

Keeping Our Expectations High

In the second year of the KSTF Teaching Fellowship, we support our Fellows to start critically examining the cognitive demands of the tasks their students engage in. Cognitive demand is “the kind and level of thinking required by students in order to successfully engage with and solve a task” (Stein et al., 2000, p. 11) and is closely tied to students’ opportunities to learn. According to Smith and Stein,

Different tasks provide different opportunities for student learning. Tasks that ask students to perform a memorized procedure in a routine manner lead to one type of opportunity for student thinking [lower cognitive demand]; tasks that demand engagement with concepts and that stimulate students to make connections lead to a different set of opportunities for student thinking [high cognitive demand] (2011, p. 15).

When we say that we want our students to engage in cognitively demanding tasks we are saying that we have high expectations for them and want to provide them meaningful learning opportunities. We are agreeing to **present them with challenging work** that pushes their thinking and requires them to make connections and ask the kinds of questions in the classroom (to the teacher and other students) that will support the individual and collective learning of important math and science. We are agreeing to teach **equitably**—that is, to provide reasonable and appropriate accommodations, as needed, to promote access to worthwhile curricula and student achievement.

So when we engage in conversations focused on equity with respect to tasks, we are supporting our Fellows in thinking about engaging their students in cognitively demanding tasks. Our Fellows agree that higher cognitive demand tasks offer students the kind of learning opportunities that teachers want to see in their classroom. They also agree that over time, this level of engagement can promote access to important STEM ideas for students and impact student achievement gains. And as a 10-year veteran in the field of education, I agree with them. Then I realized that even though, in theory, I want all students to engage with cognitively demanding tasks and to have meaningful learning opportunities, in practice it is sometimes hard to maintain. We’ve seen Fellows grapple with this too.

This awareness for me came by way of a docuseries, *Born this Way*. This show has a cast of adults with Down Syndrome and their family and friends. One of the cast members, **John**, is a rapper. In a recent episode, he performed his first song and did a great job with it. When it came time for him to perform a new song, he pulled out a piece of paper and rapped the lyrics written there.

Immediately I thought, “Oh, that’s ok. He did fine. It’s great that he’s trying this music thing anyway.” Then the scene flashed to his mother/music manager telling John that she was disappointed in him. She said that she had seen him do better, and expected that for his next show he would have all the lyrics to his music memorized. My immediate reaction was, “That’s not fair. He tried...Wait, would I be this forgiving of another artist like Miley Cyrus or Rihanna?”

This internal dialogue caused me to reflect. I realized that I was lowering my expectations for John because I felt pity for him. I was happy to applaud him when he hadn’t done his best, because on some level I wasn’t expecting the same from him that I was from others. I wasn’t even expecting him to do something that I had evidence that he was capable of doing. This was a shock to me because as an educator, I don’t agree with lowering expectations for students for any reason—including their learning differences. I wondered how often this might have happened with my students in my or others’ classrooms. In addition, as a parent I would hate for someone to lower their expectations for my child. I believe in keeping expectations appropriately high for students and providing the necessary supports for them to reach it.

So in our work with our Fellows, when we invite them to think about cognitive demand, we do a few things. First we ask them to define high cognitive demand based on their content. This allows them to be clear about the kinds of learning opportunities students should receive. Then we ask them to categorize tasks or classroom activities of varying cognitive demand that we provide them to give them a chance to use and modify their definitions. Finally, we invite them to categorize a task that they will use with their students. This supports the Fellows in thinking about the learning opportunities that they are offering to their students. This pushes them to think about whether they are providing the necessary supports to engage in the tasks they want to use—it pushes them to think about teaching equitably.

When teachers assess the tasks they give students, they are better able to grapple

with their own expectations of students and the practicality of holding all students to high expectations. In this grappling, there is a common misconception that if all students are provided with the same supports that they can all reach the teacher's high expectation—equality. **Equity is not equality.** Equality refers to sameness that can be quantitatively measured (Esmonde, 2009). For example, students experience equality in the classroom when they have access to the same teachers and books and receive identical instruction. Some may think that **equality in supports can lead to equal learning outcomes.** I am suggesting that this is a misconception because it leads from the premise that all students within a classroom learn in the same ways. Providing the exact same supports to all students can only promote the same learning outcomes if we are teaching replicas of the same student, but we know that is not the case.

So, when we think about the use of higher cognitive demand tasks, it's this idea of equity that we propose. It isn't that I think that all students will meet the same high expectations with the exact same support, but that all students can reach the same **high expectations** if we are thoughtful about the supports we offer them. I am suggesting equality in expectations and equity in supports to reach them. As we continue working with our Fellows, we realize that we need to continue to develop in our thinking about the kinds of experiences that we can share with them to further support and push their thinking about expectations for students.

So, back to *Born This Way...* One of the recurring themes on this show is based on the **Don't Limit Me** speech that Meghan Bomgaars, another cast member, gives. This message is a message of inclusion and equity. Let's share the ways that we have worked toward supporting all of our students in doing their best. Let's share our stories of not limiting our students.

References

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