

How Our “Ideals” Influence Whom We Teach: Part One

As teachers, we have a sense of what’s preferred in schooling in America, an opinion that is created by drawing upon many forms of knowledge. While we might not have been explicitly taught about the characteristics of a preferred school or student, we have been socialized into them over time. From our perspective, teaching is autobiographical, meaning teachers are all ‘experts’ on their own schooling and that expertise—gathered through explicit and implicit instruction, socialized and academic—is what teachers bring to the work of teaching.

In this blog series, we, as two current teacher educators, reflect on our own preferences in teaching. We each share a scenario where we recognized the impact of those visions on how we viewed the work of educators. What we share here is not designed to weigh judgement on the work of educators, but rather, to invite others to investigate the basis of their own perspectives and how these perspectives include or exclude various groups of students. We believe that if teachers examine their assumptions about students, then fewer students might be excluded from the “preferred students” list, advancing education towards true equity.

Katey’s scenario, “Public or private?,” is from a moment in graduate school where prospective teachers indicated where they wanted to teach and whom they wanted to impact. Ayanna’s scenario, “What do preferred students look like?,” is situated in her personal experience as a student and many conversations she’s had with others about preferred students. We hope that grappling with how our preferences impact the work that we engage in can allow us all to surface our assumptions with respect to teaching and what it means to teach, help us engage in honest conversations with other educators about our foundational beliefs about teaching, and help us to have reflective conversations about the places where our beliefs don’t match our instructional practices.

Katey’s scenario: Public or private?

I was in graduate school, working on my master’s degree in teaching secondary science at a well-respected southern state school. In one first-semester class, mid-way through the term, the professor took a poll, “How many of you future teachers in this respected program want to teach in private school? And how many want to teach in public school?” We young, pre-service teachers had

probably all sent in our applications for this program with an answer to this in our minds already. We knew where we'd like to teach, if not the exact school, then some semblance of a vision of where we'd be when we were teaching, the students we'd be in front of, the character of the building, the uniforms (or lack thereof) on the students, the action that would be around us, the room and door and desk that we would call ours. In the realm of education, private and public are categorical words that describe two coexisting educational apparati but really also contain many assumptions and expectations about students, communities, and the roles of educators. In this class, the wide majority of these new teachers had a clear preference—out of 30, 28 raised their hands for private. Two of us raised our hands for public. I was shocked by the imbalance.

I wondered why so many teachers wanted to teach in private schools. This was at a time when I thought all teachers were trying to help cure the epidemic lack of teachers in America. Teach for America was ballooning as a pathway to teaching in public schools without a teaching credential. I knew full well that you didn't need a degree and teaching credential to teach in private schools. But here, inside of a traditional teacher preparation program that conferred both, our class of teachers was larger than usual. Didn't the time and effort to earn these credentials indicate a preference to teach in public schools? But, then again, I thought, this was also the beginning of state exams in public schools and state standards were being hammered into us throughout our first semester. In our education courses, we learned how to write student learning objectives, and where they should be inserted in a lesson plan and on the chalkboard. Even as student teachers, we heard that The No Child Left Behind Act had done a number on school funding and that Annual Yearly Progress reports were sapping teacher motivation. And then there were the public charter schools popping up in cities across the country. Charter schools seemed at once to be a gift and a curse—both a funding solution for stuck-in-the-rut, under-funded public schools and a step toward the potential erosion of pillar school communities.

But come on, I thought. Why did so many want to teach in private schools? Wasn't it really about the contrasting visions that "private school" and "public school" conjured for these new teachers? Perhaps it was what "private" evokes about tuition, parent affluence, student literacy, and student compliance, and on the other hand, what "public" says about "need," "parent involvement," "funds and resource accessibility," and "making a difference." Certainly, in the same class,

we had read books that underscored or even created some of these visions: one, *School of Dreams: Making the Grade at a Top American High School* (Humes, 2003), about a private school in California where “Tiger Moms” pressed their students to the breaking point in order to make “HYP” or Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. The other, *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students* (Cushman & What Kids Can Do, 2003)—in which student authors described their struggles to balance school, work, and home—was based in a public school. Private school seemed cushy, at least from these accounts and from my suburban upbringing. But, I thought, didn’t that mean the kids were already set and didn’t need my help?

My desire to teach in an urban public district was rooted in that kind of thinking. I thought that in a public school I could be useful and I could make a difference in ways that wouldn’t be possible in a private school. This vision was not without stereotype and fantasy. I envisioned that in a public school in Washington, DC, there would be a population needing my talents and that I would be the key for the lock of student potential. My preference for public school, for students that I thought would “need” me, also said something about what I believed about students at private schools and whether or not they should have access to me. Perhaps I thought they didn’t need me or even that they didn’t deserve me. I didn’t really consider the possibility that those students might need to see an example of a female physicist, to feel connections between physics and the contextual world they cared about, or to interact with a mentor like me. I felt that public school students needed those things, but in reality, students in all schools—public or private—probably need them. Really, my ideas about public and private education were not rooted in data. To me, at that time in my career, preferred students were those who I thought I could impact, even though my assumptions about needs and opportunity were not far from blatant stereotypes. I believed that less affluent students may not have access to someone from my educational background because of the pervasive narrative that urban schools are harder to staff with high-quality teachers.

Ayanna’s scenario: What do preferred students look like?

Rochelle Gutierrez’s (2002) definition of equity in math classes includes the notion that teachers should not be able to predict a student’s mathematics achievement based on physical attributes of that student. This got me thinking more about the ways that we are socialized to think about intellectual ability in

math. From my experience as an African American woman who excelled in mathematics classes as a student, I've always known the pervasive narratives about my placement and belonging in upper-level math courses. For me these narratives are so strong that I cannot remember the actual makeup of some of my classes because the expectation is that I was one of only a few students of color and/or females in the room. These narratives shape what I understand about what a good math student does or should look like. This realization about what makes a student preferable or not is one that has been a conversation throughout my educational career in practical and theoretical ways. Based on my affinity for mathematics and for supporting that affinity and understanding in others, I decided to become a mathematics teacher.

One of the articles that I'd read while earning my teaching certification that still pushes my thinking was, "Beavis and Barbie: Holding students accountable to what?" from The Math Projects Journal's *Ultimate Math Lessons* (Shore, 2005). The central question in Shore's piece is a consideration of whether teachers would be more likely to pass unruly Beavis or attentive Barbie, and what a passing grade in this scenario would indicate about mathematical competence. While the characters in the article are in many ways exclusionary, the notion of a preferred student surfaces again and again. One of the main points of the article is "...that the number one criteria for getting a high school diploma in America is docility." Until reading this years ago, I am not sure that I would have connected docility, conformity, and ease of management with high(er) grades in a mathematics class. In reflecting on my career as a student, I was hard-working and compliant. This article suggested to me that while the compliance didn't earn my grades, it certainly made earning those grades easier for me than it would have been for a student who was not as compliant or didn't conform to American societal norms.

As a teacher thinking about how many students of color are expected to be in a continual state of 'underperforming' in mathematics and how that results in fewer being enrolled in challenging mathematics classes elicits an emotional response from me. I get angry that the brilliance of people who look and reason like me are overlooked and I get sad that there are people who cannot positively impact the field of mathematics because they were less compliant than I was as a student, effectively removing them from growing into a mathematics professional. How often do educators, consciously or not, believe they can predict someone's

mathematical or academic ability just by looking at them, learning where they live, seeing a picture of their family, or any other surface characteristic? In my experience teaching and working with teachers, I've come to realize that the work of teaching, for me, is based on getting to know students and then providing the necessary supports to allow them to engage richly with the content rather than teaching to the *good* students and tracking the others into less rigorous courses.

Thinking through these scenarios helped us see how assumptions about what makes a student preferred can limit teachers' potential impact. Our discussion of the impact of these scenarios has raised three conclusive points for us: "If we each have preferred students, how does this impact those we don't prefer?," "It's important to know what you really think and examine why," and "This is all in the name of REAL equity." The first point will be discussed below and the second two will be discussed in part two of this blog post.

If we each have preferred students, how does this impact those we don't prefer?

There are a lot of words that teachers use to describe students that also indicate a preference. Some common terms are bright, high (achieving), gifted, low (achieving), low track, diverse, at risk, natural, regular, college prep, on-grade-level, honors, advanced, remediating, etc. As you think about these words who comes to mind? Now notice who doesn't come to mind.

The issue is not the words themselves. We will always find new terms to say what we want. It's what we envision, our schema associated with these terms, that can be problematic. We could each probably draw and describe our ideal student. Those ideal students may be eager to participate, may share beautiful and complete explanations, or may 'cut us some slack' when we make a mistake in class. While having an ideal student is not problematic in and of itself, the antithesis of our ideals might raise issues for us if our student population includes even one student that doesn't live up to our ideals. The flip side of having preferred students is that we also have unpreferred students that we are in danger of excluding intentionally or unintentionally. While we may hope to be a wholly inclusive teacher, trying to reach students that "need" us or will receive us, we necessarily exclude others. In Ayanna's scenario, being aware of the expected makeup of her advanced courses indicated to her that she and people like her were not always welcome in these spaces. She was the flip side of that

coin even though she was enrolled in these math classes. She was viewed as an exception or an exceptional student when others in that space were viewed as typical. In Katey's scenario, private and public schools are flip sides of each other in many ways. Preferring the clientele and resources of a private school may indicate a deficit view of the clientele and resources of a public school. That is, underestimating the public school environment might cause one to miss the richness of the public school environment. In addition, Katey's assumptions about the resources and access of private schools and their students caused her to neglect the potential needs of private school students that she could positively impact through mentorship and support. In either case, this reflects an inability to envision the needs and resources of students in either environment accurately. While thinking more expansively about a new setting or a different type of student is ideal, it's not easy.

In our work as teacher coaches and mentors, we often hear teachers grappling with how to support the range of students they teach. We hear them talking about low-track and high-track classes or students who appear motivated and those who lack motivation. And while the speaker is thinking of particular students, we wonder what these conversations reinforce for them about those students and the flip side of that coin; the students they aren't talking about. Further, when teachers share their perspectives on teaching particular students, we wonder what stereotypes are being reinforced, especially when their stories are about historically and currently marginalized students whom they serve, whether they are succeeding under the instruction or not.

In addition, we work with teachers in a range of school settings and understand that struggles are present at private, public, charter, virtual, and hybrid schools with respect to supporting deep and lasting mathematics and science education. We wonder, how teachers can begin to share these stories of struggle as connected to an (in)ability to meet students where they are? We wonder, how do we respond to these stories of struggle from the perspective of uncovering assumptions and building teachers abilities to better support students. We must continue and encourage the consideration of both sides of the coin, our preferences for students and schools, and our assumptions about the schools and students we chose and those that we don't. Knowing that these expectations exist and need to be confronted, next we'll introduce a tool that we've found useful for investigating the flip sides of our coins and consider how self-reflection supports

equitable teaching for students.

References

Cushman, K., & What Kids Can Do. (2003). *Fires in the bathroom: Advice for teachers from high school students*. New York, NY: New Press.

Gutiérrez, R. (2002). Enabling the practice of mathematics teachers in context: Toward a new equity research agenda. *Mathematical Thinking and Learning*, 4(2-3), 145-187.

Humes, E. (2003). *School of dreams: Making the grade at a top American high school* (1st ed.). Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

Shore, C. (2005). *Beavis and Barbie: Who will pass?* (Second ed.). Murrieta, CA: The Math Projects Journal.