



Educator Update – February/March 2022

Keeping Huron County Educators Informed



This Educator Update includes the following:

1. Professional Learning Needs Survey
 2. Unconscious Teacher Bias
 3. Incorporating Grace in Today's Classrooms
 4. Upcoming Professional Development (attached HOPE flyer)
-
-

1. PD Needs Survey

Every two years or so, we have surveyed Huron County Educators about their Professional Learning needs. We have not done it at all during COVID, except to ask each PD participant about their future needs. Please take a few minutes to tell us about your needs in the next few years. You can SKIP entire sections of the survey that don't apply to you. The link will be sent via email the first week in March.

2. Unconscious Bias Related to Social Class and Teacher Expectations

In this *Kappa Delta Pi Record* article, Sue Ellen Henry and Abe Feuerstein (Bucknell University) say they were surprised when a veteran teacher, observing a kindergarten class in mid-September, said he could already tell which students would need to repeat the grade. Challenged to defend such an early prognostication, he pointed to children's ability to sit on the carpet and listen, raise their hands to be called on, hold a crayon and pencil, put on their jackets without a struggle, as well as certain academic skills.

This conversation led Henry and Feuerstein to conduct a study of how elementary teachers "read" their students through body language and other subtle cues. "Humans can produce more than 7,000 distinct facial expressions," they say, "and others can evaluate these clues within 100 to 200 milliseconds." This ability has been a powerful evolutionary tool, allowing people to size up others, understand the world around them, and survive. "And yet," say Henry and Feuerstein, "while such determinations might be natural, it's easy to see how such uninterrogated

associations could lead to stereotypic thinking. This threat is especially true for the most vulnerable children in the school-age population, including students from low-income backgrounds.”

Their study of 343 elementary teachers in a diverse set of Pennsylvania districts showed that teachers associated a number of behaviors with economically-privileged students; a selection:

- Sits upright;
- Smiles, looks happy;
- Looks at others when listening;
- Raises eyebrows in an interested way, tilts head upward during conversation;
- Acts animated, laughs during an interaction;
- Is skilled using voice to express oneself;
- Gestures with hands when talking;
- Knows when not to interrupt someone else;
- Has confident, self-assured expressions;
- Initiates shaking a person’s hand.

Teachers were likely to link a different set of behaviors with less-privileged students; a selection:

- Engages in invasive behaviors toward others – standing too close, touching, pointing;
- Interrupts others;
- Averts gaze;
- Frowns, glares, displays anger;
- Shows fear and sadness;
- Has unresponsive expressions;
- Twirls a pencil, flips book pages, fiddles with a sheet of paper;
- Wiggles feet, moves legs, shifts body position, is restless;
- Has halting speech, many speech errors;
- Intersperses speech with “um” and “ah”, stammers, makes false starts.

“Research also suggests,” say Henry and Feuerstein, “that children described by teachers as poorly dressed, hungry, tired, or sleepy are rated as less academically competent and less engaged in the classroom.”

Teachers aspire to do right by all students, say the authors; the question is whether unconscious beliefs related to social class affect teachers’ expectations of and behaviors toward their students. What is to be done?

“Step one in generating awareness,” Henry and Feuerstein, “is developing a more precise picture of what we’re seeing when we don’t think we’re looking. Being cognizant of head nods, smiles, eye contact, and other micro-bodily actions and then questioning the interpretations we are making of these moves is a start... Do I feel friendlier toward students who maintain eye contact with me? Do I tend to seat students whose bodies I perceive as jiggly further away from

instruction? Do I spend as much time praising students who I perceive as frowning more often than smiling?"... Becoming aware of these subtle, unconscious cues is a first step in interrupting subconscious influence on our beliefs about students."

Step two, say Henry and Feuerstein, "is to make time to reflect deeply on our practices, perhaps in conversation with trusted teacher partners." They suggest adopting an if/then approach to neutralize unconscious biases – for example: *If I see a student frowning, I will ask her whether she needs help.* "Over time," they say, "the combination of conscious attention to and honesty about one's assumptions and deliberate redirection of action has the possibility of not only altering latent yet pervasive forms of stereotypic thinking, but also changing our behavior toward our learners."

At the schoolwide level, leaders might examine discipline referrals and how students of differing SES are assigned to accelerated programs.

["Body Language Signals, Social Class, and Implicit Bias"](#) by Sue Ellen Henry and Abe Feuerstein in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, October-December 2021 (Vol. 57, #4, pp. 151-157); the authors can be reached at sehenry@bucknell.edu and afeurstn@bucknell.edu.

3. Incorporating Grace In Today's Classrooms

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Nicole Else-Quest, Viji Sathy, and Kelly Hogan (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) say that "compassion and kindness are foundational to effective teaching" – especially now, with the stress and trauma experienced by so many students during the pandemic.

Here are the authors' suggestions, many of which apply to K-12 classrooms:

- *Focus on the highest-priority learning objectives.* "Maybe you can't do all the things on your list," say Else-Quest, Sathy, and Hogan, "but you can do many of them really well." Build in pauses to allow students to catch up and understand what's most important.
- *Link course content to students' values and goals.* This might include essays and other assignments in which students say how the subject matter connects to their own lives and issues they care about. It's also helpful to say why you yourself care about what's being studied and how you got excited about it.
- *Show that you care about students and help them feel connected and welcome.* "Don't assume they know," say Else-Quest, Sathy, and Hogan; "be explicit and genuine." Say that you know their personal well-being is closely tied to academic success. Regularly check in to see if adjustments need to be made to support their learning.

- *Reimagine classroom culture.* Especially now, students want and need human connection. Build in opportunities for collaboration, student-led discussions, peer review, and personal sharing.
- *Give students grace through reasonable flexibility.* This includes submission of assignments, attendance and tardiness, and class participation. The ultimate goal is learning, not compliance.
- *Model taking care of yourself.* Students can learn from your example. “Set boundaries to support your own well-being and prevent burnout,” say the authors – regular work hours, limits on e-mail time, and asking for help yourself.
- *Make sure students know where to find help in a crisis.* Key information might be in the syllabus, class website, lab manual, or personal communication. Possible resources: school counselors, the [CDC’s stress-management suggestions](#), the Crisis Text Line (HOME to 741-741), and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK).

[“Give Students the Grace We All Need”](#) by Nicole Else-Quest, Viji Sathy, and Kelly Hogan in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 18, 2022 (Vol. 68, #12, pp. 68-69); the authors are at NEQ@email.unc.edu, viji.sathy@unc.edu, and kelly_hogan@unc.edu.