

Part I: Maintaining High Expectations

As outlined in the previous introductory chapter, in order to successfully harness the power of diversity as a means of achieving ambitious goals in your classroom, we believe new teachers must work to:

- (a) Maintain high expectations for all students of all backgrounds
- (b) Build a strong and appropriate diversity-related knowledge base
- (c) Effect change with respect and humility

The first of those three goals—maintaining high expectations—is the focus in Part I of this text. Part I consists of three chapters, each of which is meant to prepare you to establish and maintain rigorous academic standards for your students.

Chapter One, “Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap,” explores the current gap in academic achievement that exists in this country—a gap that is drawn largely along racial and socioeconomic lines. After looking at some of the evidence of that gap, we briefly survey some of its reported causes and their connections to race and socioeconomic status in America. By acknowledging the daunting list of pressures that perpetuate the achievement gap for minority and low-income students, our intention is (a) to reiterate how much work we all have to do achieve education equity in this country, and (b) to highlight that “student potential” is *not* on the list of achievement gap causes. In fact, it is our consistently validated faith in our students’ potential to meet rigorous academic standards that fuels our insistence that high expectations must be the starting place for a teacher determined to close the achievement gap for his or her students.

Chapter Two, “The Power of High Expectations,” dives into this notion of “high expectations” and quickly reviews both the evidence of high expectations’ power for raising achievement and the *Teaching As Leadership* framework that, we believe, offers a proven recipe for establishing and achieving those high expectations in your classroom. This chapter concludes with a snapshot of what those high expectations look like in practice, both from teachers’ and students’ perspectives.

Chapter Three, “The Challenge of Maintaining High Expectations,” amounts to a warning to new teachers that maintaining high expectations in the face of all of the counter-pressures in our society, schools, and classrooms is not easy. In this chapter, you will consider two of the most common and troublesome reasons that new teachers lose their high expectations for students.

Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap: The Promise of Student Potential

Chapter One

- I. The Undeniable Correlations Among Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap
- II. Why There Is a Strong Correlation Among Race, Class, and Achievement
- III. Conclusion: The Promise of Student Potential

The fact that you have joined us in our quest to close the achievement gap in this country indicates that you are not only aware of the inequities in our education system, but you are also bothered enough to do something about them. You know and are frustrated that by the time students from low-income communities reach eighth grade, they are on average three years behind their more affluent (and more often White) peers in math and reading. You recognize but resent that that gap widens to four years by grade 12. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige has starkly stated this tragedy: “Nearly 70 percent of inner-city and rural fourth graders cannot read, even at a basic level. It is our greatest failure as a nation. It is our failure as a people.”

This chapter and its attached readings pose the question “Why?” Why does this gap exist? And why is this gap drawn along racial and socioeconomic lines?

In an attempt to begin to answer these difficult questions, we will survey a variety of factors that are often blamed for the achievement gap. Among the factors we will consider are racism, inequitable school funding, poverty-related burdens, inequitable distribution of political clout, structures and practices inherent in the school system, family structures and support, and cultural norms.

Our purposes for beginning this text with such an expansive discussion of the achievement gap are two-fold. First, we believe that by establishing the landscape of potential causes for the achievement gap we not only focus your attention on all the work we have to do to end it, but we are also better able to identify and isolate those issues that are actually within your realm of influence as a classroom teacher. As we will discuss throughout Part I of this text, we believe the cause of the achievement gap that is most within your power to overcome is the lowered expectations that so drastically undermine minority and low-income students’ academic success. Second, we are inclined to begin with this survey of the achievement gap causes in part because of what is *not* on the list. Low-income, African-American, Latino, and Native American students’ lack of potential is not a reason for the achievement gap. As we have seen over and over in our classrooms, our students—the vast majority of whom are minority and low-income—can in fact meet the highest standards of academic achievement.

Thus, the key point of this chapter is that while there is a correlation between low achievement and students’ race and class, it is not a difference in students’ *potential* that causes that correlation. It may be, however, a teacher’s high expectations of his or her students that can help erase that correlation. So, there is one particular cause of the achievement gap that we, as instructional leaders in our classrooms and schools, can and must fight every single day—the barrage of low expectations that weighs on our students.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the following excerpt found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- “Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations” from Professor John Ogbu’s book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*

Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap

I. The Undeniable Correlations Among Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap

There is no shortage of evidence of the “failure” described by the Secretary of Education. After some progress toward closing the achievement gap during the 1980s, it has begun to grow again since the early 1990s. And, at every point, the gap between white and minority students, and between affluent students and students from low-income communities, has been shockingly large.

Socioeconomic Correlations

If we group students in this country along socioeconomic lines, the correlations with achievement are stark. One study of fourth and eighth graders’ scores on the 1992 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Trial State Assessment found that, within the same school, wealthier students scored more than 30 points higher, on average, than students of low socioeconomic status. In eighth grade, that gap rises to almost 50 points.¹⁴ The gaps are even larger when comparing scores of wealthy and poor students attending different schools.

The Children’s Defense Fund’s *Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America*, also indicates that depressed academic achievement and socioeconomic status often go hand in hand. Lower-income children are far more likely to suffer from poor nutrition, housing problems, stress and depression, and are also more likely to have fewer resources for learning, all of which can have a negative impact on academic achievement. The Children’s Defense Fund cites a study by Duncan and Brooks-Gunn which argues that these deficiencies alone can contribute to one-quarter to one-third of the lower reading, math, and vocabulary test scores among lower income elementary students. Additional research consistently links shortfalls in other resources – like the availability of computers, the opportunity to attend camps or music classes, or the possibility of going on family trips – to lower academic achievement as well.¹⁵

Race Correlations

Similarly strong correlations with academic achievement are apparent if we group America’s students by race. If we use the end of high school as the benchmark moment, the racially-drawn disparities are most glaring:

- While one out of 12 White students can competently read from a specialized text (such as the science section of the newspaper), only one out of 50 Latino students and one out of 100 African-American students are able to gain information from a specialized text.
- One in 30 Latino students and one in 100 African-American students can complete multi-step, elementary-algebra problems that one out of 10 White students can complete comfortably.
- Three out of 10 African-American students and four of 10 Latino students have mastered usage and computation of fractions, percents, and averages. Meanwhile, seven of 10 White students have mastered these same skills.

¹⁴ Lee, J. “State policy correlates of the achievement gap among racial and social groups.” *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Vol. 24, 1998, pp. 137-152.

¹⁵ Sherman, Arloc. *Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America*. Washington, DC: Children’s Defense Fund, 1997, p. 23.

Overall, according to recent data, “[n]ear the end of high school, in fact, African-American and Latino students have skills in both reading and mathematics that are virtually the same as those of White students in the 8th grade.”¹⁶

Another disturbing means of looking at this data is to contrast the academic achievement of top-performing and bottom-performing students in each racial group. The National Center for Education Statistics, in its report on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, divides student performance into groups called Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced, based on their knowledge and skill levels in each subject area. The results are consistent with our worst fears (both in the overall deficiency of all students’ performance and in the racially-drawn disparities in student performance):¹⁷

- 3.4% of White students score at the Advanced level on the science exam, compared to 0.1% of African-American students.
- Nearly half of all White students are placed in either the Proficient or Advanced categories in reading, compared to less than 20% of Black students and about 25% of Latino students.
- In five of the seven subjects tested, a majority (over 50%) of Black students are rated Below Basic, compared to about 20% of White students.

All together, the data reveals the disturbing conclusion that “the average Black or Hispanic high school student achieves at about the same level as the average White student in the lowest quartile of White achievement.”¹⁸

Another government study, “Educational Achievement and Black-White Inequality,” by the National Center for Education Statistics,¹⁹ confirmed that (in 2001) African-American students scored significantly lower than White students on both math and reading tests in both elementary and secondary schools. Comparisons were made first between overall average outcomes for Blacks and Whites (in the first in each pair of columns that follow) and then between average outcomes for Blacks and Whites with similar levels of prior educational achievement (the second in each pair of columns that follow).

In math, the 1990-1993 data shows that the gap actually closes slightly in upper elementary school, but then widens through junior high and high school:

Why Focus Only on Race and Class?

There are, of course, more forms of diversity than race and class, and in fact many of us find those other aspects of our and our students’ identities—such as gender, age, sexual orientation, religious background, disability—to be critically influential factors in the dynamics of difference and sameness that impact the teaching and learning in our classrooms. In discussing the achievement gap and our theory of change, we are focusing on race and class because those are the “lines” by which the achievement gap is most starkly defined, to the point that it is no exaggeration to say that our students are virtually segregated by race and class. So, while we believe that in order to be truly effective teachers we must be aware of the dynamics involved in our interactions and expectations of students of all different identity characteristics, here we are highlighting race and class as the factors most highly correlated with wide-spread patterns of unacceptably low academic achievement in our schools.

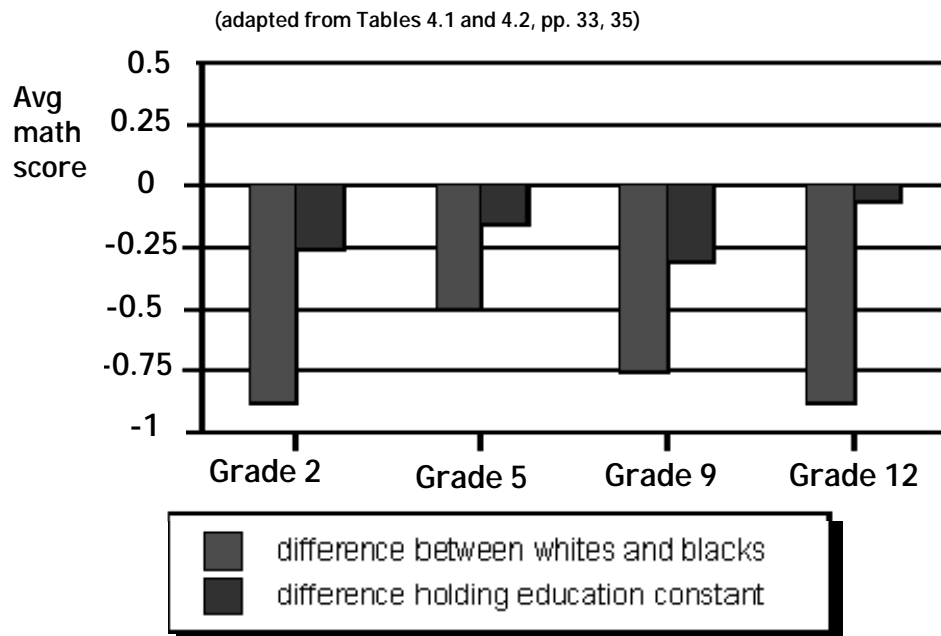
¹⁶ Haycock, Kati. “Helping All Students Achieve.” *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 58, No. 6, March 2001.

¹⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. “Educational achievement and Black-White inequality.” U.S. Department of Education, 2001, pp. 31-43. Online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001061>, accessed 7/1/2010.

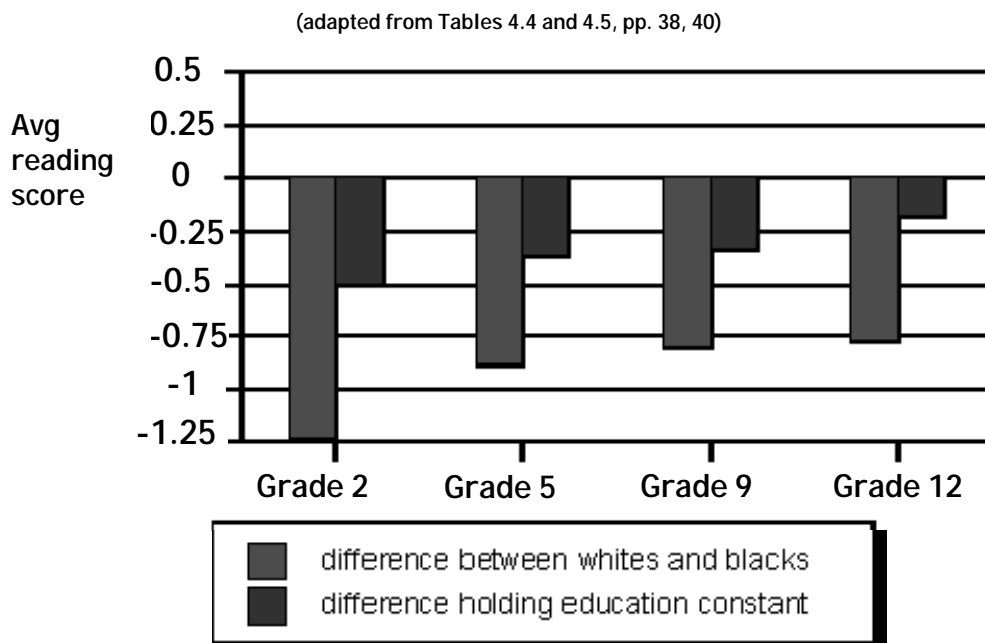
¹⁸ Education Commission of the States. “The Progress of Education Reform 2003: Closing the Achievement Gap.” Vol. 4, No. 1, March 2003.

¹⁹ National Center for Education Statistics. “Educational achievement and Black-White inequality.” U.S. Department of Education, 2001, pp. 31-43. Online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001061>, accessed 7/1/2010.

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The 1990-1993 reading test results show a similar gap, with a reduction of the reading gap in elementary school and then little change thereafter:



The National Center for Education Statistics report concludes that “[w]hatever the causes of Black-White gaps in educational achievement, the perpetuation of a large portion of these gaps throughout elementary and secondary school leaves Blacks at a relative disadvantage as they prepare for college and/or the labor market.”²⁰

²⁰ Ibid. p. 42.

Similar numbers are readily available for Latino and Native American students. Almost 60 percent of Latino students in fourth grade have not been taught to even a basic level of reading skill. The numbers are similar for math.²¹ The dropout rates for Latino students hover around 45 percent.²² Similarly, according to government statistics, Native Americans are less than half as likely as White students to score at or above proficient on standard reading and math tests.²³

II. Why There Is a Strong Correlation Among Race, Class, and Achievement

The fact that race and class are such consistent predictors of diminished academic achievement in this country poses an obvious and difficult question: Why? Why is it that students of color and poorer students, on average, lag so far behind Whiter, wealthier students? If we can answer this question, we may gain insight into how to close the achievement gap for those students.

Of course, answering this question is not easy. The search for the source of the achievement gap raises complex questions with complex answers, and many researchers espouse competing, contradictory, and/or controversial theories about why it is that poor, African-American, Latino, and Native American children lag behind White, affluent students in their academic attainment.

An Incomplete Survey of Purported Reasons for the Achievement Gap

Consider the following brief synopses of some of the common—and sometimes hotly contested—explanations for the achievement gap:

Racism. Many observers and analysts link the underachievement of African-American and Latino students to racism, in all its incarnations in America. First, and most obviously, persons of color may be subjected to straightforward, overt discrimination and prejudice, and that discrimination may occur in the school system. For example, students might be put in less engaging classes because of their race. Teachers may find their impact suppressed because of their race. School funding decisions may be made for race-based reasons. Second, some would argue that the legacy of relatively recent institutionalized racism in this country creates certain dynamics, such as the relatively lower educational attainment of Black parents, that contribute to the achievement gap. Many would also point to the growing re-segregation of minority students and wonder what impact that trend—whether it is purposeful or not—will have on the achievement gap in the next decades. [An astounding 70% of African-American students and over a third of Latino students attend “intensely segregated” schools.]²⁴ Third, many would argue that students in America are subjected to a vast and powerful stream of covert, if not subconscious, racism in the form of lowered expectations of students of color. As we will discuss at more length below and in the next chapter, the notion that racism itself is a primary cause of the achievement gap is a wide-ranging, multi-faceted idea, encompassing not only blatant, individualized prejudices but also the grand social scheme of low expectations that impact our and our students’ visions of academic success.

Inequitable School Funding. Differences in the amounts spent per pupil in different schools can be dramatic. In New Jersey, in 1995-1996, the lowest amount spent per pupil per year by a district was

²¹ “Latino Achievement in America.” A report by the Education Trust. Online at <http://www.edtrust.org>.

²² Valverde, Leonard and Scribner, Kent. “Latino Students: Organizing Schools for Greater Achievement.” *Principals.org Bulletin*. Vol. 85, No. 624, April 2001.

²³ “Reaching Out: Raising American Indian Achievement.” U.S. Department of Education. Online at http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/achieve/achievement_native.html, accessed 1/31/07.

²⁴ After decades of desegregation, schools became significantly more segregated in the 1990s. Orfield, G. “Schools more separate: Consequences of a decade of Resegregation.” Harvard University, The Civil Rights Project, 2001.

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\$5,900. Meanwhile, another district spent \$11,950.²⁵ In Illinois, the gap was even more drastic, with some schools spending about \$3,000 per year and others spending around \$15,000. Before litigation challenging the system began in the late 1980s, expenditures per pupil in Texas ranged from \$2,000 per year per student in some schools to \$20,000 per year per student at other schools. Like most school systems in the country, Texas schools were funded primarily through local property taxes, leading to massive disparities in the available funds for different districts. In fact, the wealthiest district had *700 times* the taxable property value of the poorest district.²⁶ (As it does in many states, the education funding litigation in Texas continues to this day.) Given that these funding disparities are often drawn along racial and socioeconomic lines, many blame these funding systems for perpetuating the achievement gap. Others would point to the success of poorly funded schools across the country, or to the continued failure of some well-funded schools, as evidence that money is, at best, only part of the answer.

The Weight of Poverty. Challenges that disproportionately face children in low-income communities might also be a cause of the achievement gap. Some of us know these challenges first hand, either from our own upbringing or from working, living, or growing up in low-income communities. The Children's Defense Fund report cited earlier explains that poor children often must work to help support their families or spend "study time" caring for their younger siblings; they suffer from poor nutrition and related health problems; the financial stress upon their families can lead to depression and/or behavior problems; they either have no home or live in homes without utilities, with water leakage, or with infestations; and they may have greater financial barriers to education and fewer books, family trips, and extra curricular activities. For some analysts, these poverty-related factors add up to an explanation for the achievement gap. (Not everyone agrees that poverty should be listed as a "cause" of the achievement gap, however. Other analysts point to the fact that poor children in some schools or poor schools in some states perform very well as evidence that poverty does not cause the achievement gap.)

Test Bias. According to some, one contributor to the achievement gap is the method of measurement used. (Of course, very few people, if any, think that the achievement gap is merely a result of test bias. Rather, the argument goes, the achievement gap could be somewhat exaggerated by test bias.) The tests used to determine academic achievement, according to this line of reasoning, are geared toward White, affluent students and experiences, thereby disadvantaging poor students and students of color.²⁷ Tests might be biased in their content (and therefore be asking questions about subjects that one group of students is more likely to have experienced than another group) or they might be biased in "method" (and therefore be designed or administered in a way that is more accessible and welcoming to one group than another). Or, a given test might actually be missing students' strengths; a child might be strong on math and computation but weak on comprehension, for example. Tests might also be biased in that they purport to test something that they do not. For example, according to many psychologists, the IQ tests purport to measure innate ability but actually measure developed ability.²⁸

Lack of Political Clout. Perhaps it is an amalgam of several of the previously mentioned causes, but some analysts would argue that the lack of political empowerment in low-income (and largely minority) communities contributes to the achievement gap as well. This lack of voice in policy- and decision-making may allow injustices such as inequitable funding, institutional racism, and the challenges of poverty to go unchecked by government.

²⁵ Hadderman, Margaret. "Equity and Adequacy in Educational Finance." ERIC Digest, No. 129, August 1999. (ED 454 466). Online at <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-1/equity.html>, accessed 7/1/2010.

²⁶ Farr, J. Steven and Trachtenberg, Mark. "The Edgewood Drama: An Epic Quest for Education Equity." *Yale Law & Policy Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1999, p. 615.

²⁷ Viadero, D. "Lags in minority achievement: Defy traditional explanations." *Education Week*, March 22, 2000.

²⁸ Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. "The Black-White test score gap: An introduction." From *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, pp. 1-51.

Media-Perpetuated Stereotypes. Another force that some say fuels the achievement gap is the negative influence of media-perpetuated stereotypes about students of color and students from low-income communities. You are undoubtedly familiar with the pattern of racial, gender, religious, and orientation stereotypes and omissions in television, movies and other media. A 1997 study found, for example, that despite the fact that ethnic minority groups made up more than a quarter of the population, only around 15% of the members of prime-time drama casts were members of those groups.²⁹ Moreover—and perhaps even more damaging to the expectations we have for our students—when persons of color are in fact included in entertainment and media, they are often portrayed in stereotypical and inaccurate ways. As the American Psychological Association found in its own study, minorities are “segregated in specific types of content, and rarely engage in cross-ethnic interaction.” Those stereotypes and omissions undermine teachers’ messages to students of color and students from low-income communities that students can in fact succeed academically.

School System Structures and Practices.

Another arena of suspicion for persons trying to track down the cause of the achievement gap is structural practices in the school system itself. One does not need to look too closely to see a number of disparities in the systems and structures of public schools that might be contributing factors. Consider, for example, the disparate dispersal of high performing teachers. Whether one defines teacher quality by teachers’ experience, by teachers’ credentials, or—as Teach For America would suggest—by the academic achievement of their students, high performing teachers generally move from poorer schools to better ones. Another structural contributor could be the allocation of resources within school districts—as poorer, minority students are more often relegated to older, less-resourced buildings. (In one California survey approximately one-third of teachers state-wide and approximately one-half of teachers in low-income schools reported that they did not have enough text books for students to take them home.³⁰)

Other Inequitably Implemented School Structures. Sometimes, lowered expectations of minority and low-income students are essentially institutionalized into our school structures. For example, when “homogenous grouping” is not implemented with opportunities to move from one “track” to another, it can become a virtual institutionalization of low expectations for certain students. Similarly, students may get “tracked” into the “low” or “remedial” classes and then, because those classes—if poorly implemented—move at a slower pace, there is no chance that the students can ever get out of that “track” and into more demanding courses. Remediation systems such as these, while motivated by a

Permanent “Tracks”: Marcus’s Testimony

These structural policies and practices affect real students and impact their entire lives. Consider the testimony of eleventh-grader Marcus McKinney, a California high school senior, appearing before the California Senate Education Committee, April 10, 2002:

In my 11th grade year, I went to my counselor to try to get a Spanish class. I had a floor covering class, where you learn to put down tiles and lay down carpet. I told my counselor that I wanted Spanish 1, so I could try to meet the requirements to apply to [University of California]. She tried to tell me that I hadn’t met my year of technical art, because at my high school you have to have a year of technical art [or] one year of a vocational class [to graduate]. I told her I already did because I had auto mechanics in the 9th grade. I had to bring my parents up there to get out of floor covering and into Spanish 1. Then this year I tried to get into Spanish 2, so again, I could meet the requirements. My counselor told me Spanish 2 was only for students who were going to college, automatically assuming that I wasn’t going to college. It made me mad. I got kind of discouraged, but I told her I am going to college and I want this class. Then I did not get the class anyway, because the class was overcrowded.

Barth, Patte. “A Common Core Curriculum for the New Century.”
Thinking K-16: A Publication of The Education Trust. Winter 2003, Vol. 7, Issue 1, p. 13.

²⁹ Gerbner, G. and Ozyegin, N. *Proportional Representation of Diversity Index.* Cultural Indicators Project, Spring 1997.

³⁰ “First Things First: Why we must stop punishing students and fix California’s schools.” Californians for Justice Education Fund, May 17, 2003. Online at http://tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/reportcard/features/5-6/pdf/first_things_first.pdf, accessed 7/1/2010.

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desire to help students catch up, can become systematized forms of lowered expectations if implemented poorly. The fact remains that lowered expectations, whatever their original motivation, are only hurting our students by perpetuating the massive achievement gap in this country.

Mayo Elementary School in Compton was well known for its students' success on state and district standardized tests. Year after year teachers and students received recognition for their achievement. I felt lucky to have been placed there. My first year teaching I worked hard to maintain the progress for which my colleagues had set a precedent and when our test scores came back I was excited to hear that they were going to be celebrated. Mayo's students scored at a level 3 on a state-wide scale of 1-10. I was confused – a three? The elementary school that I myself attended fewer than 10 miles away scored at a 10, yet we were celebrating success. I was offered an explanation – in districts like Compton, where students face language barriers and qualify for free or reduced lunch, a 3 was considered equal to a 10. Our students met the highest expectations that were set for them. Unable to mask my disappointment from the other teachers at my grade level I was consoled – and reminded that my own expectations needed to be checked. I left that experience determined to spend more time talking to and observing teachers at schools that ranked 10 out of 10 so that I too, could implement teaching strategies and hold expectations that would ensure my students were truly at a 10 despite the excuses made for Compton kids.

Kate Sobel, Los Angeles '98
Principal, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy

Lack of Compensating Capacity in the School System. One way to explain the achievement gap is simply to acknowledge that the students with the greatest needs (academic, social, nutritional, etc.) are attending the schools with the least capacity to serve those increased needs (higher student-teacher ratios, dilapidated infrastructures, fewer resources). This is not to say schools in low-income areas are doing worse than other schools; rather, given the external pressures of increased student needs, those schools need more—not the same, and certainly not less—resources and capacity to serve those students.

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These several proposed “causes” of the achievement gap—racism, inequitable funding, poverty, lack of political power, and school structures—probably each have some impact on the achievement gap in America. And much of the debate surrounding these causes relates to their *relative* impact on students' academic performance. Still other explanations—including the influence of certain racial groups' family structures and/or racial groups' “culture”—are also often discussed but are more controversial.

Family Structures and Changes. Among the many “family structure” factors that different commentators blame for the achievement gap are parents' level of education, single-parent families, and grandparent involvement in raising children. This line of thinking holds that the growing number of students raised in “non-traditional” home settings is contributing to those students' lesser achievement. However, other researchers claim that these family-structure factors do not seem to have very much influence on student performance. For example, some research indicates that the effects of being raised in a single-parent family are “never large enough to be of any substantive importance.”³¹ (The same researchers did find a high correlation between differences in “parenting practices” and children's test scores. And, we do know, for example, that different students arrive at school with dramatically different experiences in terms of exposure to books, pre-school learning opportunities, etc.) On the other hand, yet another group of researchers, warning that family situations and influences are exceedingly complex, assert that by defining “family characteristics” broadly these factors could contribute to as much as two-thirds of the achievement gap.³² (These researchers include in that broad definition parent education,

³¹ Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. “The Black-White test score gap: An introduction.” From *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, p. 42.

³² Phillips, M., Brooks-Gunn, J. Duncan, G.J., Klebanov, P., & Crane, J. “Family background, parenting practices, and the Black-White test score gap.” From *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, pp. 111-140.

mother's family background, mother's quality of schooling, educational outcomes, family income, parent attitudes and values, grandparents' influence, and parenting practices.)

Our Focus on African-American and Latino Students

Throughout this text, most of the conversations about racial groups focus on African-Americans and Latinos. We focus on these two groups because approximately 95% of the students the Teach For America corps members teach are African-American or Latino. Asian-American students are not discussed very often in this text because we have so few Asian-American students. (Moreover, statistically speaking, Asian-American students are not performing at the same low levels, on average, that African American and Latino students are in this country—though in some of the pockets where we teach, we have seen that behind the overarching statistics lie real disparities.) Of course, while they do not comprise a large percentage of the students we teach overall, Native American students are the primary focus of our New Mexico and South Dakota corps members. When possible, we have attempted to include data and research related to Native American students. New Mexico and South Dakota corps members can expect their training to be supplemented with some region-specific diversity-related conversations.

Group Culture. A closely related and also controversial idea is that there are some elements of certain ethnic groups' "culture" that contribute to those students' underperformance in school. Some contend, for example, that there are unique aspects of African-American culture—and other aspects of Latino culture—that are misaligned with the mainstream approach to education in our schools, leading to the achievement gap. For example, one Berkeley professor contends that "what one sees in Black students is less a refusal to contribute any effort than a sad tendency for their efforts to stop before the finish line. This tendency stems not from laziness or inferior mental power, but from a brake exerted on them by a cultural inheritance that school work is more a pit stop than a place to live."³³ And in their book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, authors Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom argue that as a result of a long history of institutionalized discrimination that precluded African-Americans from the education system, there is a Black "culture" that is disconnected from academic achievement. Different researchers have different, but perhaps analogous, explanations for the Latino achievement gap. Latino's struggles are often framed in terms of immigration-related and assimilation-related challenges, including language acquisition.³⁴ These "culture"-based explanations for the achievement gap evoke both passionate support and heated rebuttal. To some, these theories are often unacceptable "deficit" views of cultures that happen to be different from that of the majority, and such deficit models are not only often inaccurate but may do harm to the

students they purport to describe. Others find that an examination of "Black culture" and "Latino culture" offers insights into how we can best solve the achievement gap problem. Later in this text, we will explore some of the questions posed by these theories, including whether or not differences in African-American, Latino, and Native American students' culture actually should inform a teacher's classroom design and instruction. [See chapter seven of this text, entitled "Cultural Learning Styles."]

"Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations"

In order to offer a somewhat different lens on these causes of the achievement gap, along with this chapter you will read a brief excerpt from "Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations"³⁵ from a study by Professor John Ogbu, Chancellor's Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. An educational anthropologist, Professor Ogbu focuses his studies on minority status in education. In fact, some of this work has sparked some controversy because of his

³³ McWhorter, John. *Losing the Race: Self Sabotage in Black America*. New York: Free Press, 2000, p. 126.

³⁴ Conchas, G.Q. "Structuring failure and success: Understanding the variability in Latino school engagement." *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol. 71, 2001, pp. 475-504.

³⁵ Ogbu, John. *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. Chapter 3, Manwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Association, 2003, pp. 33-55.

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endorsement of the type of “cultural” explanation for that achievement gap that was discussed previously.

The excerpt you will read is part of a study of the academic disengagement of African-American students in Shaker Heights, Ohio. While this study focuses on the particular factors at play in a particular school district, Professor Ogbu’s survey of traditional explanations for the achievement gap—and those explanations’ limitations—will serve as helpful background for your own thinking about why your students are so far behind and how you can help them. As you read this article, think critically about the degree to which you believe he is correct about the influence and limitations of such explanations as racial groups’ IQ, social class status, racial segregation, teacher expectations, and cultural differences and conflicts.

This section began by posing the question, “Why is the achievement gap correlated with race and socioeconomic status in this country?” The incomplete list that we have explored above should give you some theories about the answer to that question. All of those factors, from blatant racism to theories of group culture, are likely to have a higher impact on minority or low-income students, thereby helping to explain the correlations among race, class, and the achievement gap in this country.

III. Conclusion: The Promise of Student Potential

You’ll notice that “lack of student potential” is not one of the factors listed as a contributor to the achievement gap. Among the most important lessons we have learned as educators of under-achieving students is that the *correlation* between race and income on the one hand and achievement on the other does not denote *cause and effect*. That is, the fact that African-American, Latino, Native American and poor students are behind most White, more affluent students in their academic performance does not mean that they are behind *because* they are Black, Latino, Native American, or poor. Put more positively, our students have the potential to succeed at the highest levels of academic accomplishment.


This may be an obvious point. It certainly is intuitive to those of us who have watched our students exceed the expectations that had been placed on them. Unfortunately, not everyone is convinced that our students have the innate ability to succeed alongside their White and affluent neighbors. Not only do many people consciously and subconsciously endorse a theory of lowered potential by adopting negative assumptions and stereotypes about poor and minority students, but some individuals also explicitly develop and foster this theory as a means of explaining the achievement gap.³⁶ Perhaps the best known (and most controversial) of these studies is *The Bell Curve*, published in 1994, written by Harvard professor Richard Herrnstein and economist Charles Murray. This book compared IQ scores of students of different races and attempted to define a causal relationship between race, IQ levels, and academic achievement as shown on standardized test scores.³⁷

³⁶ While these more blatantly racist and classist theories have been roundly criticized and refuted, it is worth noting that some analysts do argue that race itself is the root cause of the achievement gap. The rationale of this view is that the strong *correlation* between race and the achievement gap means that race is *causing* the achievement gap—that students of color are simply less able (because of their genetic predisposition) to succeed in school. .

³⁷ The publication of this book sparked a virtual explosion in the scientific, education, and political communities as scholars and the entire nation debated its findings and the argument of nature vs. nurture. Despite the volumes of analysis and studies debunking *The Bell Curve*’s methods and results, there are still active and vocal supporters of its theories today. (See, for example, Thomas Bouchard’s *The Genetic Architecture of Human Intelligence* and Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*).

It was easy to list the reasons I should keep my expectations low and not bring my students to the DC Citywide Science Fair. Thoughts of years of institutionalized racism, educational inequality, and poverty, all raced through my head as I worried I should keep them home to protect them from a possible disappointment. But ultimately, if I had not brought them to Howard University that day, to stand side by side with students from around the city that had grown up with more resources of every kind, they would never have won Citywide First Place honors in Medicine and Health and Behavioral Science, and Second Place honors in Chemistry. You can imagine the empowerment this gave my students and our school community, where good news is not brought home often enough. They had high expectations for themselves, which along with their dedicated preparation allowed them to speak to the judges about their projects with their hard-earned confidence, charisma, and aptitude. They taught me an unequivocal lesson in expectations that day and watching them from the audience was one of the most powerful moments of my life.

Sarah Griffin, DC '00
Senior Managing Director of Institute, Philadelphia
Teach For America

Study of Academic Disengagement. You can access this excerpt by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. 

Having witnessed irrefutable evidence that students of color can achieve at high levels, we reject outright the notion that poorer students of color are somehow less able to succeed than their more affluent and White counterparts in other school districts. But we must acknowledge the challenge we face as teachers of maintaining high expectations for our students despite the insidious, low-level murmurs of genetic inferiority that—despite overwhelming evidence of their fallacy—are periodically recycled in this country. We also must acknowledge that we are all exposed to such theories and we must actively challenge them with the evidence from our classrooms so that they do not further take hold in the American psyche.

Our students' potential to succeed is not a mere hypothesis; it has been proven time and time again in classrooms across the country. A critical key to unlocking that potential is, as set forth in the next chapter, establishing and maintaining high expectations.

Please take a break at this point to read "Explaining the Academic Gap: Conventional and Alternative Explanations" from Professor John Ogbu's book *Black American Students In An Affluent Suburb: A*

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.

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

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 Initiatives

- (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
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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/pivot13.pdf> accessed 7/1/2010.

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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.

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.

⁴⁰ Texeira, Mary Theiry 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
Teach For America

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.]

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

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

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

The Power of High Expectations

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
Teach For America**

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

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.

The Power of High Expectations

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

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. 

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. Asiyambi, when you going to make it to this side of the classroom. I need some help.”

**Susan Asiyambi, New Jersey ‘01
Senior Vice President,
Teacher Preparation, Support, and Development
Teach For America**

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 21.

The Challenge of Maintaining High Expectations

Chapter Three

- I. They're *How* Far Behind? Reality as a Threat to High Expectations
- II. "Kind-Hearted" Prejudice: Lowering Expectations Out of Concern and Sympathy
- III. Fighting Lowered Expectations for Your Students
- IV. Conclusion

In the previous chapter and readings, we explored the incredible power of high expectations. Many of our students are behind in their academic achievement precisely because we have *expected* them to be. We lower our standards for them and they consequently lower their effort. Research has consistently indicated that if we, as teachers, truly have high expectations for our students, they are much more likely to experience academic success.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the following excerpt, located in the Related Readings section:

- "Identity Development in Adolescence," a chapter from *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

Study after study has shown not only that teachers with high expectations have higher achieving students, but also that students in more difficult, more rigorous classes are more successful, even at the higher level of performance. In one such study, highlighted by the education policy think tank The Education Trust, students from "low," "regular" and "advanced" courses were all placed together in high-level courses. The result: ALL of the students, including those previously in the most basic courses, learned more and performed better in the "advanced" courses.⁴⁶

Results like these beg the question of what schools tend to call "ability." The conventional wisdom in American education has it that only the "top" students can handle algebra and high-level English. But not only is the identification of "top" students a slippery affair, the unlucky students classified as "low ability" never have a chance. Clearly, these students are *able* when they have *access* to the content.⁴⁷

Simply stated, "poor and minority youngsters will achieve at the same high levels as other students if they are taught at those levels."⁴⁸

These studies on the impact of high expectations are inspiring. We, as teachers, can rally around this approach because we know that it will help close the achievement gap for our students, and rigorous standards and expectations are within the realm of our control.

Unfortunately, as many corps members have experienced first hand, maintaining these high expectations is not nearly as simple as declaring one's intention to do so. Many new teachers are surprised to find just how much *work* it is to stay true to their pledge of high expectations, given (1) just how far behind their students are, and (2) the understandable but dangerous pull of sympathetic excuses that we are tempted to make for our students.

⁴⁶ Barth, Patte. "A Common Core Curriculum for the New Century." *Thinking K-16: A Publication of The Education Trust*. Winter 2003, Vol. 7, Issue 1, p. 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁴⁸ "Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap." *Thinking K-16: A Publication of The Education Trust*. Summer 1998, Vol. 3, Issue 2., p. 2.

The Challenge of Maintaining High Expectations

In this chapter, we will begin to explore and give solutions for both of those challenges to maintaining high expectations. We will conclude that discussion with an exploration of some of the concrete methods that you can incorporate into your teaching practice that will help you stem the influences of these challenges to high expectations.

I. “They’re *How Far Behind?*” Reality as a Threat to High Expectations

Perhaps the greatest challenge to high expectations is the achievement gap itself. Many new teachers enter the classroom fully dedicated to establishing and maintaining high expectations. And yet, as they encounter the stark reality of their students’ relatively low skill levels, they find their faith in maintaining high expectations is shaken, if not destroyed, by the long distance between their students’ current performance and truly high academic achievement. For example, you may discover that most of your fifth graders are reading on a second or third grade level (and the rest are just learning to read). Or, you may find that your seventh grade science students do not have the math skills necessary to perform any of the experiments called for by the curriculum, and that they struggle to read your “remedial” text. Or, perhaps you are shocked to find that your eleventh grade English students, whom you want to help apply for college, have difficulty writing one paragraph, let alone a college entrance essay.

Virtually every corps member you meet will share a similar story of shock, disappointment, and concern from the first days of school. Consider, for example, the reflection of Frank Lozier, a 2000 corps member who taught 8th grade English in Los Angeles:

Going into my English classroom, I was thrilled by the opportunity to bring in all the concepts that inspire me about literature—intertextuality across authors; complicated, innovative narration; race, class, and gender analysis. While I knew I had an enormous amount of work in getting my kids caught up to grade level, I spent the first weeks of September stunned by the stark reality. Where do I start? I thought to myself. Spelling? Sentence structure? Vocabulary? Punctuation? I was saddened, overwhelmed, and enraged by a system that had failed a generation of students. How could we discuss an author’s choices of racial representation if my kids couldn’t even independently comprehend the text? How would we produce written analyses of social injustice if they had difficulty consistently writing in complete sentences?

I knew I had a choice: I could a) keep lamenting and throw up my hands at the disturbing reality, b) lower my expectations and remain locked into teaching only the “basics” rather than challenging my kids to reach higher, or c) find a way to weave in the basics while pushing towards the highest levels of literary analysis. After a few weeks, I taught myself to break down and prioritize the grammar errors—first tackling my personal pet peeves, as well as the most glaring errors that would preclude my students from being respected by their readers—and the daunting reality became a challenge to undertake one objective at a time.

Even today, if I find my students not reaching objectives, I force myself to look in the mirror and ask, What can I do better tomorrow, or even next period? I’ve seen and experienced enough examples of success to know that, while difficult, it is absolutely possible. Staying connected to a community of effective teachers constantly builds my repertoire of strategies to reach every student. Observing great teachers, participating in my TFA learning team, attending workshops from the National Writing Project, reading books and articles written by exemplary educators—these are my four favorite ways to

sharpen my own saw to ensure that I am affording my students the best education. As a person of color who attended public schools, I was blessed with an education that over-prepared me for college. My students deserve nothing less.

Frank's experience is very common for new teachers in schools that serve students from low-income communities. Although we read and talk about the achievement gap frequently in preparation for that experience, the harsh reality of our students' academic needs can be overwhelming, and can quickly shake our confidence in those high expectations.

So, how *does* a new teacher maintain high expectations in the face of the stark reality that his or her students are *years* behind where they should be in terms of academic skills?

In addition to the so-obvious-as-to-be-unhelpful answers of "work hard" and "teach well," there are a number of strategies that corps members have developed and shared over the years that guide new teachers during this unsettling process of reconciling one's high expectations with the harsh reality of students' skill levels. The six principles, taken together, both provide a new teacher with a roadmap for meeting students' massive needs and help a teacher preserve the ambitious but realistic goals that the teacher has set for students' academic success:

- (1) Start with the basics.** When faced with the daunting and deflating disparity between where your students are and where you want them to be, it is often helpful to remember the great value of focusing on the most basic, fundamental academic skills first. This is not to say that you should "dumb down" the curriculum, nor should you dilute your goals to include only "the basics;" rather, this is to say that no matter what your assigned grade level and subject matter, you may need to give your students an intensive, accelerated, and on-going course in basic reading and math skills. In some cases, addressing such basics is the most valuable experience you can give your students and will set the foundation for moving on to your ambitious goals.
- (2) Take literacy instruction seriously.** A closely related idea is that all teachers of students on the low end of the achievement gap must teach literacy. Most of the time, when we say that our students are "behind," we mean, at least in part, that they lack basic literacy skills. The *Elementary* and *Secondary Literacy* texts provide you with a number of methods and tools to incorporate literacy instruction into your classroom, no matter what your original teaching assignment. Lagging reading skills trap our students in a cycle of slower and decelerating learning. Whatever your teaching assignment, you should plan on assessing and tracking your students literacy progress.
- (3) Reap the benefits of intellectual capacity that outpaces academic skills.** In addition to challenges, a classroom of students who are dramatically behind where they should be academically presents a great opportunity. Many corps members find that because students' intellectual maturity is in fact on grade level while their skill-development is not, those students are ripe for massive strides forward. That is, fifth graders who are reading on a second-grade level are able to make up that distance quickly because they do have the tools and insights of a fifth-grade mind to apply to second-grade learning. One of the common challenges for corps members is reconciling students' lower skill levels with their higher intellectual capacity; one usually doesn't want to ask one's fifth graders simply to read "baby second-grade" books, for example. (There are a few techniques to consider, including pairing with a lower-elementary class and having your older students read to them, or helping create audiobook tapes for younger classes, etc.)

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(4) Work faster, not slower. Some teachers respond to a classroom of students who are behind by setting a slower learning pace for those students. Precisely the opposite approach is needed. Your students *will* be behind. But, as mentioned above, they will have the capacity and potential for great growth. They need a teacher who will recognize that potential and drive them toward it, with an unwavering sense of urgency. They need a teacher that realizes that every second is precious. They need a teacher who thinks, “showing a video might be fine for kids who are on grade-level, but my students simply cannot afford to take the time to do that.” Think about the teachers described in the previous chapter. Would Mr. Esquith ever let a single minute go by without squeezing the most learning out of it that he can? Would students at KIPP find themselves working more slowly because they are behind?

(5) Benchmark your classroom’s pace and progress against “excellent classrooms” regularly. One of the best ways to “pace yourself” is to keep an eye on some excellent classrooms in excellent schools and to compare your students’ pace and progress with that of the students in those classrooms. If those students are reading fifteen books over the course of the year, why aren’t yours? And if your students have so much farther to go to catch up, why aren’t they reading thirty books? As mentioned earlier in this text, new teachers often find that visiting these excellent schools and classrooms energizes their focus on and determination to meet their ambitious goals for their students because those visits so starkly illustrate the unfairness of a system that educates some students well but not others.

I am practically a West Charlotte cheerleader in civilian clothes, both in my classroom and on the street. Before we take the district assessments, I talk about how excited I am to send our good data downtown so that everyone there will spit out their coffee in disbelief at our scores. I cheer and basically act like a fool as I am grading their mini-assessments while they’re working on other assignments, and my students have eventually gotten excited about proving the negative stereotypes about West Charlotte wrong. I make sure my kids are tracking their own progress, their class, my combined classes, and the school’s data versus the rest of the district. I let them know when we outperform the school and the district on certain objectives. And I let them know that they are the ones producing the data, so the success is theirs.

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(6) Teach at the intersection of “comfortable” and “challenging.” When faced with students who are so far behind, you simply must gauge and push the edges of students’ “comfort zone.” You certainly do not want to demand of students tasks that they cannot complete or they will become discouraged and lose the all-important motivation that you are fostering to reach your goals. At the same time, especially with students who are far behind, you must constantly push students to take learning risks by mixing in a fair amount of performance requests that are truly challenging for them. This calls for differentiating instruction for students at different levels.

II. “Kind-Hearted” Prejudice: Lowering Expectations Out of Concern and Sympathy

If the reality of our students’ low academic skills is one challenge to maintaining high expectations, the reality of our students’ lives is another. Sometimes, the more we learn about the various difficulties facing our students, the more we may be tempted to question the appropriateness of high expectations in the first place. When you think about all of the symptoms of poverty that can affect your students, at one point do you become tempted to say “we just cannot expect as much out of these students as we expect from those students in that affluent school across town”?

Consider the following thoughts that are representative of the kinds of thoughts that may creep into new teachers’ minds as they get to know their students:

- “Camilla has to work in the evenings so I should just let her sloppy homework slide.”
- “Oscar comes to school hungry—of course he’s going to act out during the morning meeting. I can live with that.”
- “Three of my students are just not meeting the minimal standards for fifth grade, but they usually try pretty hard. I’m going to see what I can do to make sure they pass on to sixth grade.”
- “Visiting Michael’s home was really eye-opening for me. It’s just so different from my own experience—it doesn’t feel right for me to come in and push Michael to focus on school when there’s so much going on at home,” OR “I know how tough what Michael is going through can be. I should give him a break on some of the demands of the classroom.”
- “Susan’s family has such a rich Navajo culture and tradition. Who am I to come in here and push her to achieve academically by standards set by our non-native culture and government?”

These statements represent the very real pull towards lowering expectations that can come with sympathy, concern, and respect for our students’ experiences. No matter what our own background or experience in relation to low-income communities, because our students’ lives may be difficult or different, we may want to “do them the favor” of backing off on our academic demands. The fact is, however, that lowering our expectations—no matter what the motivation—will not be a favor to our students.

Once again, perhaps the most compelling way to digest this idea is through the experience of new teachers before you who have dealt with this struggle to maintain their focus on academic success despite all the challenges in their students’ lives. Consider, for example, the written reflection of Kate Sobel, Los Angeles ’98. She taught first grade and agreed to share her experience with one student, Ernesto—an experience that, for her, has always reminded her of the challenge and importance of maintaining high expectations for every student:

“Mm Mm Miss Sobel,” Jaime stuttered. “My brother’s gonna be in your class this year. Mm Ms Powell said so.” I looked to the door to see two little heads peeking into Room B. “Come on in boys,” I said. “I’d love some help setting up for the first day of school.” Ernesto came into my room for the first time, looked around and grinned a wide smile. Four years in the classroom and my eyes looked past the too-big shoes, too-short pants

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and backwards t-shirt to see the excitement in this soon to be a 1st-grader's eyes. Ernesto and Jaime spent the day putting up butcher paper, organizing the library and unpacking boxes of fresh-tipped crayons. Ernesto was off to a good start. I had big plans for the students of Room B, and Ernesto was already high on my list.

Looking around my room at the end of that year and thinking back to that initial encounter, I wondered how I had managed to put my high expectations for Ernesto aside. I spent so much time with him that year - I grew to love his toothless smile and misfit uniforms. But all of that time and I lost sight of my expectations and my primary responsibilities as a teacher. I let Ernesto go through an entire year of first grade without learning to read.

I think about it all the time. It's one of those things that seemed to be part of a year flying by. I remember each incident clearly but I can't remember when I decided to put my academic priorities aside for Ernesto. There was the time when, with a tooth so rotten it made his face swell like a football, I sent him home with explicit directions to stay there until he had seen the dentist. And the afternoons when he and his brother ate peanut butter and crackers, content to use tutoring time to eat a much-needed snack. And all the time I spent talking to his mom about bedtime, and visits to the clinic, and getting new clothes. Somehow, when Ernesto walked through my doors in the morning my mind spun through a checklist that was different from when I greeted other students in the class. Instead of: Homework? Check. Does he know his spelling words this week? Check. Have I talked to his mom about the research project we're doing on ocean animals? Check... I jumped to sending him to the bathroom with soap and a toothbrush, checking to make sure he was wearing socks, and that he brought a jacket for recess. I had so much to give but I forgot to teach.

Ernesto spent a year in first grade with me better fed and cleaner than perhaps he is now as a fourth grader, but because I forgot to teach Ernesto he spent two years in first grade. The year he left room B to join a first grade class for the second time, Ernesto learned to read with his peers. Another teacher looked past the too-big shoes, too-short pants and backwards t-shirt to see his potential as a student. She may not have had a secret stash of snacks in a drawer with his name on it, but she gave him what he really needed - and he lived up to her expectations.

As Kate's experience suggests, succumbing to "kind-hearted" temptation to lower expectations can be just as damaging, from students' perspective, as believing that the students cannot meet the high expectations that you have set for them. In fact, if you think about the implications of this idea, you come to realize that the teachers who believe and act on statements like those above are just as guilty of limiting their students' academic achievement and life prospects as a teacher who flat-out states that "poor kids can't learn." The teachers who conform to those statements are essentially creating the achievement gap with their supposed "kindness."

In order to be more aware of times when "benign" discrimination like this is sneaking into your teaching practice, it is helpful to parse this tendency into several common strands as experienced by new teachers. Consider each of these four guidelines for avoiding these forms of "well-intended" lowered expectations. Ask yourself which of these principles you are most and least likely to have trouble following:

- (1) Define kindness in terms of learning rather than excuses.** Kindness takes many, many forms, but making excuses for poor performance is not one of them. If you see a problem in your student's life, you do what you can to take action to help, but you must also maintain focus on

instruction. As you develop your own teaching practice, take the time to think about your interactions with students—especially those that initially seem like kind acts. Are they all aligned with your goal of maintaining high expectations? Are you doing students any “favors” that are actually lowering your expectations for them?

(2) Recognize that *problems* that are outside your control do not necessarily mean a lack of achievement-related *solutions*. Sometimes, we find ourselves facing students’ living conditions that are simply not in the realm of our influence. Perhaps a student is a migrant worker and has to leave in the spring to go north to work. Perhaps a student is pregnant. Perhaps a student has asthma related to environmental hazards in his neighborhood. We look at those situations and we may be discouraged that we cannot change the root condition or problem; and yet, we should not allow that discouragement to blind us to possible achievement-related solutions. In every case, there are creative means of ensuring students’ achievement despite the obstacle (without necessarily taking on the obstacle itself). You may not be able to affect the fact that a student’s home arrangement is not conducive to homework, but there are a number of creative ways of getting that student the quiet time and space elsewhere he or she needs to complete it. You may not be able to change the fact that a student does not have a structured environment at home, but that does not stop you from creating structured expectations around behavior and academic performance at school.

(3) Maintain your convictions about the value of academic achievement despite your (possible) unfamiliarity with students’ lives and lifestyles.

We all want to respect and appreciate the difficult cultures and lifestyles that we see in our students, schools, and communities. We must not, however, confuse that important principle with a relativistic view that we have no business “imposing” the value of academic achievement on our students. We are committed to the value of academic achievement, as it will inevitably expand our students’ life prospects, giving them more and better choices in life. Imagine, for example, that you are teaching on a reservation in New Mexico, and you have the utmost respect and admiration for Navajo culture. That respect should not in any way compromise your dedication to academic achievement—these are not mutually exclusive interests. Our students’ families want their children to learn, and they may express that interest in a variety of ways. While we might adjust the manner in which we strive for academic excellence given the cultural norms of our community, we should not confuse our respect and admiration for that culture with a need to change or lower our high expectations for student achievement.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned as a teacher has been to distinguish between the things I can't change and the things I can change. Hearing about the pressures and challenges my students face outside of my classroom can be overwhelming and often leaves me with a sense of hopelessness. Hearing my student struggle to read aloud only re-energizes me because I know that IS something I can change.

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Relaxing your expectations for any student—whether out of concern for difficult situations at home or in the community, or out of respect for a culture that is different from our own—in the end only hurts that student by lowering achievement and thereby limiting life-prospects.

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III. Fighting Lowered Expectations for Your Students

Clearly, maintaining high expectations is not as simple as pledging to do so. As impassioned as we might be about the importance of high expectations, and as sincere as we may be in our promise to act on and implement them in our classroom, all of us face an uphill battle to maintain them. We must accept the challenge posed by the reality of our students' low skill levels, and we must be careful not to be an accomplice to lowered expectations through "benign" factors such as sympathy and certain school structures.

Generations of new teachers have discovered the difficulty inherent in maintaining high expectations for their students. Here we have collected a few of the "best practices" for ensuring that you are successful in overcoming that difficulty:

(1) Proactively and incessantly affirm and nurture high expectations. Given the background of forces constantly eroding high expectations for our students, you must recognize that affirmative energy and work is required even to maintain the high expectations you have already established. Every day your students are being exposed to messages that conflict with your messages of high achievement. Every day you may be tempted by well-intended sympathy or concern or respect for your students' experiences to give in a little on the rigorous standards of achievement that you have set for them. You must be perpetually vigilant and re-assert your messages of achievement.

Before entering my classroom, I knew that low expectations and negative stereotypes for my students existed, but I think I was surprised by the extent to which my students had internalized them. To counteract this, I had to make sure that I was constantly rewarding and recognizing them for positive behavior and academic achievement. It took a while for students to want to behave and achieve this way because the stereotypes and expectations were so powerful.

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(2) Challenge others' statements of lowered expectations swiftly and with real-world evidence. As a teacher of students in low-income communities, you will encounter messages of lowered expectations frequently. Sometimes those messages will come from surprising sources: not just television, but from co-workers, administrators, and sometimes even students and students' families. Address those comments when you hear them. And, just as importantly, demonstrate those comments' fallacy by introducing the speaker to the success of your students—even if (and especially if) that speaker is your student. Consider, as examples, the following actual statements heard by corps members and the corresponding ways to answer those statements:

Statement	Response
<p><i>From an administrator:</i> “Those students don’t get a thesaurus, because that level ESL is too low for the blue dictionary.”</p>	<p>This teacher might respectfully explain that her academic goals for these students will actually take them well beyond the level of the blue dictionary and explain, using data from her benchmark assessments, that her students are already handling material in the blue dictionary. She could then set an appointment to return to get a thesaurus.</p>
<p><i>From a fellow teacher:</i> “It is too much to expect parents here to have their students read 21 minutes a night.”</p>	<p>The teacher who is told this might explain that, actually, her students’ parents have really rallied around the ambitious goals he has set for the students and, based on his Reading Time Reporting system, every single student is reading AT LEAST 21 minutes a night. In fact, his students are up to an average of 33 minutes per night. This teacher might go on to describe a few of the concrete signs of the benefits of this campaign on the academic achievement of students in class.</p>
<p><i>A corps member who taught a self-contained class for students with emotional disabilities, reports:</i> “Other teachers would frequently walk past me in the hall and, often in front of their classes, say ‘I have a student for you!’ or ‘I don’t know how you do it, you must be a saint!’ These statements undermined the self-esteem of all the students involved.”</p>	<p>This teacher might discuss with her students why those teachers said those things. (As described in Chapter 3 of Learning Theory in the section on “Demystification,” students often respond positively to an explicit and respectful discussion of their learning differences.) Once those differences are named and the students know that this class is designed to teach to those differences, discussions of each student’s highly ambitious goals (as described in his or her IEP) are possible and fruitful. Finally, the teacher might follow up with the teachers who said those things and describe to them some of the progress students have made. It might be a good idea to ask those other teachers for help in communicating high expectations of success to the students, perhaps even “planting” with the teacher a few specific statements to mention in front of and about particular students that acknowledge those students’ achievement so far.</p>

(3) Flip the “malleable intelligence switch.” If you will recall from the *Teaching As Leadership* book (Chapter Two), a considerable and growing body of research indicates that one negative effect of low expectations is that students internalize the idea that no matter how hard they work, they will not achieve success. As a result, they often see their academic ability as fixed and thus tend to choose easier assignments and be less resilient about failures.

As a teacher, you must indoctrinate your students with the idea of “malleable intelligence”—that the notion of “intelligence” is not a fixed, permanent idea that cannot be improved. Students that believe their intelligence is correlated with their effort are more likely to tackle risky, challenging tasks and to rebound from failures by redoubling their effort. Part of your role as a teacher of students who may have been deflated by low expectations is to “flip this switch” in their mind, to make them realize that their hard work will in fact lead to academic success. (For more on these two different perspectives and how to drive home this idea with students, see *Teaching As Leadership*, Chapter Two.)

The first thing I teach my students is the theory of malleable intelligence. We look at examples of people who have worked hard, overcome obstacles, and achieved audacious goals. I point to the students’ own accomplishments in school or in extra-curriculum activities and show them role models in their community who genuinely want them to succeed. Students need to know that they have family, faculty, and staff members who want them to achieve their goals.

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- (4) Search for your own hidden biases and “unpack” your own privilege.** One of the most important methods of fighting the barrage of lowered expectations that grind away at your and your students’ visions of academic success is to monitor your own thoughts and perspectives for hidden biases and prejudices. We have found that corps members of all backgrounds and perspectives can benefit from the self-reflection involved in searching for our personal hidden biases and privileges. What stereotypes about your students (that you see and hear on a daily basis) have impacted your perspectives? In what settings, if any, have we enjoyed some unearned privilege because of our race, ethnicity, gender, age, or socioeconomic status? No matter to what degree we identify with our students’ identities and backgrounds, by becoming aware of our hidden biases and unearned privileges, we are much more able to check and correct the ways in which we might be inadvertently contributing to the lowered expectations that we are trying to fight for the sake of our students’ achievement.

IV. Conclusion

The high standards of excellence that you have pledged to expect of your students will immediately be challenged when you start teaching. You may find your own dedication to those standards shaken by the shockingly low performance of your students at the beginning of the year. You may also find yourself tempted to lower your expectations out of misguided sympathy, concern, or respect for your students’ lives. You must not allow these influences to undermine your high expectations for your students’ success.

At this point, please turn to the Related Readings section and read “Identity Development in Adolescence,” a chapter from Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*