In general, students from some backgrounds do well in education, for example white middle class or Chinese students. But African Caribbean and working class students too often do not. Is this underperformance due to discrimination, and the failure of teachers and colleges to value these students’ cultures? Many colleges assume this is what equality and diversity is all about.

I believe that equality and diversity boils down to two challenges: convincing students to value education, and to believe that they can learn. We need to convince our students that the education and qualifications we can help them achieve will lead to interesting and meaningful jobs, to financial security, to personal respect and dignity.

Education can help them flourish, and become somebody they will be proud of. It can help them make a real difference to their own lives, and to the lives of others. We need to teach them this specifically and emphatically, because many don’t believe it at present.

Evidence from schools suggests that underperformance is due mainly to the cultural assumptions and expectations of the students. We know how to change this as teachers.

In the 1970s, inner city schools in the US were accused of discriminating against black students. The accusers soon got a shock from an unlikely quarter.

The Vietnam war was raging at the time, and some refugees escaped Vietnam in boats to claim asylum in the US, with their kids. These “Vietnamese boat children” had been traumatised by living in a war zone, had missed years of schooling, could hardly speak English, and were not white. Also, they were going to these underperforming inner city “discriminating” schools. They had educational disaster written all over them.

But these students did brilliantly, on average outperforming white middle class kids from leafy suburbs in “good schools”. What was going right?

Astonished sociologists descended with their questionnaires to discover that the kids did well because families and their kids saw education as vital to their future well-being, and because they believed that with hard work and help their kids could succeed.

Helping kids with homework was a top family priority, dads did the washing-up while siblings tussled with trigonometry on the kitchen table. If they got stuck they asked their cousin next door. These pupils had self-belief, high expectations, good family and learning support, and a visceral belief that education was important. They also had the Confucian belief that efforts bring rewards. That’s why they succeeded against the odds.

We also need to teach students to believe in themselves as learners, and that ability is not inborn but learned. We know a lot about how to do this: Professor Carol Dweck for example has developed strategies which have had a massive impact on student achievement.

It takes time and trouble, but it works. A colleague of mine using her approach had incredulous parents visiting him to ask ‘what have you done to our Tom? He’s suddenly started working!’

So let’s get equality and diversity right. Of course we must value all students, whatever their personal characteristics, and the backgrounds they come from. But crucially, we need to teach the value of education, and self-belief in their capacity to learn.

Want to know more?

Visit CPD Resources, Ask Geoff at www.ifl.ac.uk/cpd to download a short paper that shows you how to go about developing students’ self-belief and motivations.

Topics covered in the paper include:
- Motivation
- Dweck’s Theory of Motivation
- Making use of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
- Has Ofsted got Equality and Diversity Right?

There are also strategies to try, and Geoff is keen to hear from teachers and trainers who have developed their own.

For more inspirational ideas to improve your teaching, training and learning visit Geoff’s website: http://www.geoffpetty.com/whatsnew.html