

Common Beliefs

From formally Teaching Tolerance now Learning for Justice.

COMMON BELIEF 1

*I don't think of my students in terms of their race or ethnicity.
I am color blind when it comes to my teaching.*

Background

When teachers say they are color blind, they are usually saying that they do not discriminate and that they treat all their students equally. Of course, being fair and treating each student with respect are essential to effective teaching. However, race and ethnicity often play important roles on children's identities, and contribute to their culture, their behavior, and their beliefs. When race and ethnicity are ignored, teachers miss opportunities to help students connect with what is being taught. Recognizing that a student's race and ethnicity influences their learning allows teachers to be responsive to individual differences. In some cases, ignoring a student's race and ethnicity may undermine a teacher's ability to understand student behavior and student confidence in doing well in a school culture where expectations and communication are unfamiliar. An individual's race and ethnicity are central to her or his sense of self, but they are not the whole of personal identity. Moreover, how important an individual's race and ethnicity is to their identity will vary and teachers need to take that into account as they seek to learn more about their students.

Questions to Consider

1. How does this belief undermine cultural awareness and acknowledgement?
2. What are ways for educators to acknowledge student's ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic identities?
3. Why is it important to incorporate student identities into the curriculum?
4. What is the impact on students when their racial and ethnic identities are not validated?
5. As a result of this discussion, what are you more aware of and what action will you take?

COMMON BELIEF 2

Teachers should adapt their instructional practice to the distinctive cultures of African American, Latinx, Asian, and Native American Students.

Background

Teachers who are responsive to their students' values, beliefs and experiences will be more effective than those who are not. Some generalizations can be made about cultures of different racial and ethnic groups that can help teachers to begin to understand their students. However, these generalizations also can lead to stereotypes and a failure to recognize that within broad racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Latinx and Asian) there are very big average differences related to subgroups (e.g., Chinese Americans and Cambodian Americans) and social class differences within groups. Moreover, even within subgroups and students of similar socioeconomic status, there

are often significant differences in the factors that influence student learning. There is no substitute for knowing each student well and adapting instruction to these realities.

Questions to Consider

1. What is the connection of this belief to cultural acknowledgement and affirmation?
2. How can teachers view the cultures of their students without stereotyping them?
3. How might teachers become culturally aware about the perspective and practices of their students from ethnic groups different from their own?
4. What will you do as a result of this discussion?

COMMON BELIEF 3

It is not fair to ask students who are struggling with English to take on challenging academic assignments.

Background

It is certainly true that English Language Learners (ELLs) who are struggling with English may, and probably will have, more trouble with tasks that require reading than students whose native language is English. However, when English language learners are asked, To do less challenging work than other students, they can fall behind, and, perhaps, stay behind. In some cases, difficulty with English is erroneously perceived by educators as limited academic ability. Teachers need to guard against having low expectations for English language learners and using biased assessments that reinforce those low expectations. The challenge is to engage all students in learning content at relatively high levels. This means that teachers need to seek or provide extra help for students whose English is limited to ensure that they have the same learning opportunities as their English-speaking peers. Easier said than done, of course. But it is important to recognize that English language learners often need years to master academic language, which is more complex than the social language they acquire more quickly. Therefore, English language learners need to begin to learn academic language immediately, to prevent them from falling behind.

Questions to Consider

1. How does this belief conflict with cultural affirmation?
2. How can teachers utilize students' primary language to acknowledge and affirm their identity?
3. How can teachers utilize students' primary language to support a culturally aware classroom?
4. What should an educator learn about the culture of an English language learner?
5. What will you do to learn more about this topic?

COMMON BELIEF 4

With all the pressures to raise student achievement, funding and using examples of the cultural, historic, and everyday lived experiences of my students takes valuable time away (or could take away) time from teaching and learning what matters most.

Background

In many schools throughout the country, high stakes accountability programs have pressured teachers to narrow the curriculum and focus on the short-run task of having students do well on the next standardized test. If this means that teachers do not have time or motivation to try to understand how their students' dispositions and experiences related to race and ethnicity can influence their learning, the likely result will be lower student achievement, especially for students who may be struggling the most. Good teaching requires that teachers build on their student's prior knowledge. Moreover, students learn best when they feel recognized and acknowledged for the aspects of their identity, they deem important. When students feel that their identities are ignored or not respected, they often disengage from learning and adopt a stance of outsider among strangers. As most teachers recognize, achievement tests measure only part of what is important for students to learn, and "achievement" is not the same as learning.

Questions to Consider

1. How does this belief affirm and acknowledge students' culture? Or does it?
2. How might you make time to better understand your students, even in a climate that favors high-stakes test preparation over student-teacher relationships?
3. What is the crossover of teaching and learning to affirming a student's culture?
4. What action will you take to ensure that all students are included and represented in your teaching practice?

COMMON BELIEF 5

Talking about race with my colleagues could open a can of worms – little good is likely to come from it.

Background

Talking about what appear to be racial issues with respect to student interactions, student-teacher interactions, or interactions among members of the school staff is uncommon. Race is a "hot button" in our country, and it may feel that discussing potential misunderstandings or conflicts will make things worse. Moreover, many worry about being seen as insensitive or preoccupied with race. No doubt some issues that could be race-related are not. But this cannot be known without bringing up the issue. While the country has made progress in reducing racial prejudice and discrimination, negative stereotypes, concerns about fairness, and the absence of comfort in interracial relationships persist, especially when the stakes of common action or the resolution of interpersonal conflict are high. In schools where racial issues are openly dealt with, school leaders make clear that it is important to be candid and to trust one another while ensuring that action is taken when problems are surfaced.

Questions to Consider

1. How might this belief be a barrier to achieving cultural awareness, acknowledgement, and affirmation? Or will it?
2. Why is it important to openly discuss issues that are seen as having racial dimensions?
3. What do educators need to do to foster productive examination of issues that are seen by some, as being influenced by race or ethnicity?
4. What are effective strategies for initiating and facilitating conversations about race?
5. What will you do to promote conversations about race?