

# Educational Leadership

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## Deciding to Teach Them All

*Carol Ann Tomlinson*

**Asking the right questions has an enormous impact on how we pursue equity and excellence in our classrooms.**

Several years ago, I was talking with a colleague who was teaching in a center-based school for students whose IQ scores registered above 140. She thought deeply about how to stretch her students, whose ceilings of possibility often go unexplored in heterogeneous classrooms. She was a good teacher in that setting. She knew it. Her students knew it. Their parents knew it. So I was surprised by what she said that day.

"I want to go back to a general education classroom next year," she began.

I want to see what would happen if I tried teaching this curriculum to a varied group of students. I believe I could make it work, and it's important to me to know whether I can.

She got her wish. Her new group of 5th graders in a different school the following year was certainly diverse. She had students with identified special education needs, students who could not yet read in any meaningful way, students who were learning to speak English, students who were working at grade level, and students who were more capable than many in her previous school. She taught them—all of them—the high-challenge curriculum that she had been using with her class of very advanced learners.

To say that no problems emerged and that everyone rose fairy-tale-like to the challenge would be satisfying. But it would not be honest.

The truth is that my friend had to make many adaptations in her new classroom that were not necessary in her former setting. She had to find time to work intensively with students who were not yet literate to ensure their growth in the gatekeeper skills of reading and writing. She had to find ways to support some students whose caregivers could not provide transportation, Internet access, or project materials. She had to teach inquiry skills to many students who had not previously encountered them. She even had to figure out new ways to extend the advanced curriculum for students whose reach already exceeded its parameters when the year began.

In many ways, this veteran teacher felt like a novice. She wasn't always sure how to arrange time to work with small groups of students with particular needs. She often wasn't certain how to express abstract ideas so that the concrete thinkers could confidently approach them. But from the beginning of the year, one fact was clear: Her classroom was a magnet for each student who spent 5th grade with her.

Discovery was a given. Doing was a way of life. Students learned to do better than what they perceived to be their best. Skills had an identifiable purpose. School was the place to be. Learning was the thing to do. No one wanted the year to end.

We could say that this teacher decided to “differentiate instruction in a mixed-ability classroom”—that she decided to “teach them all” in a heterogeneous setting. It would be tempting to say that she was a poster teacher for differentiation of instruction.

But I learned something more important from her and her students. As I watched their journey, I realized that she was asking a set of questions about teaching different from those we often ask—a profoundly important set of questions.

## **Framing the Questions**

My colleague had already posed the most fundamental of the questions related to academically diverse populations: Do I intend to teach each individual child?

Although there seems to be only one answer to the question, the reality is more complex. The circumstances of teaching make it far more likely that we respond by saying, “I intend to teach the curriculum in as reasonable a way as I know how, and I hope that most of the students will respond.”

My friend's answer signaled her willingness to accept responsibility for the success of each individual, regardless of the circumstances of that student's life.

To teach each student from his or her point of entry into the curriculum and perspective as a learner is more than difficult. It is a goal beyond the grasp of even the most expert teacher. The outcome for students who are outliers, however, is likely to be vastly different when a teacher pursues that elusive goal than when the teacher—by intent or default—abandons it. This particular 5th grade teacher elected to teach in pursuit of that goal, and her commitment made a world of difference in her classroom.

My colleague asked other questions about her academically diverse learners and how she would respond to them. The way she framed her questions was different from what I suspect is customary, and the subtle differences yielded powerful distinctions in her work.

This teacher did not ask, What labels do my students have? Rather, she asked, What are their particular interests and needs? Because needs rather than labels guided her instruction, students moved freely among peers and opportunities. Both her teaching and her students seemed less restricted, freer.

She did not ask, What are my students' deficits? Instead, she asked, What are their strengths? Although she clearly understood the need to “patch holes” in the fabric of their proficiency, beginning with what students *could* do changed the tone of the classroom and the will of reluctant learners.

In place of asking, How do I remediate students?, she pondered, What can I do to ensure that each student works at the highest level of thought and production possible? She understood that purpose propels human beings and that rich, purposeful curriculum propels students to master whatever skills they need to succeed.

This teacher did not ask, How can I motivate these students? Instead, she wondered, What releases the motivation born in all humans?

She did not ask, What do I do if a student cannot accomplish my agenda? She asked, How might I adapt the agenda to work for the student?

I also came to understand the subtle but crucial distinction in one other common school question. My friend did not ask, Where should we put this student? Instead, she asked, What circumstances will be the most effective catalyst for this student's development?

Taken singly, the questions are interesting and fruitful. Taken as a group, they are transformational. They are questions in search of equity and excellence for each learner.

## **Seeking Equity and Excellence**

The United States has always balanced precariously on the twin values of equity and excellence. As a people, we believe that birth in a log cabin should not be a barrier to the boardroom or the Oval Office and that all citizens should have access to the opportunities that will help them realize their potential.

Similarly, we cling to a vision of the United States as representing the best. We stand for the fastest cars, the tallest buildings, the finest medical care, and the most innovative technology. We are committed to excellence. Let the world generate a problem: We will solve it.

To lose either equity or excellence as a guiding value would be to lose our identity. To maintain both, however, is a balancing act of the highest order. And the challenge is perhaps greatest in the schools that shape young people to be good stewards of these values. Although we don't often think about the impact of education decisions on the balance between equity and excellence, many decisions push the fulcrum in one direction or the other—for individual learners, groups, or schools as a whole.

A curriculum furthers excellence when it opens doors to a promising tomorrow. Instruction furthers excellence when it moves a learner as effectively as possible toward expertise as a thinker, problem solver, and producer. And procedures, policies, and practices further equity when they maximize the likelihood that each learner will be a full participant in an excellence-based education.

The 5th grade teacher's questions were her guideposts to achieving equity and excellence for the widest possible range of students. Her decision to move from a school where a complex, dynamic curriculum was a given to a classroom where that was less likely was an excellence-based decision. She wanted to ensure that a maximum number of students see themselves as worthy of wrestling with ideas and issues, just as adults do.

Had she made any other assumption in her mixed-ability classroom, her most able students would have experienced "excellence" devoid of challenge and sweat. For such students, this sort of pseudo-excellence is at first seductive but ultimately crippling. She refused to be a thief of challenge for her most advanced learners. Beginning with high-quality curriculum and instruction is a precursor to excellence for any student. For this teacher, labels did not define access to quality of thought or production. Rather, quality was the foundation from which learning for all students could emanate.

Equity in this teacher's classroom was also central. Her pivotal, equity-based decision was determining that a wide range of learners should have access to excellence. Then she immediately began asking herself, How do I support each student's persistent movement toward excellence and expertise? Equity not only grants access but also supports success. A plan to teach students skills that they had missed in the past was in operation, but never as an end in itself. Such "remediation" was always in the service of "acceleration."

## **Grappling with the Messiness of Teaching**

Uncertainty is inherent in teaching. Although we can seldom guarantee the results of our decisions, we must make decisions, nonetheless. In a time when we find our student populations becoming exponentially more diverse, we still find ourselves asking such questions as, What is the right label for this child? Is the general classroom best or is a resource setting

preferable? Can differentiation meet the specialized learning needs of students? Should specialists focus their energies on students or teachers?

The reality is that these questions lead us nowhere. Labels often stigmatize without offering a counterbalancing benefit. Some general classrooms cripple students, and other general classrooms are almost holy in their capacity to evoke the best in a wide range of learners. Likewise, some resource rooms become prison-like in limiting options for students who become dependent on them, whereas other resource rooms open access to a better future.

Differentiation can reinforce status, or differentiation can liberate students from stereotypical expectations. One specialist can touch hundreds of lives through successful collaboration with a single teacher, whereas other specialists are wasting their time attempting collaboration. Students, even of a given "category," differ greatly. The contexts in which we might provide services for them defy generalization.

If we reframe the questions that we ask, a tectonic shift might occur in how we make decisions on behalf of academically diverse learners. Not, What labels? but, What interests and needs? Not, What deficits? but, What strengths? Not, How do we remediate? (or even How do we enrich the standard curriculum?) but, How do we maximize access to the richest possible curriculum and instruction? Not, How do we motivate? but, What would it take to tap the motivation already within this learner? Not, Which kind of setting? but, What circumstances maximize the student's full possibilities?

Ultimately, just one question might best serve diverse learners, their teachers, and their society. What can we do to support educators in developing the skill and the will to teach for each learner's equity of access to excellence?

## **Principles for Fostering Equity and Excellence in Academically Diverse Learners**

**Good curriculum comes first.** The teacher's first job is always to ensure a coherent, important, inviting, and thoughtful curriculum.

**All tasks should respect each learner.** Every student deserves work that is focused on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skills targeted for the lesson. Every student should be required to think at a high level and should find his or her work interesting and powerful.

**When in doubt, teach up!** Good instruction stretches learners. The best tasks are those that students find a little too difficult to complete comfortably. Be sure there's a support system in place to facilitate the student's success at a level that he or she doubted was attainable.

**Use flexible grouping.** Find ways and time for the class to work as a whole, for students to demonstrate competence alone, and for students to work with varied groups of peers. Using only one or two types of groups causes students to see themselves and one another in more limited ways, keeps the teacher from "auditioning" students in varied contexts, and limits potentially rich exchanges in the classroom.

**Become an assessment junkie.** Everything that a student says and does is a potential source of assessment data. Assessment should be an ongoing process, conducted in flexible but distinct stages, and it should maximize opportunities for each student to open the widest possible window on his or her learning.

**Grade to reflect growth.** The most we can ask of any person—and the least we ought to ask—is to be and become their best. The teacher's job is to guide and support the learner in this endeavor. Grading should, in part, reflect a learner's growth.

Adapted from *Differentiation in Practice: A Resource Guide for Differentiating Curriculum, Grades 5–9*, by Carol Ann Tomlinson and Caroline Cunningham Eidson (ASCD, 2003).