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Summary of Action Research

Great Expectations

I have always been intrigued by education. It has been a central theme in my life. One that continues as a constant drumbeat; a crescendo fueled by the urgent need for reform in our nation's educational community. I am the daughter and daughter-in-law of teachers, the sister of a teacher, and now the mother of a teacher. I am the grandmother of a future student. And I am a teacher. It's in my blood. And it's in the news.

It appears that our nation's schools are not doing all that well. American students perform with mediocrity on the international stage. Dropout rates have soared and business leaders decry the lack of qualified college graduates (Finn, 2008). And yet, amidst the discouraging and disappointing statistics, there are glimmers of hope. There are examples of success and high student achievement amidst the culture of failure. But why? What makes education work for some students and not for others?

Based on my own interest in education policy and discussion centering around an introductory course in psychology that my son was taking, I decided to investigate the connection between expectations and student achievement. The following questions guided my research: Can high expectations for students improve academic achievement? And does the lack of them pose a barrier to student success?

The "Pygmalion effect" is a self-fulfilling prophecy; an effect that occurs because of the behavior of those who expect it to occur. In 1965, Robert Rosenthal and Leonore Jacobson conducted research that showed how teachers' expectations for students

affected their behavior toward those students. The students, the recipients of the teachers' differentiated behavior, in turn demonstrated unusual intelligence and performance gains. Their findings have been upheld by various studies, and the results remain unrefuted.

Ample research validates the Pygmalion study, and while scientific studies are useful, providing primary sources that highlight trends and indicate support or lack thereof for hypotheses, I elected to continue my investigation with a search for unscientific but nonetheless compelling evidence. There are educators throughout the country who appear to be succeeding against all odds. They include Nancy Ichinaga and Mikara Solomon Davis in California, Michelle Rhee in Washington D.C., Joan Sullivan in New York City, and Tim King in Chicago. The success of Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone and the Harlem Success Academy, recently documented in the film, "The Lottery," further speak to the triumph of setting high expectations for all students.

As for me, I teach fourth grade. I have always set high standards for all students, because common sense told me it was the only logical course of action. I expect my students to learn, and they do. If students don't turn in their homework or complete their class work, we do it together at recess. I strive to teach my students that there are rewards for hard work and commitment to learning, and conversely, consequences for lack thereof. They learn quickly that it pays to focus and work hard during class and to complete their homework at home. Furthermore they learn that I believe in them and am committed to their success.

There are many more examples of educators who are setting the standards high and receiving amazing results. And more significantly for American children, the Obama administration and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have brought the issue of expectations and accountability to the forefront with their policy initiative "Race to the

Top.” When teachers, administrators, and policy makers set high expectations for all students, they will rise to the occasion. Nancy Ichinaga echoes the Pygmalion effect when she states, “We believe all children can learn. And they do” (Ichinaga, 2000).