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What is This?
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Donna M. Harris¹

Abstract

Ability grouping and tracking have been a major focus in educational research because of its role in promoting curriculum differentiation. However, there has been limited attention to how this differentiation occurs in contemporary schools involved with reform efforts including those focused on subject specific academic standards designed to improve student access to rigorous academic content. This article examines how varying teacher expectations regarding the implementation of academic standards promotes curriculum differentiation in middle schools involved with comprehensive school reform. Drawing on teacher interview and survey data from five middle schools, the author shows the challenges teachers confronted when implementing standards; the contradictory expectations teachers held toward students; and how teacher expectations affected to what extent standards were evenly applied. Despite the fact that standards are supposed to promote equity, this analysis shows these aims can be compromised by the challenges teachers confront in schools and contradictory expectations regarding standards.

Keywords

standards-based reform, teacher expectations, educational equity

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Promoting educational change by increasing academic demands for student learning by implementing academic standards where all students have access to common educational curriculum and instruction challenges preexisting norms in American public schools where instructional experiences have varied. In response to student differences (i.e., social and academic), schools have historically constructed different opportunities to learn (see Stevens, 1993; Tate, 2005) by separating students accordingly into different courses, classrooms, and/or learning groups within classrooms to meet the unique instructional needs of these students (Graham, 2005; McPartland & Schneider, 1996; Oakes, 2005). However, there has been great concern that the sorting of students into different learning groups via ability groups or academic tracks limits the opportunity to learn for some especially as that the breadth and depth of academic content provided varies between these learning groups. The research literature regarding ability grouping and tracking has shown that performance gaps are perpetuated when educational experiences are stratified between those in the highest and lowest learning groups (Gamoran, 2000; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Kulik, 2004; Oakes, 2005; Slavin, 1987, 1990).

Between-school gaps in experiences and outcomes among students in urban schools, in particular, are influenced by differences in beliefs about students, access to course work, and pedagogy. The differences in educational experiences are often associated with a school’s demographic profile (Balfanz, 2000; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Hanson, 1990). For example, Balfanz (2000) found that teachers in low-performing urban schools inadvertently focused on basic skills at one grade to make up for what they perceived was not taught in a prior grade. However, when teachers implement this instructional strategy throughout the elementary and middle grades, students are not exposed to the curriculum required to meet the current and subsequent grade level demands and suppresses educational outcomes.

Educational reformers suggest that standards-based reform can help to address the inequities in students’ academic experiences within and between schools (Cross, 2004). Standards-based reform has allowed for the creation of common curriculum frameworks among states to improve the opportunities to learn among students by providing content and performance goals that are explicit guides that determine the focus of instruction. As a result of content standards, teachers are expected to know what to teach and students understand what they are to learn (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2001). Performance standards provide the benchmarks to assess to what extent teachers have effectively taught and students have learned the prescribed subject specific goals. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reinforces the saliency of
performance standards given that all public schools are now responsible for ensuring student proficiency on state-level assessments. In theory, the development of standards in each state creates the context where common educational experiences and academic outcomes exist for all students regardless of the school they attend, the teacher they have, or the learning group placed (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003).

Although standards-based reform has the potential to ensure more equitable educational experiences for students by minimizing the differentiation of curriculum and instruction that occurs within and between schools, its impact can be compromised by the deficit beliefs that exist about low-income students and students of color and their families (Flessa, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). Despite its intentions, Valencia et al. (2001) assert that “standards-based school reform—reinforces deficit thinking by placing the onus of academic improvement largely on the individual and the family” (p. 319).

This analysis is concerned with how standards-based reform’s intent to expand opportunity to learn especially in urban schools can be compromised by deficit views school personnel hold about students and their families. More specifically, I explore how teachers interpret students’ social and academic differences in deficit ways when they are expected to assist all students with attaining common academic standards. This analysis also considers the implications that deficit beliefs have on the application of standards including whether curricular and instructional adaptations are associated with students’ academic differences.

**The Importance of Teachers Beliefs and Opportunity to Learn**

Several researchers have cautioned that raising standards without addressing deeply embedded norms about student potential will not substantially change the educational conditions and opportunities to learn for those students that these reforms intend to assist (McPartland & Schneider, 1996; Oakes, 1992; Weinstein, 1996). Weinstein (1996) argues that

Attention must be made to changing limiting beliefs about differential ability to learn and self-defeating teaching methods that follow from such beliefs. These have led to the inappropriate adjustment of standards [lower expectations] and the inappropriate adjustment of teaching methods [watered-down treatment] for certain groups of children, thereby, creating enormous inequities in conditions for learning. (p. 16)
Expectations among teachers and other school personnel are an essential consideration when implementing standards-based reform efforts because these beliefs among adults shape the nature of the opportunities to learn provided to students (see Brophy & Good, 1970; Payne, 2010; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) including ability group placement (see Rist, 1970). Many public schools, especially urban schools that serve large numbers of African American and Latina/o students and the poor, have the biggest hurdles to overcome to improve the quality of curriculum and instruction and student learning to meet the demands of standards-based reform and accountability (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Lipman, 2004). As a result, urban school personnel that serve a large concentration of students of color and the poor are at high risk of holding lower expectations for youth served in these settings (Balfanz, 2000; Diamond et al., 2004; Rist, 1970; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Warren, 2002). Diamond et al. (2004) found among five Chicago elementary schools that school personnel held differential expectations for students based on school composition. In settings serving mostly, Asian, White, and middle-income students, teachers held high academic expectations for them. For example, when discussing their students’ academic attributes, these elementary school teachers focused on assets including students’ motivation to learn. In comparison, the elementary school personnel in Chicago serving mostly African American, Latina/o, and low-income students held low expectations and focused on the students’ academic deficits. Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane found that these racially skewed beliefs about students had an impact on whether teachers believed that they were responsible for all students’ learning. As a result, Chicago elementary school teachers serving students of color and the poor had a lower sense of responsibility for student learning. When this occurs, teachers do not associate students’ academic problems with ineffective instruction (Weinstein, 1996). Rather, students and their families are viewed from a deficit point of view as they are seen as the major obstacles to improving learning outcomes (Belfiore, Auld, & Lee, 2005; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Warren, 2002; Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995). Deficit thinking allows for the burden for change to fall on students and their families instead of understanding how school practices impact learning (Flessa, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004).

The presence of low expectations and deficit beliefs can have an impact on students’ opportunity to learn by affecting what is taught, time spent of academics, and quality of instruction (Stevens, 1993; Tate, 2005). Standholtz, Ogawa, and Scribner’s (2004) study found that the beliefs held by school personnel affected how a school district in California adapted state prescribed
standards at the local level in response to concerns about student’s capability to achieve them. As a result of their concerns about student ability, this district differentiated standards by creating three levels (i.e., minimum, essential, and accelerated). As the opportunities to learn were stratified based on perceptions about student academic capacity, the authors suggest that the practice of standards differentiation is akin to academic tracking. Standholtz, Ogawa, and Scribner’s results indicate that differentiated standards influenced what was taught in the classroom because many teachers in their study tended to focus their classroom instruction on lower level standards in response to the focus of the California state test and the perceived needs of students.

Studies examining the relationship between teacher expectations and student outcomes inform our understanding about the impact that teacher’s deficit beliefs have on student outcomes (Hinnant, O’Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). At the secondary level, Rumberger and Palardy’s (2005) regression analysis using the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) found that students in schools with high teacher expectations as well as high rates of student completion of homework and enrollment in advanced courses had a positive impact on student’s reading and mathematics performance. Hinnant et al.’s (2009) longitudinal study of elementary students at Grades 1, 3, and 5 shows that teacher expectations had a long-term impact on reading and mathematics outcomes. At Grade 3, the authors found that teacher expectations from first grade negatively influenced the mathematics outcomes of low-income students but not for high-income students. In regard to teacher expectations and student background, Tenenbaum and Ruck’s (2007) meta-analytic review of studies found a small but statistically significant effect of race where teachers had higher expectations for White students compared with African American and Latino students. However, teachers held higher expectations for Asian American students compared with all others including White students.

This analysis expands on prior studies by examining how the deficit beliefs among middle school teachers involved with the comprehensive school reform, America’s Choice, influenced the application of content standards by describing (a) the academic challenges teachers report about their students; (b) how teachers’ beliefs about students influenced their views about whether all students were capable of meeting academic standards; and (c) how teachers’ beliefs about students influenced the application of standards.
The America’s Choice comprehensive school reform model provides an appropriate setting to examine the tensions confronted when implementing a standards-based reform to address the gaps in students’ skills and learning experiences by promoting detracking, schoolwide change, and standards-based curriculum. Developed during the 1990s, this reform model intends to expand the opportunity to learn for all students. First, America’s Choice promotes the elimination of ability grouping and tracking overtime (Bodilly, 2001; National Center on Education and the Economy [NCEE], 2000). The lead architects of the America’s Choice design, Tucker and Codding (1998), envisioned that standards serve as an antidote to the tracking system, to the strong press for classifying students into ability groups that simply reflect and then reinforce low expectations for those students. Standards should be used to set a very high foundation requirement for all students, reflecting high expectations for everyone. (p. 43)

Standards are clear targets for students to work toward and master. In the end, it is expected that students will be motivated by their success to take more academically rigorous courses. Given the academic needs of students in many America’s Choice schools, the designers of this reform model recognize that all schools may not be able to attain this vision initially. This vision is to be fulfilled incrementally as students move from their middle schools into the America’s Choice high school (P. Peregrine, personal communication, December 10, 2004). Second, America’s Choice promotes the philosophy that student success is based on effort and with additional time for learning. Before, during, and after school tutoring are supposed to be implemented to extend students’ learning opportunities. Third, as a comprehensive school reform model, America’s Choice promotes the structural, professional, and instructional changes that are to be used by all teachers and in all classrooms across subjects and grades. Extended time for learning is promoted through the use of block scheduling with 60 to 90 minutes available for instruction. Common classroom routines including opening meetings, work time, and closing meetings are promoted as consistent ways to organize teaching and learning across subjects and grade levels. In addition, large schools are encouraged to create small learning communities through the creation of houses and/or grade level teams. Teacher meetings are designed to foster a dialogue among teachers to assist with implementation of the
design, foster collaboration around instruction, and develop a professional community among school staff (NCEE, 2001). Fourth, the creator of America’s Choice, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), has been in the forefront of development of academic standards with its the New Standard Performance Standards (NSPS) that preceded some of state level efforts to curricula standards. All schools are expected to implement the America’s Choice standards-based English language arts and mathematics curriculum. As all states have developed their own standards because of federal pressure and incentives, America’s Choice has attempted to align the NSPS with those states where they have schools using their program (Tucker, 2004). Fifth, all America’s Choice middle schools are expected to implement the Ramp Up to Middle Grades Literacy program to improve reading skills of adolescents (see Codding, 2001).

Method

Data

Data for this analysis are drawn from five middle schools that were part of a 5-year (1999-2004) mixed-method evaluation of the America’s Choice design undertaken by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania and funded by the U.S. Department of Education in middle and high schools across the United States. This evaluation was focused on understanding the school-level implementation process regarding America’s Choice; the quality of assistance the America’s Choice model provided to schools as they changed curriculum, instructional practices, and professional community; and the impact the America’s Choice had on teaching and learning. Data collection for the evaluation of the America’s Choice middle school program began fall 2001 and ended during the winter of 2004. Research teams of at least two researchers visited these middle schools five times for 2-to-3-day visits (usually twice an academic year) between 2001 and 2004. During each site visit the research team interviewed teachers, school administrators, school-level coaches who were responsible for implementation of the design, and guidance counselors. Semistructured interview protocols focused on questions about various aspects of the America’s Choice implementation and the use of standards-based curriculum and instruction over 3 years. Interviews were tape-recorded and conducted during planning periods, before, and/or after school. Several teachers, principal, leadership team surveys were administered throughout the duration of the evaluation to understand the implementation and impact
in a broader population of schools and teachers implementing the America’s Choice design. This analysis draws on approximately 270 teacher and school leader interviews from five urban middle schools that were part of the middle school evaluation. I also use 244 teacher survey responses administered in 2004 from four of five of America’s Choice middle schools that are the focus of this analysis to understand teacher perceptions about standards beyond those interviewed. One of the middle school’s survey data is missing because of nonresponse.

**Sample**

The five middle schools included in this study were all located in urban contexts from the northern and southern regions of the United States and confronted pressure to improve student outcomes as a result of state imposed high stakes testing. America’s Choice was adopted to improve student outcomes within the schools studied and was adopted by number of other schools within their individual districts as part of a systemwide reform effort. Each school initially served sixth through eighth grades. However, during 2001-2002, one school in this study was expanded to include secondary Grades 9 through 12 over time. The student enrollments for these schools varied with the smallest school serving 967 students and the largest school with over 1,600 students. African American and Latina/o students were the predominant student populations at most of the five America’s Choice middle schools. These schools tended to serve many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds ranging from 49% to 100% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. By the 2003-2004 academic year, three of the middle schools were in their 3rd year of implementation and the other two were in their 4th year of implementing the America’s Choice design.

**Analysis**

A mixed-method research approach (see Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) was used to analyze the interview and survey data to understand the challenges teacher encountered when implementing standards and how these experiences shaped their beliefs toward students attaining standards. The survey and interview data allowed for a triangulation of information to understand the complexities surrounding teacher beliefs and the implementation of academic standards (Cohen & Manion, 1994). An examination of case studies from the five middle schools CPRE visited provided initial insights about teacher beliefs and the role of standards within America’s Choice schools. The
qualitative software package, Atlas Ti, was used to sort teacher interviews by questions related to standards. Thematic matrices were created to allow for a comparison of school personnel responses about content standards to generate themes applicable within each school and between schools (Ritchie, Spencer, & O’Connor, 2003). Once the qualitative themes were established, relevant survey responses were used to supplement initial understandings about teachers’ views about their students and standards. SPSS was used to analyze survey data and provided descriptive data regarding teacher survey responses that were used to confirm whether themes found with interview data were valid among a larger pool of teachers from four of the five America’s Choice middle schools included in this study.

Results

Student Challenges, Deficit Beliefs, and Standards

It was anticipated that the America’s Choice standards-based approach would provide middle school teachers with the curricular and instructional focus to increase access to academically rich content and remedy the academic differences among students by increasing the expectations for curriculum coverage, improving instructional focus, and enhancing the quality of student work. Despite this vision, many of the America’s Choice middle school teachers confronted considerable challenges with their students that affected some of their outlooks about students and the application of standards. Survey responses from 244 teachers in the four of the five America’s Choice middle schools studied showed that 54% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement, “Many of the students I teach are not capable of learning the material I am supposed to teach” and 84% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their students were not ready for problem solving until they had acquired the basics. Interview data further support the perception that many students within the American’s Choice middle schools had academic challenges that made the implementation of standards-based curriculum and instruction difficult. English and math teachers across the five middle schools stated that the low-literacy skills of students affected teaching and learning. When discussing students having problems attaining standards, a literacy coach commented.

Our kids have a lot of needs. There is a low foundation knowledge as well as low reading ability. It is difficult to reach all the standards.
When surveyed about whether they thought that most of their students could reach standards, 59% of America’s Choice middle schools teachers strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. Although interviews show that teachers in these five middle schools held a general belief that most of their students could meet the same standards, their responses varied and were more nuanced. These nuances communicate the tensions about and difficulties teachers encountered with standards-based reform and reflect deficit beliefs about students and their families. When asked during interviews about whether all students could be held to or achieve the same standards, teachers reported four challenges in interviews that were all associated with student and family factors with little attention to school or teacher practices. The varying skill level of students was the first challenge reported by teachers.

I’m not really sure . . . They want us all to be similar. I don’t know what they base the standards on. America’s Choice gives you a curriculum, but it is impossible that they [the kids] will all meet the standard because it’s no one’s fault they just can’t because of IQ or home life or whatever. They have problems outside of school larger than anything else I can even imagine.

Some teachers tended to attribute the challenges they confronted to student IQ, home life, and culture. The comment below suggests that factors including intelligence, race, and cultural orientation were beyond a teacher’s control and prevented students from meeting standards.

I don’t think that statement is correct. I totally disagree. In public school you have students with IQ 50 and you have students with IQ of 150. Children’s ability levels are not the same. Some students I think it is irresponsible is that they clobber teachers over the head and the teachers are not the only things in the equation. There are parents, cultures. Studies show that cultures have an influence on students. Low socioeconomic students are going to perform lower because they don’t have as many books in the home. Students don’t know half the vocabulary you are looking at. There was a study discussed in the [news] paper. It stated that different cultures have different expectations for their children. There is a gap in expectations between Asians and Whites, White and Black. Asian parents expect A’s. [The] White culture expects B’s. African American and Hispanics expect C’s. It is not every home.
The previous teacher’s response is an example of a deficit belief held about the powerful challenges confronted and the efficacy of standards. These references about differences in IQ levels among students imply that student ability is fixed which contradicts the America’s Choice philosophy that effort is the link to student achievement. The comments also highlight race-based stereotypes that put the onus of student achievement on families and not teachers or school practices (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). The problem with the espoused deficit beliefs is that they allow school personnel to make “overgeneralizations about family background”(Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 159).

A second challenge, lack of student responsibility for their own learning or motivation, was also viewed as a formidable obstacle by teachers. Only 46% of America’s Choice teachers surveyed in four of the five middle schools strongly or somewhat agreed that their students assumed responsibility for their work. Teacher interview data provide examples of how the lack of student responsibility played out in the America’s Choice middle grade classrooms. A math teacher thought that many students had little motivation to do schoolwork once they left school, even when this teacher assigned one homework problem to complete.

Students do not come back with the problem being done. They feel defeated before we start; I try to encourage them and tell them they can do it if they just focus. I think they have labeled themselves, don’t think anyone else has done it. They think they are not as smart as other kids. I try to tell them the difference between someone they look at as smart and not smart and it is habit. They have habits they have to break; the other kids don’t have bigger brains, they just do different things and have different focus and if they get focused they will too; they are very similar.

Another math teacher provided two examples where students did not assume responsibility for their learning.

We have one boy, who could meet standards, but purposely he had everything wrong—he is dummying down on purpose. . . I can see the potential in this kid, but I don’t know how to draw it out, to maximize it. I have another kid who does not come for after-school help because he has to practice his football. I know about No Child Left Behind, but I really worry about leaving No Child Left Behind.
There may be many factors that cause middle-grade students to disengage in schools beyond the lack of motivation. Student reactions may be in response to prior negative experiences in schools where low teacher expectations can alter student enthusiasm for learning (Fritzberg, 2001).

The third challenge teachers confronted was limited time to cover standards for all students. As an English teacher reported “We try to cover all the standards with all the kids, but there isn’t enough time in a day or year to do it—even with the [gifted] students.” The lack of time to assist students with meeting standards is another reality imposed by the traditional school day and academic calendar. Although America’s Choice expected schools to extend the school day and school year (with summer academic safety nets), some schools did not have the resources to make that happen. For example, budget cuts prevented America’s Choice schools in one district from sponsoring summer school during 2003 (see Tushnet & Harris, 2006).

Given the various obstacles with getting most students to attain standards, the fourth challenge and the least acknowledged in interviews was that teachers lacked the skills and strategies to engage students regarding standards. Only 29% of teachers surveyed in four of the five America’s Choice middle schools included in this study strongly or somewhat disagreed with a question about the support received to implement the standards was adequate. This suggests that the majority of teachers surveyed in the America’s Choice middle schools in this analysis did not report a need for additional professional support to help students with standards. However, one design coach described that although teachers in the school confronted many challenges in helping students to meet student needs, most made efforts to assist their students but teacher efforts were often limited because they needed more strategies to reach students.

Teachers in this building really believe that students can achieve for the most part and that is evidenced by the efforts they put into teaching. They may complain but deep down they really care about the students and they really put forth the effort; sometimes they may not know what to do and how to do it. They are always willing to learn . . . what it is that a lot of times most of the teachers are concerned that they cannot do it right and they just want to do it right.

A few teachers acknowledged in interviews that they lacked the necessary skills to engage students. When asked what was needed to help students meet standards, math teacher reported needing assistance with motivating students
Training on how to deal with at-risk students and finding ways to motivate students to meet the standards. One of the big challenges is motivating students to want to learn and meet the standards. If I had complete control, all kids would be motivated to learn.

Yet the above response does not necessarily reveal a need for change in pedagogy related to content.

The challenge of teaching low-achieving students who were perceived as unmotivated took a toll on teacher efforts to meet student needs. Despite their efforts, some teachers indicated they saw no measurable impact on student engagement.

This year we have been working, working, working and when you do that and don’t get the results and the kids can’t achieve, it is disheartening. They can do it but they have no drive, no motivation, can’t see past this hour. They would love to have one teacher per student; they would love for me to just be with them.

The consequences of teacher frustration related to helping students to meet standards given the existence of deficit beliefs, allow for teachers to take limited responsibility for student learning. Teacher surveys from four of the five America’s Choice middle schools indicate that 57% strongly or somewhat agreeing that the achievement of their students was beyond their control. An English teacher expressed that this frustration was driving many teachers to leave the district.

I think it is absurd to compare students with 140 IQ and ones with 100. There are some students who will choose not to meet the standards. I also think if you continue on this road a lot of teachers will leave. We are blamed for what students do or don’t do. I know lots of teachers looking for other jobs. This is in this school and other schools. This is affected by No Child Left Behind, which has good elements. They ask us to do a 100 dollar job on a dollar bill. We don’t have enough time or money to do this job.

The teacher’s comment above implies that he or she could not be held responsible for student outcomes given the challenges confronted with students who either lack the capacity or will to engage with the work required to attain standards. As more than two thirds of teachers surveyed reported that they did not have control over student attainment, then we should expect that these attitudes will influence the application of standards.
Deficit Beliefs and the Application of Standards

The challenges that teachers reported regarding assisting students with achieving academic standards and the deficit views that emerge as a result, create a context where the opportunity to learn for students may differ when the application of standards vary. The nature of beliefs about student capacity (i.e., being of high or low ability) and motivation to learn influenced teachers responses regarding how standards were applied including whether standards were modified where different criteria were used to judge the attainment of them. The existence of varying teacher expectations regarding standards attainment reflect another way opportunity to learn can be stratified in contemporary schools engaging with standards-based reform.

Teacher perceptions about the differences in students’ academic backgrounds shaped how some responded about whether most students could meet the standards. The interviews suggest that some teachers in the five America’s Choice middle schools implemented standards by modifying expectations for what it meant to achieve standards. Comments by two teachers below suggest that all students would not be able to attain all aspects of standards or achieve similar proficiency levels.

I think different students are going to meet standards in their own way. It’s not a cookie cutter. Every student will not be able to do every component of a standard.

I think they can achieve some level of proficiency, yes, but the level of proficiency will vary.

Although standards-based reform intends to foster common expectations for student learning, teachers can circumvent this goal by stratifying what it meant for students to meet prescribed academic standards. One teacher suggested that standards-based class work might vary in quality for lower and higher level students including special education students.

I believe that all students can meet the standard. I think all students have different levels of meeting the standard. I even believe that [special education students] or low level learners can meet the standard. You can take [special education] students and they can write a story, but it may not be at a level of advanced, but they use the elements to meet that standard. The end products may not be as sophisticated. The quality of the end product may not be as detailed as others, but the elements can still be there. The higher-level kids with the content and vocabulary will be very detailed, but low students can still have the elements.
The remarks provided above show that a teacher can implement standards but at the same time vary their expectations for students based on their perceptions about student academic preparation. We must consider that these variable expectations reflect different opportunities to learn because the quality of outcomes may vary. These teacher observations demonstrate the difficult reality imposed by having students that vary dramatically in academic skills. These results point toward the fact that standard-based reform does not resolve the challenges with expanding opportunity to learn and may be limited in drastically improving the quality of educational experiences and outcomes among the lowest performing students in classrooms.

Despite America’s Choice philosophy that all students be held to the same academic standards, some teachers revealed that they applied different standards for judging student work. Although 67% of America’s Choice middle school teachers surveyed strongly or somewhat agreed they used the same criteria to judge the quality of an assignment, 32% disagreed with this statement.

An English teacher considered the progress that students made over time when assigning grades in relation to the standards.

[My] approach runs contrary to being fully standards-based, but as long as students are continuing to grow and improve, I’ll keep grading this way. Otherwise, students would always be failing even when they were working hard—kids can’t always feel failure. They need to experience success as well if they are going to preserve—as long as the child is improving.

This teacher admitted assigning grades based on individual student effort and work excellence. “Once I get a sense of where students are coming from, I assign grades based on both quality and effort.” Although a basic tenet of America’s Choice is effort, we cannot ignore that the quality of student work is essential in standards-based education. If student work is not up to par, then standards have not been able to improve the quality of student outcomes. These statements reveal the conflict of implementing standards-based reform in a system where students have different skill sets and with limited time to help students progress. Some argue for the development of intermediate standards that students progress through as they move toward standards mastery (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2001). The idea is that these intermediate benchmarks provide evidence that progress is being made with students achieving a level of success. However, how will these intermediate standards be assessed and systematically tracked over time? It is unclear how
teachers and school principals would ensure that these intermediate standards not become stratified expectations for student work.

Although most of these America’s Choice middle school teachers made attempts to expose students to the America’s Choice standards-based curriculum, for example, 85% of teachers surveyed strongly or somewhat agreed that they used standards to plan lessons, some teachers interviewed indicated they were not able to assure mastery of them. Responding to the assertion that all students can meet the standards, a lead math teacher puts it best by stating “They can. Every student can be exposed to standards and have some success.” However, this teacher suggested that “Mastery [of standards] may not be achieved.” This distinction is important because exposure to standards alone is insufficient. To promote the quality of education across schools and classrooms and among students with different educational preparation and skills, teachers must possess the tools that lead to standards mastery. If some teachers do not expect their students to attain all aspects of standards and modify the criteria for judging standards attainment, then what good are standards in bridging the gap in educational experiences, expectations, and outcomes?

If some teachers within schools lack the belief and skills to facilitate mastery of standards, then standards-based efforts to improve the quality of education for all students is compromised. In the face of America’s Choice efforts to improve student access and learning, teachers’ deficit beliefs can derail efforts to promote equal educational opportunity for students. Adjusting criteria to judge mastery of standards contradicts the goals of standards-based educational reform. It also reinforces differentiation of another kind where there are varying degrees of standard mastery. In the end, this may result in students acquiring different skill sets where some will be more prepared than others to show proficiency on state assessments and take on rigorous academic coursework in high schools.

**Conclusion**

The data from this analysis show that standards in and of themselves did not remedy the challenges that schools and teachers confronted with students of varying academic skills and engagement. Although teacher survey responses in the America’s Choice middle schools in this analysis indicated a general belief that all students would be able to attain content standards, interviews revealed that student related challenges including discussions about inherent academic differences made it difficult for teachers to help students master standards. Deficit beliefs held by teachers about students and their families
can become an institutional barrier for expanding opportunities to learn when the burden for improvement rests primarily on students. These varied perceptions of student capacity to achieve standards may lead to the stratification of curriculum and instruction when America’s Choice middle school teachers unevenly apply standards. Some teachers indicated that some of their students would not be able to attain all aspects of a standard or there would be different levels of proficiency. Although most teachers were committed to standards exposure, less were committed to whether all students would attain similar proficiency or mastery of standards.

Much of the discussion regarding curriculum differentiation has focused on differences in learning experiences and opportunities as the result of the formal organization of different course pathways (i.e., tracking) and courses (i.e., advanced or basic) (Ayalon, 2006). This analysis shows that the stratification of learning opportunities can also be perpetuated through teachers’ deficit beliefs related to their students and standards. These findings suggest that even if formal learning groups via tracking, ability grouping or multiple course levels are eliminated and standards implemented, the inequality in educational experiences will still exist for students that have social and academic differences. Although schools may ultimately alter the formal structures that are often associated with curriculum differentiation, they may not be able to destroy the norms and political factors that preserve these alternative forms of differentiation (Oakes, 1992; Weinstein, 1996).

Variable teacher expectations fostered by deficit beliefs and the uneven implementation of standards illuminate two unresolved tensions regarding how teachers should manage academic differences and maintain common educational goals. The first tension is whether we need to have multiple standards given the variability of student background in many low-performing schools (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2001). Finn and Kanstoroom (2001) suggest that intermediate standards may be needed so that low-achieving students can experience success as they progress toward standards. Given the time constraints, it may be difficult to get all students toward mastery in an academic year. The idea of variable standards contradicts that aims of standards-based reform because stratified goals may limit what certain student populations, such as low income and students of color, should learn. The second tension relates to the fact that the goals associated with standards are not equivalent to high expectations (Voltz & Fore, 2006). If this is true, then how do we go about raising teacher expectations for students? There is some debate within the school reform movement over whether teachers’ beliefs need to change before we see changes in their practice. The data from this analysis suggest there has to be an alignment between teachers’ beliefs and practices.
in order for standards to dramatically improve students’ learning and outcomes for all.

To change teacher practice, there has to be ongoing support within and outside the classroom to address teacher beliefs (Flessa, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Weinstein, 1996). Weinstein (1996) suggests

To make common rigorous standards work, we have to believe in the potential of all children to learn despite diversity of characteristics and style. We also have to provide children with tools to overcome obstacles in learning—thus differentiating teaching methods in “appropriate” ways while not lowering educational goals. (p. 17)

Weinstein et al. (1995) found that negative teacher expectations about students changed as a result of their involvement with a long-term intervention where teachers met weekly over 2 years to confront and challenge their beliefs. While working collaboratively among peers, teachers holding negative expectations encountered evidence to contradict their preexisting beliefs. It was only when these prior beliefs were contradicted, that teachers could alter their expectations. Any initiative designed to change teacher beliefs is a time consuming enterprise and requires intense effort to expose deeply embedded expectations for students because most teachers are not aware of these negative beliefs. Clair, Adger, Short, and Millen (1998) state that

Professional growth for standards-based teaching and learning in culturally diverse schools requires more time than is usually made available in traditional professional development structures. The time requirement is great because teachers need to consider how their beliefs and their actions affect students from varied cultures, language groups, and races in distinct ways. (p. 14)

To move beyond a deficit view of students regarding educational attainment, teachers need strategies at the classroom level. Walsh (2006) provides suggestions for how to connect with students but cautions that there is no one way of reaching out to disengaged students. He encourages new teachers, in particular, to become familiar with their students to understand their academic interests, strengths, and weaknesses; develop trust with disengaged students; treat them with respect; and refrain from taking students resistance personally. This strategy is insufficient if teachers are not actively engaged with a long-term intervention, where they can reframe their expectations for students. The path to helping students that vary academically, culturally, and
linguistically in relation to standards requires a systemic approach to unearthing deeply entrenched ideas about student deficits and intelligence among all school personnel and teachers specifically. Without doing so, standards-based reform will be a meaningless effort to change schooling. The responses of the middle school teachers involved in this study suggest that the varying implementation of standards can perpetuate the educational inequality for those marginal students that the reform effort was supposed to eradicate.

Research about standards-based reform needs to systematically study how standards are implemented by districts, schools, and teachers. We must continue to examine whether the modification of standards reinforces the stratification of learning opportunities that already exists for students. If standards are only reinforcing similar patterns found prior to these major reform efforts, then we need to take a step back to consider why. Changing deeply embedded beliefs that teachers and other school personnel hold require a different kind of professional investment where staff must confront negative beliefs about students that are shaped by race, social class, and English language status. These teachers must begin to understand how beliefs put limits on their expectations for student learning. Transforming these beliefs must occur before or at the same time that schools are implementing standards-based reform or any effort to promote change in schools.

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References


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