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers USA, 1996, p. 42.
[39] Ferguson, Ronald. "Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools." North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, December 2002. Online at http://www.ncrel.org/policy/pubs/pdfs/pivol13.pdf accessed 7/1/2010.

The Power of High Expectations

As further described in *Teaching As Leadership* through the research of Jeff Howard, the self-fulfilling prophecy of low and high expectations applies to *students* as well as teachers. Students have been shown to achieve more when *they* believe their teachers and society expect that they will achieve at high levels. And unfortunately, they achieve less when less is expected of them: "[C]hildren may bring to the classroom a lifetime of being told that they are failures, or even worse, that they are developmentally disabled."[40]

> *It is easy to equate success to race and background, but doing so will be your demise as a teacher. If you show your students that success is attainable through perseverance, and teach them to be self-propelled and self-motivated, then their background will become obsolete. It is simple to blame failure on background; the greater challenge is to teach well.*
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> **Katherine Smith, Delta '02**
> **COO, NYC Department of Education**

With the last chapter, you read Professor Ogbu's chapter on various explanations for the achievement gap. Consider Professor Ogbu's treatment of *teacher* expectations. Note that Professor Ogbu contends that "low teacher expectations" is a more complicated phenomenon than some analysts indicate, and he asks us to consider the degree to which students themselves influence teacher expectations. How does this contention support or contradict our assertion here that low expectations more generally (including low expectations by teachers, society, families, and the *students* themselves) are a hugely damaging influence that we, as teachers, actually can take on and conquer?

"Racism, Discrimination, and Expectations of Students' Achievement"
Along with this chapter, you will read another book excerpt. "Racism, Discrimination, and Expectations of Students' Achievement,"[41] is by Professor Nieto, author of the previous block quote, and one of the country's leading experts on diversity issues in the education context. In the piece that you will read, Nieto directly takes on the interrelations between conscious and unconscious biases and the low expectations that are so damaging to students.

In her chapter, Nieto contends that deep-seated, often unconscious, prejudices held by teachers, administrators and policy makers often manifest in the education structures of our schools and the education experiences of our students. She argues that social ills of racism, sexism, and other types of discrimination are embedded in schools' practice and design as much as they are in society at large. Nieto contends that this discrimination is not only revealed through the actions (often resulting from unconscious prejudices) of teachers, but through student outcomes like drop-out rates, college attendance, and other indicators of educational failure or success.

One of Nieto's fundamental theses is that not only are teacher expectations critical to student success, but that many teachers fail to realize that they have diminished expectations of their students in the first place. As you read this article, think critically about your own perspectives on students in your future classroom. Is there any degree to which you too, despite the best of intentions, tend to see the different backgrounds of students not as an asset, but "rather as an obstacle to be overcome?" Are you tempted to relax expectations of students out of sympathy or pity? And do you recognize the damage that such a relaxation of standards can cause? These are obviously not easy questions to answer, and honest answers are often painful. But, as Nieto indicates, students' achievement depends on teachers' frank exploration of their own deep-seated beliefs and expectations.

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[40] Texeira, Mary Theirry and Christian, Pamela Merchant. "And Still They Rise: Practical Advice for Increasing African American Enrollments in High Education." *Educational HORIZONS*, Spring 2002, p. 117-118.
[41] This reading is Chapter 4 of Sonia Nieto & Patty Bode's *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers USA, 2008.

When I arrived in Henderson after institute and made the all-important visit to the local Wal-Mart for school supplies, I had several people approach me in the store and ask if I was a new teacher. I excitedly responded yes—but when they asked where I was teaching, and I responded with the name of my school, they just looked at me with regret. "Oh honey," they said—"good luck. Those kids don't do a thing, and that school is out of control." I realized that if I was hearing these comments from the mouths of strangers in Wal-Mart, I could only imagine what my students had heard over their last eight years of schooling.

Crystal Brakke, North Carolina '99
Vice President - Institutes
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II. But What Do "High Expectations" Actually Look Like?

Many of us are easily sold on the importance of high expectations to our students' experience, but we still may not have a clear vision of what those expectations look like, or we may fail to make the transition from the all-important mind-set of high expectations to implementing those expectations in the classroom.

A key to implementing high expectations in your classroom is to realize that "high expectations" is in fact *something you do*, not just believe. Teachers who reap the benefits of high expectations for their students do not merely *tell* their students that they have high ambitions for them, they also *show* them those high ambitions by making every instructional decision—from choosing objectives to teaching methods to management structures—consistent with high standards. While the reality of their students' lagging academic skills may mean that teachers must do more and different things in the classroom, effective teachers aim for excellence by setting an ambitious goal and then fostering a daily sense of urgency to meet that goal.

To establish and maintain these high expectations, you simply must see great teachers—whether in low-income schools or in affluent schools—implement high expectations in their own classrooms. Seeing a room of students working at their potential is often a mind-blowing, eye-opening, fire-lighting experience. [Your regional program directors will make "excellent school" visits available to you. Go! There is nothing so inspiring and infuriating than seeing the pace and learning in fantastic schools, and thereby realizing what your students are being deprived of.]

At the beginning of the year I make sure that every student achieves academic success. I track their progress with a diagnostic and continually track them. At the end of the short unit (usually a week or two) I sit them down and show them their diagnostic and their test. They see the success with their own eyes and they build the confidence to succeed. People want to win, they want to succeed; most often, they just don't think they can. This way they know they can succeed right at the beginning so when things become difficult, they are ready for it.

Sean Flammer, Delta '02
Trial and Appellate Attorney
Scott Douglass & McConnico

Consider the following excerpt from Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom's recent book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. In this section, the Thernstrom's are reporting on the tangible signs of high expectations that they are seeing in the wildly successful schools they are studying. (You will note that the Thernstrom's study includes the KIPP - Knowledge Is Power Program - Academies, started by two Teach For America alumni.)

> "High expectations" is a current educational buzzword, with much hand-wringing about just how high those expectations can be for Black and Hispanic children in poverty. There is no hand-wringing in Esquith's [a nationally recognized teacher in Los Angeles] class or at any of the superb schools we visited. All of KIPP's eighth-graders have completed a two-year high school-level Algebra I class by the time they graduate. Part of the secret is a lack of the usual education ambivalence about the need to memorize basic mathematical facts and strategies for solving problems. Levin himself teaches math, and he turns, for instance, the speed with which kids can

accurately run through the times tables into a competition, the object of which is to beat his own time. To watch him explain to new fifth-graders (with minimum preparation for the academic demands of KIPP) how to tell which of two numbers is the larger is to see a level of sophistication in illuminating the structure of math that is very rare.

This year I dismiss my homeroom by group, rather than as a whole class. Quiet, attentive groups leave first; rambunctious, noisy groups leave last. I struggled with a group of boys that would constantly reenact the best moves of last night's wrestling program with their pens as stand-in wrestlers complete with sound-effects. Not surprisingly, they were consistently leaving last. I tried threatening them with additional time in the classroom, phone calls home, and even contemplated breaking apart the group entirely. I was fed up and was sure that a group of 12 year old boys was incapable of staying still and quiet. Finally, one day I tried flipping my bias on its head. I turned to them and said, "From this point forward, I expect your group to leave first every day." After I made my expectations clear, they created their own routine. During dismissal, the group's leader says, "okay boys, you know the drill." Each one of them folds their hands, sits up straight, and tightens their lips. Needless to say, I dismiss them first almost every day.

Gabe Scheck, New York City '01
Managing Director - Corporate, Foundation, and Government Relations
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The teachers set academic expectations, and they work hard to get their students to internalize those expectations. The day we visited Amistad [an excellent school in New Haven, Connecticut], the kids were chanting: "People, people, can't you see? Education is the key. People, people, don't you know/ College is where we will go." (North Star [another excellent school observed for this book] has an almost identical chant.) All the schools we admired offered various rewards for academic performance. . . .Such rewards, publicly labeling some students as more academically accomplished than others, make many public school teachers nervous on grounds of equity. At a Los Angeles elementary school we visited, every month one student was recognized from each classroom. But the teachers, we were told, "don't get specific about the criteria." In other words, recognition was arbitrary, and the students fail to learn a crucial lesson: Schools and employers generally reward hard and good work.

KIPP's sixth-graders are expected to spell such words as audible, audience, confidential, hyperbole, hypertension, and pianist. (Rich vocabularies open literary doors.) In Houston, on a day we visited, an eighth-grade English class was engaged in a close textual analysis of *The Lord of the Flies*. Later that day in a "thinking skills" class, Michael Feinberg, the principal, led a sophisticated discussion of the federal highway program, the power of Congress over interstate transportation, and the political pressures behind appropriation decisions.

We watched seventh-grade history students at Newark's North Star playing a game visually traveling across a map of Europe with countries and cities differently colored but unidentified by name. Start at Berlin, travel 500 miles east, drop straight south, through one country to the next. Where are you? Almost all hands went up; the student called on had the right answer.

Esquith's fifth-graders play mental mathematical games—no pencil and paper allowed. Take the total IQ of everyone on the board of education ("It's zero!" he says with a twinkle); add 8; multiply by 7; subtract 5; divide by 17. In a flash the students hold up tiles with the number 3 on it. Take the number of holes on a golf course, add the number of years in a decade, add the number of weeks in a fortnight, add 19, and take the square root. Up come the number 7 tiles with amazing speed. These are inner city kids, but Esquith does not ask "inner-city" questions; he wants them to know what a golf course looks like.

> Esquith pushes the kids hard, and believes "facts are good." But there's nothing grim about his class. (We saw kids at lunchtime shouting, "Let's skip lunch," so they could keep working.)[42]

All of these examples—and many of the examples provided by thousands of corps members in their own classrooms—illustrate not only the importance of high expectations, but their possibility. As a brand new teacher considering the implications of high expectations for your own classroom, remember the two fundamental tenets just described:

(1) High expectations means doing, in addition to believing
(2) Treat yourself to the concrete vision of high expectations that is afforded by watching excellent teachers maximize the potential of their students

III. The Power of High Expectations—Students' Perspective

While it would probably come as a surprise to many people who harbor debilitating stereotypes of our students, another consistent lesson that we have learned as we have worked with our students is that they themselves yearn for higher expectations. Even those students who have internalized the "inferiority complex" that comes from constantly hearing and experiencing low expectations will explain, if asked, that teachers, schools, and society could and should expect more of them.

The organization Public Agenda, a nonpartisan public research group, conducted a study involving surveys of over 1300 high school students and focus groups in communities across the country. Public Agenda ensured that the sample group included an "over-sample" of African-American and Latino students.

Among the telling results of this study was the consistent message from students that they can and want to be held to higher standards. This result might be surprising, coming in the midst of the public discourse about raising standards and accountability in our schools, but these high school students (across all demographic categories) stated loudly and clearly that they want schools to expect more of them. As explained in Public Agenda's report, "Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools,"

> Teenagers support the nationwide call for higher academic standards, which they think all students should have to meet. They concede that it's possible today to get good or adequate grades without much effort, and most youngsters in public high schools admit that they do not put as much effort into their studies as they could. The great majority of students say that having to meet higher standards would make them work harder in school and would prompt them and their classmates to learn more.[43]

In fact, six in ten teens support enforcing the standards to the point of holding a student back for a year, even if that student has tried hard and attended class regularly.

Perhaps most interesting for our discussion of high expectations for our students, the over-whelming majority of high school students believe that standards should not be "eased for youngsters with disadvantages." In fact, 84% of students say "schools should set the same standards for students from

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[42] Thernstrom, Abigail and Stephan. *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, pp. 58-60.
[43] Johnson, Jean and Farkas, Steve. "Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools," *A Report From Public Agenda*, 1997, p. 19.

inner-city areas as they do for middle-class students."[44] There were not significant differences in student answers from various racial or demographic categories on that question.

As one of the students surveyed explained, "I think they don't take us seriously enough. We're really smarter than they think."[45]

One of my resourced students, Arnetta, had a very difficult time focusing in class. Anytime I tried to give her personal attention, she always stated that I shouldn't waste my time because she wouldn't understand it in the end anyway. I expressed how painful it was for me to hear her say things like that and often asked why she uttered such words. Arnetta stated that she was just repeating the words of adults before her who got frustrated with helping her because it took her a longer time to process the material. Arnetta had become conditioned to sitting quietly while other students reaped the benefits of individualized attention. She thought that this was a norm and acceptable. I didn't see a change in Arnetta until I made it a point to circulate and stand by Arnetta's desk every day until she attempted and succeeded with a question. After a while, Arnetta became so happy with success that she would yell out, "Hey Ms. Asiyanbi, when you going to make it to this side of the classroom. I need some help."

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IV. Conclusion: High Expectations for You and Your Students

On one level, this chapter and the additional readings have addressed on a grand scale some of the social ills that contribute to the achievement gap in this country. More importantly, however, this chapter and these readings are about your work in your classroom. As many corps members have experienced before you, all of the statistics comparing the achievement of different groups of students have a mere fraction of the impact on you that your students will. Very soon, when you are the instructional leader of your classroom, the achievement gap will become painfully real. You will take on the responsibility for erasing it in the lives of the students in your classroom.

We believe that we, as teachers, have the power to overcome the achievement gap with our students. And we believe the central tool in your most immediate control is high expectations. Our students, very often, do not believe they can succeed. They do not believe that their hard work will lead to the academic success that they readily admit that they want.

Thus, a key to success as a teacher of minority and low-income children is establishing and maintaining high expectations for both your students and yourself. As we will discuss in the next chapter, this task is unfortunately easier said than done.

Please again pause at this point and read the selection entitled "Racism, Discrimination, and Expectations of Students' Achievement", which can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. Also included on TFANet is the article "Equity Within Reach: Insights from the Front Lines of America's Achievement Gap," which you may read for another viewpoint of these issues. 🕮

[44] Ibid. p. 20.
[45] Ibid. p. 21.