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Helping Students of Color to Meet High Standards

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Some teachers and the classroom environments that they cultivate are more effective than others at helping students consistently to do their best work. Further, the degree to which any particular environment steadily produces high effort may differ depending upon the racial composition of the student body. This essay discusses evidence collected in elementary schools with a wide range of racial compositions, representing both urban and suburban locations mostly in Northeastern and Midwestern states.¹ The evidence suggests that students behave better and persist more when two instructional conditions obtain. First, the teacher communicates convincingly that she likes it when they ask questions and loves to help when they get confused or make mistakes. Second, the teacher continually presses students to strive not only for understanding, but also for accuracy as they complete their assignments.² The combined effect of these two conditions—*High Help* and *High Perfectionism*—appears to be especially large in classrooms where non-Asian students of color are the vast majority. This racial differential in apparent effectiveness suggests that combining cheerful helpfulness with a press for producing correct answers might well be considered an “anti-racist” strategy for raising achievement and narrowing achievement gaps.

¹ All did surveys as part of the Tripod Project for School Improvement, of which the author is the founder.

² Non-Asian students of color were mostly African Americans with some Latinos and a few Native Americans, South Pacific Islanders and Arabic students. Some were also mixed race.

Consider four types of classrooms, based on mid-winter survey responses from students in over 500 elementary school classrooms. In these four classroom types, students responded very differently when asked about *how much their teacher liked helping them* (for example, “My teacher likes it when I ask questions”) and *how perfectionist their teacher was* (for example, “In our class, getting right answers is very important.”)

In the first type of classroom, *Low Help with Low Perfectionism*, a below-average percentage of students believed that their teacher liked helping them; in addition, a below-average percentage responded that their teacher placed a high premium on correct answers. In the second type of classroom, *Low Help with High Perfectionism*, a below average percentage believed that their teacher liked to help them, but an above average percentage perceived a heavy emphasis on getting correct answers. The third type of classroom, *High Help with Low Perfectionism*, is the type where an above-average percentage believed that the teacher loved to help, but a below-average percentage perceived a heavy emphasis on correct answers. Finally, in the fourth type of classroom the percentages believing that the teacher loves to help and also places a heavy emphasis on correctness were both above average. This is the *High Help with High Perfectionism* classroom type.

This essay concerns the special importance of *High Help with High Perfectionism* pedagogy for achieving good behavior, positive peer supports for achievement, and persistent effort in classrooms where students of color are the vast majority (specifically, 75 percent or more). Notably, *High Help* environments (irrespective of perfectionism) elicit better behavior and greater academic engagement in classrooms of *all* racial

compositions. However, *High Perfectionism* (when *accompanied* by *High Help*) appears substantially more important for classrooms where three-quarters or more are [non-Asian] students of color.³

When white students were the majority, the most common classroom type in the data for this study was *High Help, Low Perfectionism*. For whites and Asians, this appeared to produce the best behavior and only slightly less persistence 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 persistence than *High Help, High Perfectionism*. No matter what the racial composition, fewer than a quarter of classrooms were *High Help with High Perfectionism*.

My analysis suggests that 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 with similar demographic and racial compositions where teachers practiced *High Help with High Perfectionism*, students showed quite high fall-to-spring persistence in effort.

To see the pattern visually, examine the Exhibit below. The chart shows the percentages of students who agree in the fall with the statement, “I *will* do my best work in this class all year,” and the percentages of the same students who agreed later in the spring with the statement, “I *have* done my best work in class all year long.” In *High*

³ In classrooms where whites and Asians are well represented, adding *high perfectionism* to *high help* may similarly help those students to persist at higher levels; but my evidence suggests that this combination makes the most difference when students of color are at least three-quarters of the class.

Help, High Perfection classrooms, 77 percent agreed in the spring that they had actually followed through on their intentions – that they did their best all year.

To summarize, these findings indicate that when students of color make up over 75 percent of an elementary school classroom, *High Help, High Perfectionism* teaching produces superior fall-to-spring persistence in effort on school tasks. Behavior and classmate collegiality are also better.

What Do *High Help, High Perfectionism* Teaching Practices Look Like?

Compared to teachers in other classrooms, those 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 applied the following 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 suggest that the most powerful “helping” practices were *welcoming questions from low achievers* and *waiting for low achievers to respond when called upon*.

Avoid *High Perfectionism* without *High Help*

High Perfectionism—the press for correct answers—can be problematic in the absence of *High Help*. While a teacher might believe she is serving students of color well by being a perfectionist (since being a perfectionist is the classic example of having “high expectations”), if she *does not help her students sufficiently to meet her goals* she can actually disserve them further, since students of color are particularly at risk for believing that they *may not be “able”* to succeed with difficult work (see Cohen, this volume).

Our student survey responses offer insights into what *High Perfectionism* classrooms entail in the absence of *High Help*. Specifically, compared to reports from students in *High Help, High Perfectionism* classrooms, students in *Low Help, High Perfection* classrooms report more often 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, there are very seldom opportunities to redo the work to improve it.

Further, there appear to be negative impacts of such conditions on peer support.

Compared with *High Help, High Perfectionism* classrooms, students in *Low Help, High Perfection* classrooms agree 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.” Thus, not only do teachers seem less supportive, peers do too.

If students are pressed to achieve correct answers on challenging work under *Low Help* instructional conditions, some may come to believe that success is almost impossible, and the result can be excessive anxiety, disengagement, and disidentification

with academic tasks. Further, 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 and associated consequences, teachers should strive to do the following:

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 if students are learning.
6. Sometimes allow students to redo assignments on which they do poorly.

Finally, many of the most valuable 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 obviously misguided and the focus instead should be on careful reasoning.

Conclusion: *High Help with High Perfectionism* as a Race-Conscious Goal

Persistence across the school year tends to be highest for all racial groups and all classroom racial compositions, when both *Help* and *Perfectionism* are high. Nonetheless, less than one-fourth of more than five hundred classrooms surveyed actually occupied this category—no matter what the racial mix. Further, for all racial groups in the classroom, failure to achieve the *High Help with High Perfectionism* condition appeared to have the greatest detrimental consequences where students of color were at least seventy-five percent of the class.

An implication is that every teacher should seek ways to communicate, “[*High Help*] I truly love to answer your questions, but [*High Perfectionism*] 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 and particularly where students of color are the vast majority, is an “anti-racist” strategy for improving behavior, increasing persistence, raising performance levels, and probably even narrowing achievement gaps within and among elementary school classrooms.

Exhibit: Percentages responding “Yes” to the following two statements in classrooms with over seventy-five percent students of color (exactly the same students are represented in the fall and the spring).

Fall survey (yellow bars): “I will do my best work in this class all year.”

Spring survey (blue bars): “I have done my best work in this class all year long.”

