

Strategies for Communicating High Expectations to Students
April 15, 2005
TIP #8

RESPONSE OPPORTUNITIES

Probing and Delving

Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers ask high achieving students more complex and higher level cognitive questions than they do lower achieving students. Low achieving students are more likely to be asked factual recall questions. Though unintended, this circumstance limits students' access to rigorous instruction and denies them the opportunity to engage in challenging academic pursuit. It also communicates a low teacher expectation for student performance. Students asked more lower level cognitive questions may interpret this circumstance as an indication that their thinking is inaccurate, incomplete and/or undervalued.

Related to teacher questioning is the use of teacher probes. Probing or delving occurs when a student does not respond to a teacher question. Probes are teacher assists that support the student to answer. Research suggests that high achieving students are more apt to be the recipients of teacher probes, while lower achieving students are more likely to be "let off the hook." That is, when lower achieving students do not respond, teachers are more likely to move on to another student than to offer assistance to answer. The reasons for this are well-intentioned. Teachers do not want to embarrass students by putting them "on the spot" and they want the class to hear the correct answer as the class works toward mastery of content. But not probing or delving sends a message of low teacher expectations. It says to students, "I don't think you are able to give an acceptable answer." Probing and delving sends another message. It says to students, "I am confident you can answer and I am going to help you to do so."

When a student does not respond to a teacher posed question try one or more of the following probes.

- Restate the question in other words. Though the question is clear to the teacher, it may not be clear to the student.
- Rephrase the question.
- Breakdown the question into a smaller ones.
- Ask a related question.
- Give the student a hint, clue or prompt.

Probing and delving also help students to clarify their thinking, surface their reasoning, and explore alternative perspectives or solutions. A probing question makes a student think more deeply about the topic at hand, thereby engaging him/her in more cognitively rigorous instruction. This is especially important for lower achieving students who may have begun to doubt their own capabilities and withhold effort. Seeing their teachers make a special effort to help them can enhance students self-confidence and willingness

to exert effort in learning. The question stems that follow are examples of teacher probes that can support students to think more deeply.

- What did you notice about...?
- What makes you say...?
- What do you mean by...?
- Tell me more about...
- How does that relate to...?
- What are the connections between ____ and ____?
- What is the idea behind...?
- What's another way you could ...
- What might be the result if...?
- What criteria did you use to...?
- What is your hunch about...?
- How did you decide that ...?
- What is your opinion about...?
- What else do you know about...?