Equitable learning and development: Applying science to foster liberatory education

Camille A. Farrington

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For over 100 years, certain enduring aims, beliefs, and criticisms have shaped the evolution of educational policy and practice in America. Any effort to reform or transform K–12 schooling to align with the science of learning and development must take into account the prevailing and often contradictory goals and assumptions underlying the school system we have inherited, and how this system shapes the daily experiences of students in classrooms across the country. Racial equity must be at the center of our concerns, both because children of color share in the human right to health and wholeness and because we live in a precarious moment in human existence. We cannot afford to waste the talents and contributions of any young person by squandering opportunities for their learning and development in a miseducative system.

In recent years, the social-emotional learning (SEL) movement seems to have crashed headlong into both the academic standards/accountability movement and a renewed movement for educational equity. In this commentary, I want to grapple with this specific tension—borne of long-standing beliefs and criticisms but experienced anew today across schools, districts, and states—and consider what recent scholarship on the science of learning and development has to offer toward resolving this tension.

Proponents of rigorous academic standards situate educational disparities as a problem of inconsistent and unambitious expectations and support for students’ intellectual work. They believe that students need to develop cognitive skills and broad knowledge of the world to unlock future options, and they are deeply committed to ensuring that all students have rigorous opportunities to think and to develop those skills and knowledge. Some proponents of the standards movement worry that the new attention to social-emotional learning will take educators’ eyes off the prize and that schools will lose hard-won, academic-focused instructional minutes to faddish SEL programs that may amount to little more than “fluff”—all to the detriment of students with the most disadvantages.

Proponents of social-emotional learning counter that “learning is social and emotional,” and that if schools support broader inter- and intra-personal development, students will be healthier and more well-adjusted, and the school and classroom climate will be more conducive to academic learning (National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2018). Proponents of SEL or social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD) argue that a holistic focus on student development is essential both for students’ success in school and for their long-term well-being.

While there is wide general support for expanding the focus of schools to include broader student development, there is also resistance from some educators and outside observers who have decried SEL efforts as racist. In particular, the focus on “grit” has come under criticism (Herold, 2015), but the cultural assumptions underlying the broader social-emotional learning movement have also been questioned. Does “character education” or “self-regulation” really just mean we are doubling down on compliance and adherence to White dominant norms of behavior? Is SEL being used to advance yet another deficit narrative that blames students of color for not having the perseverance or self-management skills necessary to succeed in school? The pushback against this criticism has been vigorous and broad-based but has acknowledged that, in order for SEL to benefit students of color, it must be undertaken with an explicit racial equity lens (Aspen Institute, 2018; Chatmon & Osta,
Equity, academic excellence, and holistic development: Tensions among educational reforms

To truly understand the what, why, and how of practice in K–12 schools requires an archeological dig through our collective history of evolving assumptions, fears, convictions, and aspirations.1 One of the earliest and most enduring aims of public schooling has been identifying hidden talent among the masses: discovering those children with extraordinary promise, whose abilities are worthy of cultivating at taxpayer expense. We can think of this as the meritocracy paradigm. Over 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson (1788) argued that, by trying to educate everyone, schools could easily identify those who were actually educable. Early proponents of public high schools likewise saw them as a way to offer opportunity to all, but then continue support only to those who merited it (Reese, 1995). Much of the current educational system stands on bedrock beliefs in race- and class-based theories of intelligence, upon which we built foundations of ostensibly “meritocratic” structures. By running all children through a set of lessons, testing their retention, and tallying their performance, educators could effectively stratify students by their academic rankings.1

Explanations for the variability of intelligence and effort have varied over time: race, culture, genes, physical environment, home training, religious devotion, random variation, and divine providence (Conant, 1961; Deschenes, Tyack, & Cuban, 2001). Regardless of the explanation at any given moment, schools have long been seen as a natural sorting mechanism, dividing those who are intelligent and willing to work hard from those who are not, so that every student gets what they deserve (Dench, 2006; Young, 1996).

Note that this was absolutely not a system designed to ensure that all students would learn the specified content. A teacher training textbook from 1920 made it clear to aspiring teachers that “all students learning” was not the goal: “Nothing that education can do will enable a non-selected [i.e., inherently inferior] group of individuals to approach quality either in ability or in achievement. Indeed, it may be confidently asserted that the net result of education is to magnify differences rather than eliminate them” (Strayer & Engelhardt, 1920, quoted in Reese, 2005, pp. 155–156).

Underlying the meritocracy paradigm was an assumption that the existing social and economic hierarchy was right and natural; the challenge was in efficiently slotting people into their appropriate places in that social order (Farrington & Small, 2008). Early in the twentieth century, taxpayers were adamant that their money not be wasted on students who engendered little hope for academic success. As educational historian David Labaree (1988) explained, “Meritocratic theory argues that individual differences in ability, motivation, and character define varying degrees of individual worth or merit. Accordingly, those with the most merit should receive the largest share of social rewards, and it becomes society’s responsibility to guarantee that people get what they deserve” (p. 23). All the mechanisms of “meritocracy” in our current system (and there are many) derive from this central aim of identifying and rewarding academic merit.

The early architects of the “modern” American school system in the early twentieth century were also true believers in the “cult of efficiency” (Callahan, 1962), an orientation toward the administration of public services that reshaped our understanding of school into an economic enterprise rather than a moral, civic, or humanistic one. These architects revered standardization, doubling down on the batch-processing pedagogy originated in the 19th century: teachers delivered preset curricula to students in large

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1For a much more thorough treatment of the history summarized here, please see, for example: Anderson (1988); Cuban (1993); Franklin and Savage (2004); Kliebard (2004); MacDonald (2004); Reese (1995); Reyhner and Eder (2004); Spring (1986); Tyack (1974); Tyack and Cuban (1995).
classrooms with desks bolted forward, tested children’s retention of information, meticulously recorded marks and grades, and marched forward through the textbook (Cuban, 1993; Tyack, 1974). The foundational structures laid in the 1800s and early 1900s still largely dictate the type of education most students receive in high schools today, regardless of how our beliefs and goals might (or might not) have changed.

A small percentage of children has always thrived under this system; teachers and administrators deemed them the most intelligent and deserving students, and promoted them to the next grade. It is critical to understand that the percentage of children who benefited from this system is and has always been small. The fundamental purpose of a “meritocratic” education system is to identify and educate a small subset of students, while progressively weeding out all of those who do not excel by whatever particular metrics we have devised (Farrington, 2014). A hundred years ago, most children left formal education before high school and repeated at least one grade while still enrolled. This is to say that the pace of instruction was not calibrated to the pace at which most students were learning. But of course that was the point: to differentiate the small percentage of students who could keep up with this accelerated pace. In 1909, “the average child in the average city school system progressed... at the rate of eight grades in ten years” (Ayres, 1909, p. 88). By the time students left formal schooling, the researcher noted, the vast majority were “thoroughly trained in failure” (Ayres, 1909, p. 220).

**A call for rigorous academic standards**

Against this basic premise of schooling as meritocracy, several recurring criticisms have shaped practice in K–12 schools. One was the push for schools to be more academically rigorous and, further, to hold uniformly high academic expectations for everyone. This push for more rigor most often took the form of additional, advanced course requirements at the high school level. In the early 21st century, the Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, and other state-specific academic standards aim to raise the level of intellectual rigor for all students in K–12 classrooms. However, the push for academic standards has deep roots. As far back as 1893, the National Education Association’s “Committee of Ten” unanimously insisted on a college preparatory education for all high school students, regardless of their college aspirations. (This was particularly noteworthy in 1893, when fewer than 5% of young people went to college.) The Committee asserted that rigorous study in mathematics, science, and languages would develop in all students the “powers of observation, memory, expression, and reasoning” that would benefit them throughout life (National Education Association, 1894, p. 57). Furthermore, they argued, high schools should not foreclose a student’s option to attend college by offering courses of study that would not qualify them for college admission. The effect of the Committee of Ten report was to largely standardize the high school curriculum and institutionalize the requirement that all students take multiple years of coursework organized around individual disciplines (mathematics, sciences, history, geography, English composition and literature, and at least one additional language), which is the basic structure of the vast majority of high schools today.

Yet, a hundred years later, concerns about lax academic standards persisted. Students experienced widely different quality and depth of academic instruction, depending on where they attended school and into which track they were programmed. The architects of modern-day standards reform were motivated by a deep commitment to ensuring high academic expectations for all children, regardless of race, gender, or geography, with equal access to rigorous curricula that would allow each child to fully develop their intellectual capacity. Under No Child Left Behind, the federal policy requirement of disaggregating data by student subgroups would hold schools accountable for educating everyone. Most reformers also believed that, in addition to articulating clear standards, states should ensure that teachers and students had the resources necessary to meet those standards, in the form of high-quality curricula, ongoing professional development, and sufficient instructional time.

The goals of the academic standards movement are not only noble, they are also more aligned with science than are the pessimistic assumptions of a strictly meritocratic system. As we learn more about the brain’s plasticity and the ways teachers can optimize learning, it becomes clear that the vast majority of students have the raw materials to engage in rigorous academic work and to meet high standards of achievement. Yet, there has been major pushback against the standards movement, not because of its basic goals, but because of the unintended consequences of its policies.

First and foremost, while the movement largely succeeded in implementing rigorous standards for all
children, deep inequities persisted in funding and resources, and hence in learning opportunities to actually meet the higher bar. Many districts implemented new standards without concomitant support for high-quality curricula or teacher professional development. While disaggregated data may be a net positive, the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation also put in place an accountability structure that substantially increased students’ exposure to high-stakes tests. To ensure sufficient instructional time for tested subjects (primarily math and reading), elementary and middle schools narrowed their curricula and increased didactic instruction, particularly in schools serving low-income students and students of color (Au, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2007; McMurrer, 2007; Valli & Buese, 2007). Harvard professor Jal Mehta recently observed that, despite the intentions of proponents:

The effort to close achievement gaps has in practice doubled down on the century-old industrial model of schooling: ‘… teaching as transmission, batch processing of students, conventional assessments, tracking and leveling, and all the rest. Anything that moves away from those assumptions—like project-based learning, problem-based learning, interdisciplinary learning, authentic assessment, or constructivist pedagogy—is seen as risky;’ something that is ‘OK for the privileged kids’ but somehow distracts from the real work of closing achievement gaps on state-sponsored tests. (Mehta, 2019)

Furthermore, the punitive consequences for low-performing schools set up an environment of compliance and fear. Compounding these challenges, new academic standards left intact an old educational system designed to promote high performers and weed out everybody else. The underlying mechanics of meritocracy were not well suited to the expectation that all students would meet a shared set of rigorous standards.

**A call for more holistic development**

Whereas one recurring theme has been the call for schools to be more academically rigorous, another recurring criticism is that schools pay too much attention to academics at the cost of broader student development. New urgency around social-emotional learning has been fueled by this sense that schools have focused too narrowly on academic knowledge and skills, forgetting that young people need a broader set of competencies to be healthy and successful in the world. Over the past 150 years, critics have pushed schools to include more “elective” (non-academic) courses, as well as hygiene and health education, arts and music, vocational training, moral education, and civics classes (Kliebard, 2004). As the president of the Chicago Board of Education lamented early in the 20th century, “Our high schools place too great importance upon the training of brainworkers and too little stress upon the training for manual arts. We cannot all be poets and professors, you know” (“Pleads for new school methods,” 1909, p. 20). More recently, researchers have called for universal, school-based social-emotional competence interventions at scale because, they argued, social-emotional competence is “critical to success in school and life for all children” (Domitrovich et al., 2017, p. 408).

These competing movements in education have created a pendulum swing of programs and policies for over a century, as efforts to increase intellectual rigor—particularly in the high school—alternate with movements to make schooling more directly useful, beneficial, and relevant to more people.

**A call for racial equity**

Woven throughout this educational history is yet another set of voices, arguing that, regardless of whether the focus is on academic or more holistic development, schools are racist institutions that pursue these goals in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and reproduce racial inequality. Some critics rejected the basic premise of meritocracy; they argued it was the inequitable distribution of opportunity that determined educational achievement and life outcomes. Rather than selecting and sorting children into the socioeconomic slots they “deserved,” some critics argued that public education should be a vehicle for upending an unjust social order by providing to those who have been oppressed the means to end their oppression. Others believed in a meritocratic system, but they wanted a level playing field to enter the competition. Early battles for racial equity centered on policies of racial exclusion, where parents fought to secure equal access to education in the public institutions attended by White students. Black and Native American families, as well as families who had immigrated from Mexico, China, and Japan, have each had to sue for the rights of their children to attend regular public schools in the United States (Spring, 1986). As communities of color secured legal rights of access to education, they still found that their children were having different experiences—and starkly different outcomes on average—from White children. Concerns about implicit bias, low expectations, and lingering
stereotypes of intellectual inferiority have prompted demands for culturally competent educators and more culturally responsive schools, particularly in urban school districts that predominantly serve African American and Latino students. Educational equity is commanding renewed attention as of late, in the face of persistent racial disparities in funding, opportunity, and outcomes, within a system that too often seems wholly unresponsive to the long-standing concerns of communities of color. The push-back against social-emotional learning programs must also be understood in this light.

**Looking forward: The science of learning and development**

Across these recurring criticisms, one thing seems clear: our current system of K–12 public schooling is still inadequate to the task of preparing a diverse generation of young people for the future. It may be that coursework is not rigorous enough, that schools focus too narrowly on academics at the expense of broader development, or that we allow racial disparities to continue unabated; whatever the cause, most observers agree that schools need to undergo some fundamental transformation if they are to advance democracy and meet the needs of a diverse citizenry. As we collectively consider what 21st century learning might look like in the United States, the tension between these enduring aims and criticisms is alive and well. This tension plays out every day in school board meetings, state houses, think tanks, advocacy organizations, business roundtables, research centers, newspaper editorials, opinion pieces, PTO meetings, and in the daily lives of teachers, school leaders, children, and parents across the country.

Amid these debates, we also have a new body of evidence synthesizing the science of human learning and development (Cantor et al., 2018; Farrington et al., 2012; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018; Nagaoka et al., 2015; Osher et al., 2017) and applying this research to K–12 school practice (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2019). What I find most hopeful in this recent body of work is that it provides the basis for a unified path forward for a new American education: education that is simultaneously rigorous, **and** holistic, **and** liberatory.

The stakes are high. Children coming of age in this century will grow up in a society that is richly diverse, where no single racial or ethnic group holds a majority. Together, this generation is inheriting a world of escalating economic inequality, deep cultural divides, disruptive technologies likely to transform the organization and nature of work, and potentially existential threats to the health of our planet. We need schools that prepare young people not so much to “fit in” to an existing social and economic order, but to leverage their intelligence, passions, and cultural assets to vigorously “bend” the nation and the world “toward justice” in an era that will require much of them.

The science of learning and development provides reason for us to be incredibly optimistic about our collective human capacity to meet these challenges. The emerging picture indicates that every human being has much richer potential than we may have imagined. We also know this critical key: that developmental experiences and human relationships are what cultivate that potential in young people, assuming we are also committed and organized to meet their basic physical needs.

**Subjective meaning of American K–12 education**

Public education is contested space. The schools in which the vast majority of children are educated today are the amalgamated products of two centuries of push and pull in the debate over the desired ends and means of public schooling. Systems and structures designed so “geniuses [could be] raked from the rubbish” ² sit side by side with policies intended to set high academic expectations for students regardless of race, culture, language, religion, gender, or learning differences. The critical point that the science of learning and development should make clear to us is that these systems, structures, policies, and practices have psychological weight. They mean something to students, and teachers, and parents; and, this meaning shapes their thinking about school and learning and each other, and defines what is possible for them to achieve there.

The frame of these enduring educational aims and criticisms provides context for the present conversation about how best to support the social, emotional, and academic development of young people in public schools today. Recent scholarship such as the comprehensive work by Darling-Hammond et al. (2019)

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²Thomas Jefferson (1788, p. 156), writing in support of publicly-funded education for White children in Virginia in order to identify a talented few, argued that: “Of the boys thus sent in any one year, trial is to be made at the grammar schools one or two years, and the best genius of the whole selected, and continued six years, and the residue dismissed. By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed at the public expense, so far as the grammar schools go.”
allows us to leverage the lessons learned from two centuries of reform to design rigorous and culturally responsive learning environments that enable the equitable learning and holistic development of all children, along with the necessary learning and development of the adults who must make this happen. By underscoring the importance of students’ subjective experience in schools, coupled with our deepening understanding of the psychological conditions that support academic engagement, the cumulative science of learning and development puts us in a position to make radical change in American education. I focus here on the high school, as this seems to me the most problematic of our current educational institutions—and the most misaligned with everything we know about learning and development.

### Adolescent development and American high schools

What the science of learning and development makes clear is that human beings construct meaning from events and interactions, and those meanings can have a greater impact on a person’s behavior and future development than the events and interactions themselves. Adolescence is a critical stage of human development. Teenagers are in the midst of leaving behind childhood and contemplating who they will become as adults. This gives rise to three deep psychosocial preoccupations: developing their own interests and attributes (learning about the Self); understanding their place within the social world of peers and adults beyond their family (learning about Others); and building general knowledge and understanding of how things work (learning about the World) (Farrington, Kroshinsky, Beechum, Johnshon, & Weiss, 2018). Adolescents tend to view everything they encounter through this self-referential lens: Who am I? Where do I fit in? What am I capable of? How might I contribute to the world? (Farrington et al., 2012; Nagaoka et al., 2015).

Young people are actively scanning their environments for new or confirmatory information about themselves, others, and the larger world, building up schema to guide them in the future. During adolescence, they are also actively developing their identities as racialized and gendered people, coming to understand what it means to be a Latina or an African American male or a White transgendered person in the world. All of this is in play when a student interacts with peers and adults at school.

High school students are trying to make sense of themselves and the world in an educational system that sends very mixed messages about their identities and their futures: we encourage students to dream big and set high aspirations, and yet we continually remind them that they are being rank-ordered in a way that will largely determine their options. We say we care about their learning, but if they struggle to understand something, we leave them behind and move on to the next unit.

When young people enter a high school classroom, they must situate themselves psychologically within an environment that can directly influence their motivation and engagement in learning (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2011). How am I feeling today? What do I think of this academic task that my teacher is asking me to do? Is it relevant or meaningful to me? Do I find it interesting? Do I know how to do it? Do I think I will be successful? Do I trust that my teacher knows what she’s talking about and has my best interests at heart? Does she even know me? How am I feeling about the other people in my class today? Am I worried about an interaction I had with one of my peers? Why am I doing this anyway? Do I believe it will get me where I want to go? Do I even know where I want to go? Students are not likely to directly ask themselves this series of questions, but the list illustrates the psychological dynamics that shape their performance.

Students of color, particularly, receive mixed messages in school, where a “colorblind” notion of academic success collides with racial stereotypes about chronic underperformance. Theresa Perry (2003) argued that the contextual nature of learning makes the task of high academic achievement “distinctive” for African American students particularly. She poses some questions of her own that can be added to the aforementioned list:

How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the power of the mind, when African-American intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and out of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence?

Can I commit myself to work hard over time if I know that, no matter what I or other members of my reference group accomplish, these accomplishments are not likely to change how [we] are viewed by the...
larger society, or to alter our castelike position in the society? I still will not be able to get a cab. I still will be followed in department stores. I still will be stopped when I drive through certain neighborhoods. I will still be viewed as a criminal, a deviant, and an illiterate. (Perry, 2003, pp. 5–6)

We know from psychological science that how young people interpret their environments largely shapes their behavior and performance in those settings. In applying basic research about child and adolescent psychosocial development to schools and classrooms, researchers have identified several key beliefs that support motivated learning, with evidence across academic content areas and student demographic and achievement characteristics. These beliefs have more recently come to be known as “learning mindsets” (Quay & Romero, 2015). Learning mindsets draw upon various aspects of students’ perceptions of themselves, others, and the world to make sense of and respond to learning situations and challenges, and there is a robust body of evidence showing that learning mindsets are positively related to student behaviors, persistence, and performance on academic tasks (Paunesku et al., 2015; Farrington et al., 2012; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Learning mindsets align with students’ needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) and can be summarized by four first-person statements:

1. I belong in this learning community. [Belonging, identity safety, relatedness]
2. I can succeed at this. [Self-efficacy/expectancy of success, competence]
3. My ability and competence grow with my effort. [Growth mindset, locus of control, autonomy]
4. This work has value for me. [Value, relevance, purpose, autonomy]

When students believe these things to be true, they are more likely to focus their attention on learning and to persevere with challenging academic tasks. When students perceive that any of these is not true, they are more likely to disengage from learning (Farrington et al., 2012).

Students’ choices about engagement or disengagement are highly consequential. Over time, positive mindsets and active engagement in learning are associated with deeper understanding of academic concepts and better academic achievement, as well as enjoyment of learning and development of positive academic identities. Conversely, maladaptive mindsets become part of a recursive cycle of withdrawal from learning (Yeager & Walton, 2011), leading to gaps in knowledge and skills that can undermine students’ future learning as well as their enjoyment of and confidence in their learning ability (Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990).

Whether or not students “believe” in or endorse a particular mindset has to do with both their own subjective (internal) experience and more objective (external) conditions of the learning context. Across subject areas and grade levels, particular aspects of learning environments and of teachers’ instructional practices have been shown to influence students’ mindsets and psychological experience of learning. These include: norms and routines for student and teacher interactions in the classroom, the depth and quality of the learning tasks, teacher grading practices (Black & Wiliam, 2004), the quality and frequency of feedback (Hattie, 1992), opportunities for student autonomy and choice (Croilan, Davison, & Worrell, 2016) as well as for collaborative learning (Boaler & Greeno, 2000), messages about the nature and purpose of learning and the role of mistakes in the learning process (Turner et al., 2002), teachers’ affective support for learning (Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012), and the extent to which the teacher connects learning to students’ prior knowledge and interests (Gordon & Bridglall, 2006).

Scholarship on the science of learning and development has also investigated the extent to which the persistence of inequitable educational outcomes might be explained by a mismatch between the dominant culture of schools and the cultural worlds (and cultural models of self) of African American, Latinx, and low-income students (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Hammond, 2015). Research on culturally responsive classrooms and instructional practices is building evidence to show that children and adolescents are more likely to engage in learning when norms and practices within schools and classrooms align with students’ home cultures (Au & Jordan, 1981; Brady, Germano, & Fryberg, 2017; Espinoza-Herold, 2003; Hollins, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In aligned contexts, students are more likely to feel seen, known, and valued by their teachers, and to trust them as reliable and legitimate sources of support for learning.

Culturally responsive practices support the creation of what have been called “identity-safe” learning environments (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013), where young people feel like they can bring their full selves into a learning space, where they routinely see “people like them” engaged in deep intellectual work, and where learning “makes sense” to them based on their enculturated understanding of themselves and the world (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). Identity-safe environments are
psychologically safe and welcoming not only in regard to racial/ethnic cultural identity, but to the many other aspects of identity that make students whole people, including home language, socio-economic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, physical ability/disability, and special educational needs. Teachers who are able to take the time to know and understand their students are also more able to be inclusive of and responsive to students’ individual interests, preferences, and goals.

The science of learning and development tells us that human beings are active agents in their own development. Not only do people seek out situations and experiences that affect their learning, but they interpret the meaning of situations and experiences in ways that profoundly shape the impact those stimuli have on development (Osher et al., 2017). We also know that schools and classrooms are powerful contexts for learning and development, and that teachers can directly control (or at least strongly influence) most psychologically important aspects of classrooms.

How does this fact help to resolve the tension between academic rigor, SEL, and equity? I share the conviction of academic standards proponents that schools need to hold high expectations for students’ work and learning. Indeed, the most vocal of school critics on issues of racial equity explicitly call for high intellectual expectations of students of color (Gordon & Bridgall, 2006; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). The problem has been, however, that “business as usual” in traditional schools and classrooms has not been at all effective in creating the conditions to support students of color to routinely meet those high expectations. Furthermore, despite decades of reform efforts, we have made little progress as a nation in eliminating differences in academic performance across racial/ethnic groups.

Social-psychological mindset interventions in education are demonstrating that creating the right psychological conditions (or experimentally manipulating students’ perceptions of those conditions) within a specific education setting can significantly improve the performance of students of color. Some of these conditions are enhanced by the explicit development of students’ social-emotional skills (e.g., teaching strategies for successful collaboration with peers), but most of the psychological conditions that support adaptive mindsets are created by making different pedagogical choices in the classroom. For example, teachers can give “wise feedback” (Yeager et al., 2014) that conveys high standards and belief in a student’s ability, along with explicit strategy suggestions, without taking up additional instructional time. Students of color have been shown to respond positively to wise feedback in a way that increases their academic performance. This is an example of a way to leverage a social-emotional approach to support students in reaching high academic goals, and it has the added benefit of being particularly effective with students of color.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) created an extensive overview of specific SEL and SEAD practices shown to support students’ learning and development. Teachers, school leaders, and district and state administrators would most benefit from this list if they keep these basic ideas in mind: (1) What young people experience within their schools and classrooms has a big impact on their learning and development, but how they interpret those experiences is even more important; (2) teachers can ensure that students have particularly rich experiences and opportunities available to them, and furthermore, they can shape how students make meaning of those experiences; (3) Many if not most of the existing structures, policies, and practices in K–12 education—particularly at the high school level—were designed a long time ago to accomplish some very different student outcomes: primarily to sort and winnow. Therefore, to ensure students meet high academic expectations, teachers will need to step outside the lines of routine instructional practice. This is particularly true for teachers working with students of color, low-income students, English language learners, or other young people who have been historically marginalized in schools and society.

The recommended practices in Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) have evidence of effectiveness precisely because they respond to students’ psychological needs. Intentionally creating counter-narratives of achievement for marginalized students—backed up by practices that directly support their success—is the best bet we have for eliminating differences in academic achievement among subgroups as we raise the bar for quality work. The process for working toward educational equity has to begin by being in proximity to the students, families, and communities most affected by inequity, listening to understand their experiences, and working to change the structures and practices that they identify as being most in their way. Liberatory education is a collective process of understanding the system in which we are each located, understanding how this system is experienced by those who benefit the least from it, and using whatever power we have to co-create more equitable structures and practices.
References


