



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series March 2012

## What Do All Students Need from All Teachers?

In this *Educational Leadership* article entitled, *Teach Up for Excellence*, differentiation guru Carol Ann Tomlinson (University of Virginia) and EDEquity founder Edwin Lou Javius note that until quite recently, U.S. schools were legally segregated and unequal based on race. Today, there is still significant racial and economic separation within schools. “The logic behind separating students by what educators perceive to be their ability is that it enables teachers to provide students with the kind of instruction they need,” say Tomlinson and Javius. “All too often, however, students in lower-level classrooms receive a level of education that ensures they will remain at the tail end of the learning spectrum.”

The deepest wounds that schools inflict on students, they continue, “are wounds of underestimation. We underestimate students when they come to us with skills and experiences that differ from the ones we expected and we conclude they’re incapable of complex work. We underestimate students when they fall short of expectations because they don’t understand the school game and we determine that they lack motivation. We underestimate them when we allow them to shrink silently into the background of the action in the classroom. We underestimate them, too, when we assume they’re doing well in school because they earn high grades, and we praise them for reaching a performance level that required no risk or struggle.”

This is a shame, they say, because low-achieving students flourish when they’re exposed to high-level instruction. We know the human brain is “incredibly malleable, and that individuals can nearly always outperform our expectations of them... Virtually all students would benefit from the kind of curriculum and instruction we have often reserved for advanced learners – that is, curriculum and instruction designed to engage students, with a focus on meaning making, problem solving, logical thinking, and transfer of learning.”

These convictions bring Tomlinson and Javius to seven principles for “teaching up” – that is, creating classrooms that give all students access to high achievement:

- *Accept that human differences are normal and desirable.* “Each person has something of value to contribute to the group, and the group is diminished without that contribution,” say Tomlinson and Javius. “Teachers who teach up create a community of learners in which everyone works together to benefit both individuals and the group.”

- *Develop a growth mindset.* This means “doggedly challenging the preconception that high ability dwells largely in more privileged students,” say the authors. “The greatest barrier to learning is often not what the student knows, but what the teacher expects of the student.” Growth-mindset teachers emphasize hard work, set clear learning goals, and provide support and feedback along the way.
- *Work to understand students’ cultures, interests, needs, and perspectives.* “Teaching any student well means striving to understand how that student approaches learning and creating an environment that is respectful of and responsive to what each student brings to the classroom,” say Tomlinson and Javius.
- *Create a base of rigorous learning opportunities.* This includes discipline-specific knowledge and skill expectations, connections with students’ lives, collaboration with peers, looking at different perspectives, and having students create authentic products for real audiences.
- *Understand students’ varied entry-points and curriculum speed.* “Teachers who teach up understand that some students may feel racially and culturally isolated in their classes,” say Tomlinson and Javius. “Therefore, they find multiple ways for students to display their insights for the group. These teachers understand that every student needs ‘peacock’ moments of success so classmates accept them as intellectual contributors.”
- *Create flexible classroom routines and procedures.* The trick is to draw on classroom assessments, formal and informal, to accommodate the inevitable range of student needs. “Teachers who teach up carefully select times when the class works as a whole, when students work independently, and when students work in groups,” say Tomlinson and Javius. “They teach their students when and how to help one another as well as how to guide their own work effectively.”
- *Be an analytical practitioner.* Effective teachers are students of their students. “They empower students to teach them, as teachers, what makes students most successful,” say the authors.

## REFERENCE

“Teach Up for Excellence” by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Edwin Lou Javius in *Educational Leadership*, February 2012 (Vol. 69, #5, p. 28-33), <http://www.ascd.org>.

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