



Common Beliefs

COMMON BELIEF 1

*I don't think of my students in terms of their race or ethnicity.
I am color blind when it comes to my teaching.*

Background

When teachers say they are color blind, they are usually saying that they do not discriminate and that they treat all their students equally. Of course, being fair and treating each student with respect are essential to effective teaching. However, race and ethnicity often play important roles on children's identities, and contribute to their culture, their behavior, and their beliefs. When race and ethnicity are ignored, teachers miss opportunities to help students connect with what is being taught. Recognizing that a student's race and ethnicity influences their learning allows teachers to be responsive to individual differences. In some cases, ignoring a student's race and ethnicity may undermine a teacher's ability to understand student behavior and student confidence in doing well in a school culture where expectations and communication are unfamiliar. An individual's race and ethnicity are central to her or his sense of self but they are not the whole of personal identity. Moreover, how important an individual's race and ethnicity is to their identity will vary and teachers need to take that into account as they seek to learn more about their students.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some ways for educators to acknowledge students' ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic identities?
2. Why is it important to incorporate their identities into the curriculum?
3. What happens when teachers don't validate their students' racial and ethnic identities?

COMMON BELIEF 2

*The gap in the achievement among students of different races
is about poverty, not race.*

Background

Studies of the influences on student achievement invariably show that students' family income is a significant correlate of low achievement. However, even when students' socioeconomic status is taken into account, race often accounts for variance in student performance. The reasons for this are complex and experts disagree about why this is so. Most experts dismiss explanations having to do with race-related "culture" (i.e., the culture of poverty thesis) or genetic differences among races. Some experts believe that the racial influence on achievement lies in the experiences students of color may have in school—such as low expectations, teaching that is insufficiently responsive to differences in student interests and needs, or differential access to learning

opportunities. There is considerable agreement among researchers that “stereotype threat”—students’ belief that societal stereotypes about the limits of the academic abilities of African American, Latino and Native American students have merit—can discourage such students from seeking to achieve at high levels.

Questions to Consider

1. How does “stereotype threat” bring race to the surface in (a) understanding student achievement and (b) fostering productive student-teacher relationships?
2. How do school-based policies and practices reflect institutional racism?
3. What can be done to dismantle racial bias and misconceptions in the American educational system?

COMMON BELIEF 3

Teachers should adapt their instructional practice to the distinctive cultures of African American, Latino, Asian and Native American students.

Background

Teachers who are responsive to their students’ values, beliefs and experiences will be more effective than those who are not. Some generalizations can be made about the cultures of different racial and ethnic groups that can help teachers to begin to understand their students. However, these generalizations also can lead to stereotypes and a failure to recognize that within broad racial and ethnic groupings (e.g., Latino and Asian) there are very big average differences related to subgroups (e.g., Chinese Americans and Cambodian Americans) and social class differences within groups. Moreover, even within subgroups and students of similar socioeconomic status, there are often significant differences in the factors that influence student learning. There is no substitute for getting to know each student well and adapting instruction to these realities.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some ways in which teachers can view the cultures of their students without stereotyping them?
2. How might teachers learn about the cultural perspectives and practices of their students?
3. What is culturally relevant pedagogy?

COMMON BELIEF 4

In some cultures, students are embarrassed to speak in front of others so I take this into account and don’t call on these students in class.

Background

Some students learn lessons in their homes and communities about appropriate behavior that discourage them from participating actively in class discussions. Others prefer to work in small groups or on their own but not to speak out in class. For example, such dispositions are common among some Native American students and some students of Asian descent. Clearly teachers need to be sensitive to such concerns among their students. On the other hand, when students do not learn to express themselves in public settings and to feel confident about their verbal abilities, this may undermine the development of verbal skills, and of literacy more generally. This, in turn, limits their willingness and

capacity to take on certain potentially rewarding roles and responsibilities. Of course, the reluctance of some students to engage in class may not be an artifact of culture at all. Thus, generalizations about cultural characteristics should be treated as possible explanations rather than definitive diagnoses.

Questions to Consider

1. How does a culturally relevant curriculum validate the cultural identity of students?
2. What is the connection between students' cultural identities and knowledge of their history?
To explore these and other questions, take a closer look at the resources below.

COMMON BELIEF 5

When students come from homes where educational achievement is not a high priority, they often don't do their homework and their parents don't come to school events. This lack of parental support undermines my efforts to teach these students.

Background

When families (not all students live with or are primarily cared for by one or more parents) do not get engaged in supporting their children's learning, the job of the teacher is more difficult. The reasons why families don't get involved are many. They may lack interest, but more often parents cannot get to the school, feel that they lack the knowledge of resources to help, or feel that they do not know what their role should be. This is especially true, of course, for families from some cultures, for those who do not feel comfortable with English and for single parents who may work more than one job and have responsibilities for caring for other children. Schools that support teachers in reaching out to families in several ways, and that see family engagement as a school-wide responsibility, can significantly increase the extent to which families help their children do well in school.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some explanations for why parents avoid coming to their children's school?
2. How can educators invite and encourage the involvement of families?

COMMON BELIEF 6

It is not fair to ask students who are struggling with English to take on challenging academic assignments.

Background

It is certainly true that English Language Learners (ELLs) who are struggling with English may, and probably will have, more trouble with tasks that require reading than students whose native language is English. However, when English language learners are asked to do less challenging work than other students, they can fall behind and, perhaps, stay behind. In some cases, difficulty with English is erroneously perceived by educators as limited academic ability. Teachers need to guard against having low expectations for English language learners and using biased assessments that reinforce those low expectations. The challenge is to engage all students in learning content at relatively high levels. This means that teachers need to seek or provide extra help for students whose English is limited to ensure that they have the same learning opportunities as their English

speaking peers. Easier said than done, of course. But it is important to recognize that English language learners often need years to master academic language, which is more complex than the social language they acquire more quickly. Therefore, English language learners need to begin to learn academic language immediately, to prevent them from falling behind.

Questions to Consider

1. How can teachers both view and utilize students' home language in a positive manner?
2. How can teachers facilitate the development of academic English for ELLs?

COMMON BELIEF 7

I believe that I should reward students who try hard, even if they are not doing well in school because building their self-esteem is important.

Background

It is certainly true that students who are confident in their ability to do well in school achieve at higher levels than do students with the same ability who lack this sense of efficacy. However, if students come to believe that they are achieving at high levels when they are not, this can lead to a belief that they need not work harder. If they realize that other, less-able students are receiving recognitions similar to theirs, this may lead students to believe that less is expected of them than their classmates. This, of course, is the case—less is being expected and students can take this as evidence that they do not have the ability to achieve at high levels. High self-esteem does not, in itself, translate to high academic performance. But, when high self-esteem is derived from solid performance in school, this contributes to student engagement and effort to improve further.

Question to Consider

1. What do teachers need to keep in mind as they raise the learning expectations for students who are not as confident in their capabilities as learners?

COMMON BELIEF 8

I try to keep in mind the limits of my students' abilities and give them assignments that I know they can do so that they do not become discouraged.

Background

Students do need to experience success in order to stay motivated. It makes sense, therefore, to give students work that they can accomplish. The potential downside here is that this will lead to lower expectations by both students and teachers. The challenge for teachers, then, is to be clear about the ultimate academic goal and ensure that students engage in increasingly demanding work in order to meet that goal. When that work is accompanied by teacher support and the expectation of success, students achieve at high levels.

Question to Consider

1. What are some ways that educators can simultaneously have high expectations of their students and acknowledge their individual needs?

COMMON BELIEF 9

Students of different races and ethnicities often have different learning styles and good teachers will match their instruction to these learning styles.

Background

Many teachers have learned that they should take into account the learning styles of their students. But the concept of learning styles has different meanings and much recent research on learning does not talk about learning styles. Among the reasons why many cognitive psychologists discount the importance of learning styles is that this intuitively sensible idea is easily abused. For example, we all prefer to learn in some ways more than others. But this does not mean that our brains function differently when we learn. And, if our preferences are reinforced, we may fail to learn how to learn in other ways. Since we cannot control the demands on us to learn, especially outside of school, being taught in terms of our preferred “learning style” can limit our success in solving problems. Some ways of describing learning styles—such as distinctions between “concrete operationalizing” and “abstract conceptualization” (or “logical-mathematical” and “bodily-kinesthetic”)—implicitly represent a hierarchy of academic learning capabilities. Thus, students not challenged to learn to conceptualize complex phenomena will be disadvantaged in taking on many tasks most highly valued by society and essential to complex problem solving.

Question to Consider

1. What are some ways that educators can have high expectations of their students, while acknowledging their individual needs?

COMMON BELIEF 10

Grouping students of different levels of achievement for instruction may benefit some students, but it can undermine the progress that could otherwise be made by higher-achieving students.

Background

The research suggests that most students can benefit from participating in learning groups comprised of students who have different levels of achievement and in which students of different races and ethnicities participate. But to say that this can be the case is not to say that it will. The success of heterogeneous groups depends a great deal on the extent to which teachers carefully structure group work and prepare all students to participate, taking into account the needs and dispositions of each student. There are also times when students need instruction targeted on particular skills and should be grouped with students who have similar needs. Educators should avoid tracking students by ability and should strive for grouping strategies that best enhances students’ opportunities to learn.

Question to Consider

1. What are some strategic approaches to using group learning in the classroom?

COMMON BELIEF 11

Before students are asked to engage in complex learning tasks, they need to have a solid grasp of basic skills.

Background

The “basic skills first” approach to learning is intuitively sensible and is reinforced by some curricula. Of course, students must learn basic skills. However, when students are not given challenging problem solving tasks at early stages of their cognitive development, it is likely that they will not develop important skills and dispositions. This is particularly problematic for students who do not experience opportunities for problem solving (high cognitive demand) in their homes. So, when the curriculum turns to lessons that demand the ability to make judgments and inferences, basic skills first students will be disadvantaged. Moreover, when students are struggling with so-called basic skills, but are not given more demanding work in school, these students may not learn how interesting and useful learning can be. Additionally, when basic skills are taught in isolation from authentic contexts—such as a worksheet rather than a short story—students do not learn to apply what they have been taught or recognize what they have learned in a variety of contexts. Teachers need to ensure that struggling students do not become struggling thinkers.

Question to Consider

1. What are some ways to incorporate complex problem solving in basic-skills assignments?

COMMON BELIEF 12

With all the pressures to raise student achievement, finding and using examples of the cultural, historic and everyday lived experiences of my students takes valuable away (or could take away) time from teaching and learning what matters most.

Background

In many schools throughout the country, high stakes accountability programs have pressured teachers to narrow the curriculum and focus on the short-run task of having students do well on the next standardized test. If this means that teachers do not have time or motivation to try to understand how their students’ dispositions and experiences related to race and ethnicity can influence their learning, the likely result will be lower student achievement, especially for students who may be struggling the most. Good teaching requires that teachers build on their students’ prior knowledge. Moreover, students learn best when they feel recognized and acknowledged for the aspects of their identity they deem important. When students feel that their identities are ignored or not respected, they often disengage from learning and adopt a stance of outsider among strangers. As most teachers recognize, achievement tests measure only part of what it is important for students to learn and “achievement” is not the same as learning.

Question to Consider

1. How might you make time to better understand your students, even in a climate that favors high-stakes test preparation over student-teacher relationships?

COMMON BELIEF 13

Talking about race with my colleagues could open up a can of worms — little good is likely to come from it.

Background

Talking about what appear to be racial issues with respect to student interactions, student-teacher interactions or interactions among members of the school staff is uncommon. Race is a “hot button” in our country and it may feel that discussing potential misunderstandings or conflicts will make things worse. Moreover, many worry about being seen as insensitive or preoccupied with race. No doubt some issues that could be race-related are not. But, this cannot be known without bringing up the issue. While the country has made great progress in reducing racial prejudice and discrimination, negative stereotypes, concerns about fairness, and the absence of comfort in interracial relationships persist, especially when the stakes of common action or the resolution of interpersonal conflict are high. In schools where racial issues are openly dealt with, school leaders make clear that it is important to be candid and to trust one another while ensuring that action is taken when problems are surfaced.

Questions to Consider

1. Why is it important to openly discuss issues that are seen as having racial dimensions?
2. What do educators need to do to foster productive examination of issues that are seen by some—or all—as being influenced by the race or ethnicity? What are some examples of effective strategies for initiating and facilitating conversations about race?