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Teach Up for Equity and Excellence



Carol Ann Tomlinson



For marginalized students especially, we need to move from a “pedagogy of poverty” to a “pedagogy of plenty.”

Abstract ▾

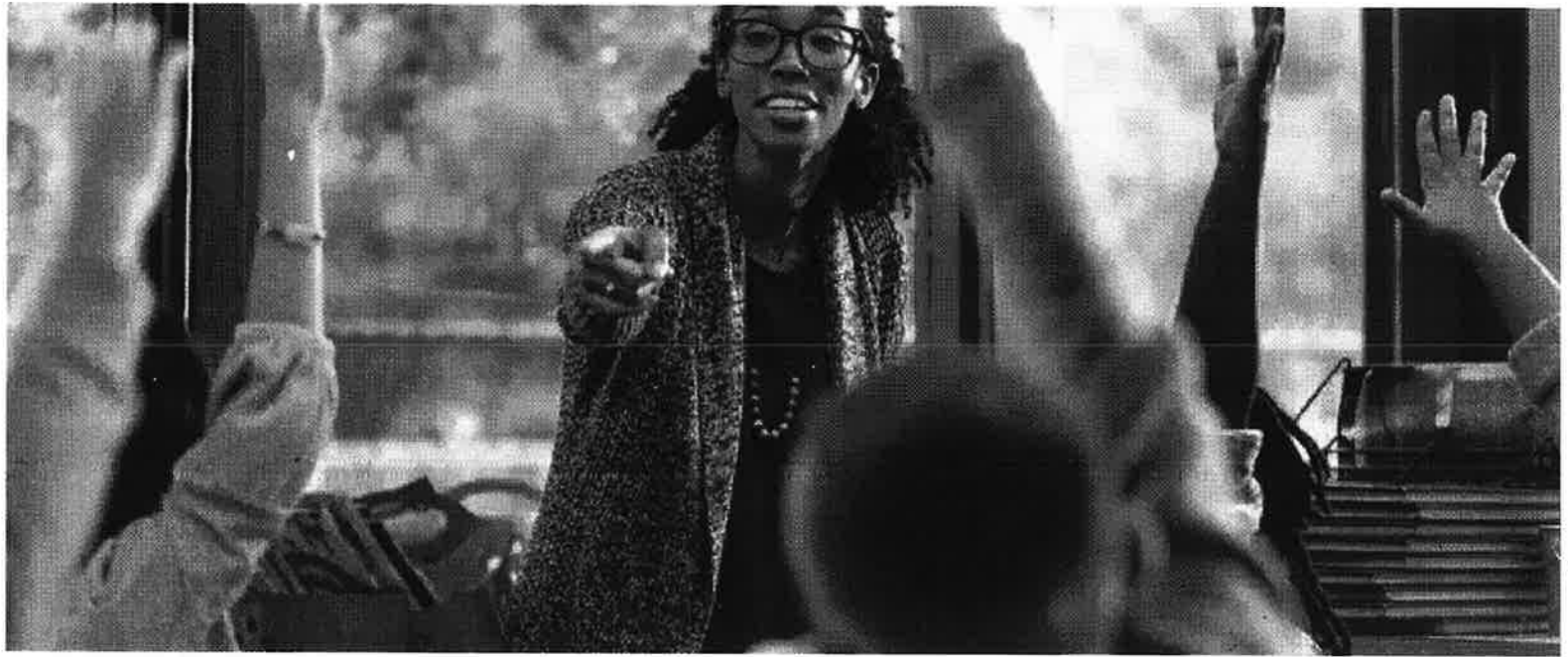


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Abstract

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Differentiated instruction has always been about providing every learner full opportunity to grow as much as possible academically, intellectually, and socially. Our students' lives are complex in so many

ways—learning needs and strengths, interests, culture, race, language, social skills, emotional development, economic background, adult support, prior school experiences, and a host of other variables—and each of these factors impacts learning. Striving to see, understand, and respond to that complexity is at the core of quality differentiation. It is non-negotiable for teachers who seek to make a significant, positive difference in the trajectories of the young lives in their care.

A key principle of differentiation is "teaching up" (Tomlinson, 2021, 2022; Tomlinson & Javrus, 2012). When we teach up, we provide equitable access to excellent learning opportunities for all students. This idea reflects and elaborates a position voiced by Grant Wiggins two decades ago:

We will not successfully restructure schools to be effective until we stop seeing diversity in students as a problem. ... They have the right to thought-provoking and enabling schoolwork, so they might use their minds well and discover the joy therein to willingly push themselves farther. They have the right to instruction that obligates the teacher, like the doctor, to change tactics when progress fails to occur. They have the right to assessment that provides students and teachers with insights into real-world standards, useable feedback, the opportunity to self-assess, and the chance to have dialogue with or even challenge, the assessor—a right in a democratic culture. Until such a time,

we will have no insight into human potential. Until the challenge is met, schools will continue to reward the lucky or the already-equipped and weed out poor performers.

(Wiggins, 1992, pp. xv–xvi)

Teaching up is of particular importance at this moment in education because it offers a path forward on two related, lingering, and defining concerns. The first is our enduring negligence to provide equity of opportunity to students from persistently marginalized groups. The second concern is a decades-long blindness to the test-driven, impoverishing nature of curriculum and instruction that pervades today's classrooms. The two concerns are tightly bonded. It is impossible to claim a quality system of public education without placing both concerns in the foreground of educational policy and practice.

Resisting the Pedagogy of Poverty

Just over three decades ago, Martin Haberman (1991) reflected on his experience of observing classrooms where teaching and learning were characterized by teachers giving information, asking right-answer questions, giving directions, assigning low-level tasks, monitoring seat work, reviewing, giving tests, going over tests, assigning homework, going over homework, settling disputes that were common among disenchanting students, punishing noncompliance, grading papers, and giving grades. Haberman called what he observed in these

classrooms "a pedagogy of poverty." The label seemed apt to him because, he said, students in those classes came largely from backgrounds in which poverty was pervasive and because students who spent much or most of their school years in those classrooms were virtually guaranteed a life of poverty after their school days ended.

A decade later, Helene Hodges (2001) wrote about an alternative approach to teaching and learning characterized by authentic tasks, meaning-driven curriculum, a literacy-rich environment, quality resources, and strong connections between classroom and home. This approach centered on problem-focused learning and cognition and metacognition in the context of purposeful activities. Students worked collaboratively (in various social configurations) on issues of deep concern to them and engaged in discussion and debate about the substance of content and meaning-making. Hodges, referencing Haberman's work, called this approach to teaching and learning "a pedagogy of plenty" because students in classrooms using it came largely from economically sound backgrounds and because students who spent much or most of their time in such classrooms were virtually guaranteed a life of plenty after their school days ended.

Unfortunately, a "pedagogy of poverty" has been synonymous with the experiences of most students of color in public schools since the years of mandated integration. These experiences continue to convey the unambiguous and debilitating message that the people in charge of these students' education view most students of color as capable of

handling only remedial, mind-and-soul-numbing academic fare—and often not even that. In the end, for too many of these young people, school becomes irrelevant, and just one more barrier standing in the way of full membership in the broader world.

While the damage done to already marginalized learners by a pedagogy of poverty is broad in duration and scope, that degenerative approach to teaching and learning stunts the growth of many other learners as well. Students of many races and economic backgrounds whose adult support systems are unable to zero in on academic achievement, or who have learning, social, or emotional challenges, rarely find themselves in classrooms that provide a pedagogy of plenty, engage them in dynamic work, and mentor them to reach for excellence. Students we deem to be "just average" are taught in ways that lead them to establish limiting ceilings of expectation for themselves. Even learners identified as "advanced" or "gifted" are seldom consistently challenged adequately in general education classrooms or pullout programs.

The all-consuming drive to raise standardized test scores has led us in some cases to embrace, or at least accept, a pedagogy of poverty for most students.

Teaching Up—A Way Forward

Despite the prevailing winds of contemporary schooling that encourage us to "teach down" to many students, there *are* teachers who swim against the tide—who "teach up." These teachers work from two foundational principles. First, the job of the teacher is to prepare young people for life, not for a test. Second, *every* student is worthy of the most compelling and energizing learning opportunities that are available to *any* student.



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To teach up, educators must plan curriculum and instruction for students with "high ceilings" of learning and then provide scaffolding that enables a very wide range of learners to access and succeed with

that work. But, of course, the fabric of teaching up is sturdier and more tightly woven than any single strand would suggest. Excellence and equity in teaching and learning require high-quality practice in all classroom elements that work interdependently to maximize student opportunity and growth.

Toward that end, for example, teachers who teach up work from a vision for equity and excellence in the classroom and invite students to contribute to that vision and help enact it. They model empathy, respect, and appreciation for the diversity of students' cultures, languages, talents, experiences, and learning needs. These teachers work persistently to establish a learning environment that is invitational for each learner, building bonds of trust with their students and supporting them in building bonds of trust with their peers. Through the curriculum these teachers use, students become curious, because their learning connects with their lives and experiences and motivates them to commit to the hard work of learning.

Such teachers consistently use formative assessment practices to gain insights into each student's learning trajectories. They plan learning opportunities that make room for student variance and that are also responsive to learners' strengths and interests—opportunities that are active, collaborative, and authentic. They have no superpowers but rather aspire to grow as vigorously as they ask their students to grow,

learn from mistakes as they ask their students to learn, and persist as they ask their students to persist.

Teaching Up in Action

To show how teaching up looks in practice, let me tell you about three teachers who do this well. These are teachers who I've worked with, observed, or taught throughout the years who all exemplify the characteristics of "teaching up." It is interesting to note that one of them has taught largely in public schools in small, rural communities, one primarily in a public school in a large urban district, and one in private schools. Teaching up belongs everywhere there are young learners.

Letting Curiosity Guide Learning

Cris Lozon's preschoolers, in a private school in California, commonly investigate questions that arise from their daily lives. They engage in play with materials of their own choosing and share work that helps them become good thinkers and problem solvers. Ms. Lozon and her colleagues observe the students and engage the students in purposeful talk designed to help them develop conceptual understandings of how things work. Recently, while the students used blocks and other materials to design roadways for a town, conversations centered on form and function, patterns, and systems. When the children created scientific drawings of spiders, they considered scale and proportion. In

music class, they counted beats and talked about the rhythms they heard. Fundamental concepts like these recur throughout their learning all year, and students begin to incorporate the concepts and their meanings into their thinking and expression.

At a recent end-of-year "Works of Wonder (WOW) Night," students presented to their parents some questions that had guided their projects as well as some answers they found in their investigations. Among the questions the students posed and considered were:

- How do we keep ourselves and our friends safe? How do rules keep us safe?
- How do light and shadow affect the life of plants, insects, and baby chicks? How does light make shadows grow and shrink?
- How do we make bridges that can connect two countries together? How do bridges bring people together?
- How do the stories we tell bring together the past and the present? Why are stories important? (Lozon, 2021)

While play remains central to the children's days, their teachers guide them to think about durable concepts, develop complex academic vocabulary, pose and seek answers to questions, and collaborate consistently as thinkers, problem solvers, knowledge generators, and effective communicators. At a young age, these children are building

the habits of mind and work that are foundational to success in school and in the world.

Making Real Change in the World

During the many years Ron Berger taught elementary students in rural Massachusetts, they had hands-on experiences to guide them through learning. His students tested the water quality of all the local streams and lakes. They tested the private wells in town to see if the water was safe to drink. They cleaned up the playground and built playground equipment, a recycling shed, and a playhouse for kindergarteners. The teachers guided the learners in doing sophisticated scientific and demographic research. The students learned how to use computers and Excel for their work, and they prepared reports for their town and state.

These types of community service projects not only show students they have the power to make a difference in their local environments, but they also help students develop an ethic of excellence and the skills and hard work necessary to achieve excellence. Berger says:

Once a student sees that he or she is capable of excellence, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility. There is an appetite for excellence. After students have had a taste of excellence, they're never quite satisfied with less; they're always hungry. (Gosner, 2021)

Redefining Success

Chad Prather's high school students bring to school with them the deep anger and resentment felt by many students of color whose families bear the weight of poverty and marginalization. They come with the predictable hallmarks of a pedagogy of poverty. There is little in their experiences to commend the study of world history.

To bring the subject alive, Prather created a year-long simulation, called CIVGAME, for his students studying world history. The game requires students to form teams and build a civilization and to try to make it successful. Students must consider leadership, ethics, competition, collaboration, stability, natural disasters, and more. The game reflects the struggles that many of the students face regularly. It also makes history make sense to students who have seldom seen their lives reflected in it.

At the end of the year, a panel of judges studies all of the nation-states developed by the 26 student teams to determine which team has created the most successful state. When students ask Prather how they will know what the judges are going to think is success, he tells them:

You won't. You'll need to determine that for yourself. What makes a state successful? Is it size and power, the accumulation of land and wealth, the growth of a far-reaching empire? Is it military might, wins in war, perhaps the conquest of enemies? Is it a set of systems that meet the

needs of small populations? Or perhaps a record of humanitarianism and service to other states? You decide.

At the heart of CIVGAME are essential questions familiar in student experiences: What does it take to get ahead? Where do good ideas come from? How do you keep from crumbling? What matters more, where you end up or how you get there? Is there anything worth the sacrifice of everything? What drives people forward? What holds people back? Students explore these questions over time, sometimes directly but often in the background of the work they do as they explore world history and the context of their life experiences.

Says Prather:

I owe my students an experience that will sharpen their lenses and equip them to be the designers of a changing world. Instead of positioning them to be textbook readers observing the history-makers inside our curriculum, they become the subjects of our curriculum—the heads of state, the generals, the artists, the innovators, the diplomats, the activists, and the empire-builders. They will study history, of course, but more than that they will do history. (Prather, 2021)

Opportunities for academic excellence and engagement are often denied to students who live in poverty, students of color, and students who've been discouraged by previous school experiences. But through

CIVGAME and other projects like it, students who have most often experienced a pedagogy of poverty can find themselves immersed in a pedagogy of plenty.

An Ethic of Excellence

These examples come from three educators who, through their classroom work, have shaped my understanding of the transformational power of teachers to elevate students' prospects through what they teach and how they teach. They welcome students from broadly diverse backgrounds to be full participants in ambitious, distinguished work and deep learning. They embrace what Berger (2003) calls an ethic of excellence for all learners, establishing high ceilings of expectation and high support to help each student achieve excellence.

The educators described here ensure dedicated time for the whole class to encounter, explore, and discuss compelling ideas; connect their own experiences with what they learn; plan for expressions of learning; and become skilled collaborators. They allow students to work alone, with peers, and with the teacher to pursue their interests, plan for and take their own next steps in the learning process, and give and receive feedback on their work. They differentiate in response to their students' strengths and needs in both contexts.



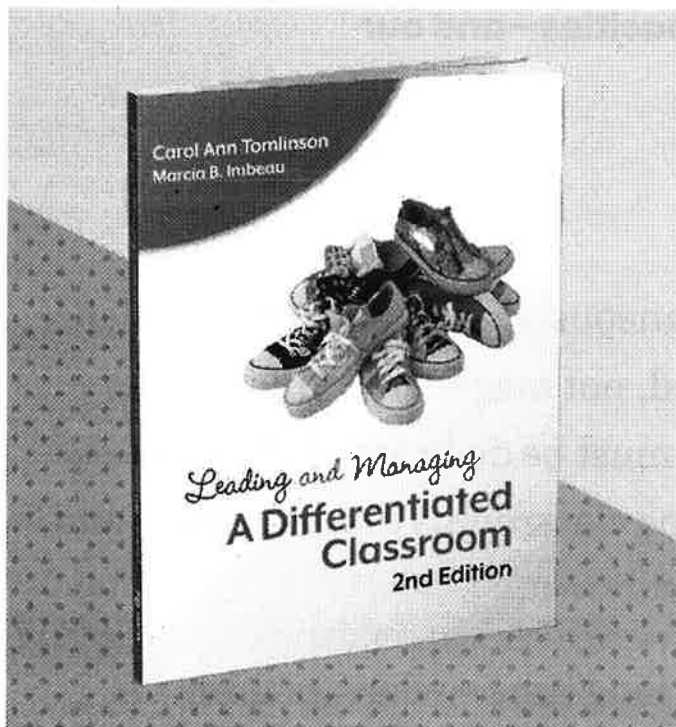
**We must be dedicated believers,
learners, and plodders toward leading
classrooms that recognize and fuel
each student's capacities—and our
own.**

Teachers who teach up work simultaneously for equity and excellence. But they are not a supernatural breed, not magicians. This work is within the realm of all teachers. We must be dedicated believers, learners, and plodders toward leading classrooms that recognize and fuel each student's capacities—and our own.

We clearly know—have known for a long time—what teaching for equity and excellence looks like. The pull to persist in familiar teaching patterns is powerful even as the evidence of need for change surrounds us daily. The opportunity we have to strengthen the lives of the young people we serve, re-shape the profession we represent, and extend our own reach is, I believe, far more compelling.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does the concept of "teaching up" resonate with you? Why or why not?
- What characteristics are most important for a teacher to have when "teaching up"?
- How can we capitalize on children's curiosity to enhance their learning?



Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom

The second edition of this foundational guide from Carol Ann Tomlinson provides practical strategies for creating effective student-centered instruction that recognizes and respects each student as a successful learner.

[Learn more](#)

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