The Gap Is In Our Expectations

By Joan Cone

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Sixteen years ago I taught low-track ninth grade English/reading classes. These began with lessons on sentence structure, paragraphing and spelling, and when I felt students were ready, I assigned personal narratives. I taught literature through short stories and short, easy-to-read novels and checked students' understanding with multiple-choice and short-answer questions and an occasional essay. I administered an easy-to-correct comprehension test to assess reading levels and then assigned individual exercises from large boxes of programmed learning kits. My students sat in straight rows facing the chalkboard. They worked quietly and alone. I avoided group work and class discussions out of a need to set a serious tone and to keep control.

Often as many as 80 to 85 percent of the students in these classes were African-American males - even though fewer than half the students at our school are African-Americans. The caste-like placement of students in remedial classes and the huge racial imbalance inspired me and other English teachers to redouble our efforts to teach the basic reading and writing skills that we believed would help get them into the academic mainstream.

Yet the students did not seem to improve in any appreciable way in our classes or throughout high school; most programmed into low-track ninth grade English classes were still in low-track English classes in 12th grade. Why this happened, despite all our good intentions, was a revelation.

In the mid-1980s, four ninth grade English teachers signed on to do a two-year collaborative research study with University of California Prof. Rhona Weinstein, investigating ways to create success for low-achieving students. That collaboration revolutionized our theory and practice.

As we analyzed our expectations for low-track ninth graders, we came to see that in giving them less challenging texts and programmed writing exercises, and in shying away from essay assignments and having them work quietly and alone, we were telling our students: "You are not thinkers, readers and writers; your behavior needs to be

controlled; you are not ready for exciting, challenging curriculum. You need to be separated from students who want to learn." We saw from our students' low attendance rate, disruptive classroom behavior and poor school work ethic that they understood our messages and had learned to fulfill our expectations.

As veteran teachers who saw ourselves as caring women and progressive thinkers, it was painful to accept our complicity in our students' failure. We had not become teachers to create failure or to be co-conspirators in perpetuating the racial and social-class inequities that divide American society.

Our first response was to phase out tracking. Instead of being separated into low, average, fast and honors classes on the basis of test scores, all ninth and 10th graders were programmed into heterogeneous classes, each with clusters of high, middle- and low-achieving students. Eleventh and 12th graders could choose honors classes (many for Advanced Placement college credit) or less demanding college-prep courses, but the separation went no farther than that. We also broke down the old system in which the most prestigious teachers taught the most elite classes.

While this required some program juggling, the most important changes occurred inside the classroom. Early on, I found that placing low-achieving students in a class with high achievers was not enough; I had to learn to teach differently, to meet the more varied needs of students in the same classroom. I did not come to this awareness on my own. Paula, one of the few Latinas in my first untracked Advanced Placement class, pointed it out. After only a few days, Paula told me she wanted to transfer out of the class. "I can't stay," she told me, "I don't talk like these kids." This made me realize that I needed to make Paula and students like her comfortable discussing academic work: making meaning of complex texts, asking questions, sharing writing, working in groups. That was the beginning of what I call my "pedagogy of talk," in which I encourage students to get to know each other and participate in social talk so that all will feel more comfortable taking part in academic discussions later. Now they sit facing each other, not the blackboard.

The heterogeneous classes also have forced me to position myself not as a teacher of books but as one who teaches students to read books. Now I take time to teach skilled and unskilled readers, both of whom need the lesson, that reading is a social, cultural and cognitive act that requires their active involvement. My focus is on strategies for entering a text, making meaning of it and connecting it to life. Non-fiction works

and magazine and newspaper articles help students to make these connections, as do works by writers who reflect their now more diverse cultural and racial backgrounds.

It remains a daily struggle to avoid giving in to the temptation to conclude that a student's lack of skills indicates lack of ability or that a student's lack of energy or enthusiasm means that we are failing. It helps to have colleagues who believe in what we are doing, but also the evidence is that in struggling to maintain high expectations for all students, we are succeeding in the vast majority of cases.

While English teachers have not kept quantitative data, we see a connection between untracking and the increasing percentages of our school's African-American and Latino students who are meeting University of California and California State University admissions requirements. From 1991 to 1997, qualified African-Americans went from 25 percent to 58 percent; Latinos went from 30 percent to 60 percent.

We see results in students like Michael, who came to ninth grade below grade level and four years later, bolstered by a 3.0 average and academic confidence, easily chose to work with the most high-achieving students in his psychology class. Or in students like Hui who, as a ninth grader transferred out of an ESL class into an untracked ninth grade class and as a senior enrolled in AP English and earned a 4 on the national AP examination. Or Jorge, who saw the difference between his untracked ninth grade English class and his low-track physical science class and petitioned to get out of the science class - an experience he recounted in a moving college application essay.

We know our work is not done. Enrollment in Advanced Placement classes still does not reflect the racial diversity of our student body; numbers of seniors still struggle with reading and writing and don't see themselves as students; some teachers continue to resist the idea that all students can learn with and from each other. While most departments in our school praise our work, they continue the less complicated separation of "achievers" from "nonachievers."

Unfortunately, across the country, and even in our own school system, the winds are blowing in their favor. New York and a number of other states have begun reporting standardized test scores by race. It seems that this can only lead to the segregation of low-achieving students into skills classes where their teachers can focus on improving test-taking skills. Indeed, a few months ago, our superintendent called for the

reinstatement of tracked classes in ninth and 10th grade English. Already students are calling the classes the "smart" class and the "dumb" class or "honors" and "ghetto."

Administrators also are planning to begin remedial English/reading courses for students who score low on state tests and plan to purchase a state-approved literature series that will standardize the entire language arts curriculum.

When English teachers argued against the changes, which threaten to undo all that we have achieved, we were told that "dramatic" changes had to be made to improve district test scores. The parallels between what will happen to our students and what will happen to us are chilling: We both are to be controlled and given pre-packaged materials so we can improve our test scores.

Sadly, the days are numbered in which in our English classes "gifted and talented" students sit side-by-side with social-promotion students and native English speakers next to students newly out of ESL classes, and together read "Animal Farm" and learn lessons about power.

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