

## Addressing the Rigor Gap in Schools

In this *Kappan* article, Hofstra University professor Bruce Torff asks whether there might be a third explanation for the persistent achievement gap between the haves and have-nots in American schools. Some people blame poverty, injustice, and resources; others blame teachers, lack of accountability, and unions. Torff wonders if our beliefs about teaching and learning might play a role.

“Alas,” he says, “some of our culture’s folk beliefs lead to education practices that don’t seem optimal.” For example, it’s widely believed that critical thinking is only for high-achieving students. Being able to draw one’s own conclusions, rather than memorizing what’s taught, is an important life skill, but many educators believe it’s too challenging for low-achieving students. “A rigor gap emerges in which disadvantaged students are judged to require less-rigorous curriculum than that afforded their more privileged peers,” says Torff. “A self-fulfilling prophecy may result: The disadvantaged receive watered-down lessons that limit students’ academic growth, resulting in additional impoverished curriculum in subsequent lessons; conversely, the advantaged receive challenging lessons that boost students’ academic performance, leading to additional rigorous curriculum down the road.”

Is it true that low-achieving students can’t handle critical thinking? No, says Torff. He points to research showing that these students benefit just as much as high achievers when immersed in a high-critical thinking learning environment. Effective teachers have always delivered the same high level of rigor to all their students.

But most teachers have different beliefs, and these beliefs are resistant to change, both during teacher training and on the job. “Once the inservice years begin,” says Torff, “teachers’ beliefs tend to remain steadfast no matter what kinds of experiences they have, how long they have been teaching, or how much inservice education they attain. As with other elements in folk psychology, beliefs about learning and teaching seem to be etched in stone and difficult to rewrite.”

Torff believes there are six factors at work when teachers opt for a less-rigorous curriculum for their disadvantaged students:

- Students’ level of prior knowledge;
- Students’ level of academic achievement;
- Students’ level of motivation;
- Time constraints;
- Parents’ influence;
- Colleagues’ influence.

“These are the triggers of the rigor gap,” he says. But he believes they can be challenged and changed through the following professional-development activities:

- Conversations, journals, and assignments designed to get teachers to reflect on their existing beliefs. Telling people what to believe doesn't work, but getting them to think about their own beliefs in light of other evidence just might.

- Detailed analysis of case studies about disadvantaged students being denied access to rigorous curriculum experiences.

- Evaluating programs that get disadvantaged students successfully engaging in critical thinking.

- Involving teachers in writing curriculum that gets all students working at high levels.

“Taking aim at the beliefs underlying the rigor gap, these strategies have potential to help close the achievement gap,” Torff concludes. “Of course, poverty and social injustice are problematic, as are underperforming teachers and lack of accountability. But at least part of the problem lies elsewhere: in our culture’s well-intended but off-target beliefs about appropriate curriculum for disadvantaged students.”

“Teacher Beliefs Shape Learning for All Students” by Bruce Torff in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2011 (Vol. 93, #3, p. 21-23), <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>; Torff can be reached at [bruce.torff@hofstra.edu](mailto:bruce.torff@hofstra.edu).