

THE CHALLENGE OF MAINTAINING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

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 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

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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

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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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.

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.