

Folk Belief Theory, the Rigor Gap and the Achievement Gap

Torff, B. (2014). Folk Belief Theory, the Rigor Gap, and the Achievement Gap. *The Educational Forum*, 78:2, 174-189. Available from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2013.878424>

This Reading Review provides a summary and review of a 2014 paper by Bruce Torff where he analyses several research studies about teacher beliefs around curriculum for low-advantage and high-advantage students in the USA. His research shows how out-of-awareness assumptions or folk belief theory can result in a rigor gap that leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Out-of-awareness assumptions

Torff concludes that problems as complex as the achievement gap usually stem from multiple causes. His research has shown that folk belief theory does exist where educators are socialised into a culture's beliefs about teaching and learning which provides the basis for best practice.



The rigor gap

When a folk belief is that low-advantage students are not ready to manage high critical thinking (CT) activities, this results in a rigor gap. Torff's research shows that teachers are favouring low-CT activities for low-advantage students, even when they believe that high-CT activities are better for students overall.



A self-fulfilling prophecy

Research with expert teachers shows that this less rigorous pedagogy is not appropriate for students in need of remedial work, but instead constitutes a watered down-curriculum and impoverished teaching for students who might be as challenged and engaged as high-advantage students. A self-fulfilling prophecy results. The rigor gap results in the achievement gap.



Etched in stone

Folk beliefs, by their nature, being based on social-shared beliefs and underlying and out-of-awareness assumptions are hard to rewrite – they seem to be etched in stone.

The Stronger Smarter Metastrategies and Approach

Torff's research-based study provides further support to the underlying theoretical basis for the Stronger Smarter Approach and Stronger Smarter Leadership Program. He states that taking aim at the beliefs underlying the rigor gap – addressing the root causes of the problem – has potential to help close the achievement gap. The Institute's work is based around exactly this. The Stronger Smarter Approach aims to bring Australia's out-of-awareness beliefs about Indigenous education in Australia into awareness. Until this happens, nothing can change.

Meta-strategy 3: High-Expectations Relationships

In Australia, we know there is an achievement gap – the recent TIMSS and PISA research reports (see SSI Reading Review) have highlighted this once again. If you are Indigenous, come from a low-advantage background or go to a school in a low-advantage area, you are less likely to achieve. We also know that historically in Australia there has been an opportunity gap. Many of the parents and grandparents of today's Indigenous school children had poor experiences of schooling.

The challenge for Australian education now is to ensure that this opportunity gap doesn't continue as a rigor gap. Our work on High-Expectations Relationships (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2014), supports educators to ensure that there is no rigor gap, and that high expectations beliefs are more than rhetoric but are enacted in classrooms.

Meta-strategy 1: Positive student identity

Professor Sarra's work in Australia (Sarra, 2011, 2012) has shown the importance of a positive sense of identity for Indigenous students. Lewthwaite et al's (2015) work on Culturally-Responsive Pedagogies shows that learning experiences need to reflect, validate and promote students' culture and language. They suggest the role of the school is to understand the cultural context and respond appropriately for the benefit of each student. We believe that it is essential that 'Strong and Smart' goes beyond the rhetoric and promotes rigorous, challenges and culturally-responsive curriculum in the classroom.

Meta-strategy 2 and Meta-strategy 5: Embracing Indigenous leadership and innovative staffing models

Employing Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and supporting them as co-educators can help develop a rigorous and relevant curriculum when non-Indigenous teachers tap into the rich, local cultural knowledge that AEWs bring to the classroom.

For more information and references, see the Stronger Smarter Institute's full research review see the Stronger Smarter Institute website at www.strongersmarter.com.au . Contact us at enquiries@strongersmarter.com.au.