Helping Students of Color Meet High Standards

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Some teachers cultivate classroom environments that are highly effective in helping students do their best work consistently. This essay discusses research in elementary schools with a wide range of racial compositions, representing both urban and suburban locations in northeastern and midwestern states. Student and teacher surveys were conducted as part of the Tripod Project for School Improvement, which I founded several years ago. The evidence suggests that students invest more effort under two instructional conditions I call "high help" (i.e., when the teacher communicates convincingly that she likes it when they ask questions and loves to help them when they get confused or make mistakes) and "high perfectionism" (i.e., when the teacher continually presses students to strive not only for understanding but also for accuracy as they complete their assignments).

The combined effect of these two conditions appeared to be especially significant in classrooms where African American and Latino students were the majority. Most such classrooms in this research were predominantly African American, with some Latinos, and included Native American, Pacific Islander, Arab, and multiracial students. Teaching styles characterized by high help with high perfectionism correlated with good behavior, positive peer supports for achievement, and persistent effort. High help environments, especially when accompanied by high perfectionism, elicited better behavior and greater academic engagement in classrooms of all racial compositions, but appeared substantially more important for classrooms where three-quarters or more of the students were students of color. Hence, combining cheerful helpfulness with pressure for producing correct answers is an antiracist strategy for raising achievement and narrowing achievement gaps.

When white students were the majority, the most common classroom type found in this study was high help, low perfectionism. Teachers seemed very happy to provide assistance but did not press much for correct answers. For whites, this combination appeared to produce the best behavior and only slightly less persistent effort than high help, high perfectionism. Conversely, the most common classroom type when students of color were the vast majority was the opposite, low help with high perfectionism, a combination that produced much worse behavior and substantially lower effort. The final type of classroom, low help with low perfectionism, was the worst by any measure.

In classrooms where students of color were more than 75 percent of the student body, any condition other than high help with high perfectionism was associated with a particularly large decline in student effort and persistence by the spring. Conversely, in classrooms where teachers practiced high help with high perfectionism, students showed sustained persistence in effort from fall to spring. In high help, high perfectionism classrooms, 77 percent affirmed in the spring that they had done their best all year.

What are high help, high perfectionism pedagogies? Compared to teachers in other classrooms, teachers in high help and high perfectionism classrooms reported significantly greater agreement with the first five statements below:

1. I have several ways of explaining the things that students find difficult to understand.
2. I welcome questions, even if it slows the class down.
3. I try to pay special attention to students who seem sad or upset.
4. I talk to students about their lives outside of school.
5. I talk about the joy of learning.

More than other teachers, these teachers' survey responses indicated that they also applied these pedagogic strategies:

1. When planning lessons, they thought about whether students would enjoy them.
2. They tried to call on low achievers as much as on high achievers.
3. They often waited for students to answer when called on, even if it took a long time.
4. They encouraged low achievers to ask questions and did not fear that this would slow the class down too much.
5. They felt equally effective at teaching students from various racial backgrounds.

When examined together, teacher and student survey responses suggested that the most powerful helping practices were welcoming questions from low achievers and waiting for low achievers to respond when called upon.

It is important to note that insistence on correct answers (perfectionism) can be problematic in the absence of assistance. While a teacher might believe she is serving students of color well by having high expectations, if she does not help her students sufficiently to meet her goals she can do them
Disservice, since students of color are particularly at risk for believing that they may be unable to succeed with difficult work (see Cohen, Chapter 16). Students' responses offered insights into what high perfectionism classrooms entail in the absence of high help. Compared to students in high help, high perfectionism classrooms, students in low help, high perfectionism classrooms (the most common for students of color) reported more than that:

1. High achievers get called on much more than low achievers.
2. The teacher tells individual students when peers outperform them.
3. Students are made to feel that doing poorly on an assignment is a bad thing, even if they tried their best.
4. Struggling students are allowed to give up when the work gets hard.
5. Mistakes are strongly frowned upon, even if students are learning.
6. When students do poorly on assignments, they are seldom given opportunities to redo the work to improve it.

These conditions also impaired peer support. Students in low help, high perfectionism classrooms agreed more that "In our class, some kids tease you if you make a mistake" and "In our class, kids tell you when they do better than you." Peers and teachers seemed less supportive.

If students are pressed to achieve correct answers on challenging work that adequate assistance, some may come to believe that success is impossible, resulting in anxiety and disengagement from academic tasks. An excessive emphasis on correct answers can detract from the joy of learning and encourage a focus on extrinsic instead of intrinsic sources of satisfaction. To avoid high perfectionism, low help conditions, teachers should:

1. Avoid calling disproportionately on high achievers.
2. Avoid interpersonal comparisons of student performance that reflect negatively on some students, such as telling students when peers outperformed them.
3. Help students understand that making mistakes is okay if they tried their best.
4. Push students to persist, but also give appropriate assistance, when assignments seem too difficult.
5. Emphasize that the major goal is thorough understanding, not simply right answers; making mistakes is okay as long as students are learning.
6. Give students periodic opportunities to redo assignments on which they do poorly.

Any of these assignments aim to help students develop higher-order thinking and reasoning skills and may have no single correct response.

In such cases, an emphasis on correct answers is misguided; the focus should be on careful reasoning.

Persistent effort throughout the school year tended to be highest for all racial groups and all classroom racial compositions when both help and perfectionism were high. Failure to combine ample assistance with high expectations appeared to have the greatest detrimental consequences where students of color were the majority of the class.

Every teacher should seek ways to communicate, "I truly love to answer your questions, but I also insist that you concentrate in order to complete your work accurately." A consistent and compassionate effort to transmit this message, especially to students of color, is an antiracist strategy for improving behavior, increasing persistence, raising performance levels, and narrowing achievement gaps within and among elementary school classrooms.

RESOURCES


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle**: What do you make of Ferguson's finding that "high help, high perfectionism" teaching was particularly successful in classrooms serving many children of color, but was less common than "low help, high perfectionism" in classrooms of such demographics?

2. **Strategy**: Think of a teacher you know whose pedagogy seems to fit the "high help, high perfectionism" model. What sorts of interactions and activities occur in his or her classroom?

3. **Try tomorrow**: What's one specific way you could convey a stance of high help, high perfectionism to your students?

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