

Great Expectations

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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?

I am an observer. I always have been. I observe people and I observe ideas. I like to think about what makes people tick. What works and what doesn't. As I made my way through school and followed the educational experiences of my children, I encountered a few talented, effective teachers, and I suffered at the hands of educators who were clueless when it came to imparting knowledge and inspiring their students. I did not know enough to really blame them, but simply tucked away the observations for future reference.

Psychology grabbed my attention for two reasons when my son enrolled in an introductory course at the college level. The subject matter, as he shared it enthusiastically, was interesting to me. But moreover, he was engaged by the teacher. She had a talent for disseminating information, and additionally, she set the bar high and he reached for it successfully. It was the class that turned his academic career around.

During the course of the semester, his study of developmental theories led me to connect my interest in education to psychology. As children grow and progress through the stages of development, their school experience and learning environment play a huge role. Social cognition theory proves the importance of the development of a child's strong sense of self during the middle childhood years. This is achieved through a variety of factors, but I am most interested in the effect of teachers' expectations on children's learning. Can high expectations for students improve academic achievement? And does the lack of them pose a barrier to student success?

As children grow, they begin to develop social and cognitive skills. In the years between 6 and 12, labeled by Erik Erikson as the industry vs. inferiority stage, children master incremental challenges and learn to interact with others. Social cognitive theory focuses on the effect of models on child development. Behavior and self-esteem are affected by parents, teachers, peers, and others with whom they come into contact. Children develop social cognition, or the ability to understand the social world around them (Rathus, 2010). It is in this context that they also develop self-esteem, a sense of self-worth. Their world expands and they learn to interact with peers and teachers. Some children learn to navigate the school environment with increasing confidence and independence from their parents, however those with low self-esteem may develop learned helplessness. These children connect success with ability or the perceived lack thereof, and stop trying. Children with a strong sense of self learn that success can be achieved through

effort and persistence (Rathus, 2010).

“The “Pygmalion effect” is a self-fulfilling prophecy; an effect that occurs because of the behavior of those who expect it to occur” (Rathus, 2010). 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 since, and although some have disagreed with the authors’ research methods, the results remain unrefuted.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities convened a national panel called the Greater Expectations Initiative. Their study and the accompanying report offers two conclusions: Many students are achieving less than they should, and by raising our expectations and support for learning, higher expectations will result. They describe ways in which teachers can successfully use the Pygmalion effect to convey high expectations and conversely to avoid communicating negative expectations. The initiative further states that effective teachers convey higher expectations to students by teaching more as they expect more and by also requiring greater output or responsiveness from those for whom they have set the bar high. Effective teachers also set high expectations for all students.

A characteristic shared by most highly effective teachers is their adherence to uniformly high expectations. They refuse to alter their attitudes or expectations for their students-regardless of the students’ race or ethnicity, life experiences and interest and family wealth or stability (Miller, 2001).

In addition to the original research on the Pygmalion effect, there have been numerous studies that support the same conclusion. In one study of 101 3rd, 4th and 5th graders, the researchers found that “students acquired information about their abilities by observing the

differential teacher treatment accorded high and low achievers.” These students then proceeded to adjust their own expectations and perform in accordance with the input they received. Another study of 234 4th, 5th and 6th graders came to the same conclusion (Brattesani 1984).

Yet another observational study in four first grade classrooms was supportive of the hypothesis that teacher expectations “serve as self-fulfilling prophecies” (Brophy, 1970). The teachers in this study demanded more from those students for whom they held higher expectations and less from those whom they believed to be less capable of success. The University of North Carolina conducted a study of physical education classes comprised of 173 students and 7 teachers which found that most students confirm the expectations held for them by their teachers (Trouilloud, 2002). Jerome Dusek and Joseph Gail conducted a meta-analysis of research on the bases of teacher expectations. They found that student attractiveness, conduct, cumulative data, race and social class were factors that tended to influence teacher’s expectations. They also pointed out methodological difficulties and deficiencies in existing research on the topic (Dusek, 1983). Scientific studies are useful, as they provide primary sources of research which highlight trends and indicate support or lack thereof for hypotheses, however I elected to continue my investigation with a search for unscientific, but nonetheless compelling evidence.

Education reform is a cornerstone of the Obama agenda. It also figured prominently in the platforms of Presidents Bush and Clinton. It all began with a 1983 study called “A Nation at Risk,” which brought to the country’s attention the growing discrepancy between the achievement level of American children and students in countries around the world. Reforms were implemented in school districts across the country, standards were developed and assessments and accountability measures were adopted. However 25 years later, widespread gains have not materialized and many

children in the United States do not have access to an education that will adequately prepare them for a future that will include higher education or success in the workplace. We are spending more money on education than ever before yet neither our test scores nor our graduation rates have appreciably improved. Furthermore, confidence in the public school system remains low (Finn, 2008). Our record of reform, especially in urban areas, suggests that we have not yet discovered a foolproof formula for educational success, or have we?

There are educators throughout the country who appear to be succeeding against all odds. When Nancy Ichinaga became the principal of Bennet Kew Elementary School in Inglewood, California, 95% of her students were illiterate. The majority were poor minority children (48% Latino, 51% African American) and yet, several years after Ichinaga's arrival, they were out-scoring Santa Barbara students and many of their peers in Los Angeles in math and reading by a wide margin (Cohee, 1998). Nancy Ichinaga (Life and Times, PBS) believes that failure to provide all students with the same educational standards and high-quality curriculum is an example of racial injustice. When she came to Bennet-Kew, students were scoring in the 3rd percentile on standardized tests. Students were undisciplined and teachers made excuses based on the family backgrounds and socioeconomic situations of their students. Ichinaga implemented clear grade-level objectives and retained students in kindergarten and 1st grade until they had learned to read. She refused to listen to excuses based on economics or demographics, and insisted that teachers believe in the ability of their students to learn. "We believe that all students at every level can be successful in a common, comprehensive, academically oriented curriculum. We believe this irrespective of

primary language or ethnic background” (Ichinaga, 2000).

Ichinaga’s influence did not end after her tenure as principal at Bennet-Kew. She is now a member of the California State Board of Education, and a mentor of teachers and principals (Ross, 2008). One of her protégés is Mikara Solomon Davis. Davis was the principal of Bunche Elementary in Compton, California from 2000 until 2006. The student population at Bunche Elementary is comprised of 50% Latino and 50% African American children, and all come from socio-economically disadvantaged families. Yet, under Davis’ leadership, achievement scores rose from the bottom 10% to the top 20%, on a par with those of the state’s most affluent schools (Blume, 2007). Thus, under Ichinaga’s mentorship, Davis changed the culture of the school. She implemented a strong discipline system, put high expectations in place for all students, critiqued teachers daily and held them accountable.

Davis was shocked at the level of disrespect for authority she found at Bunche and appalled at the disparity between her own educational experience and that of her students. Like Ichinaga, she viewed the discrepancy as a civil rights issue. Davis is now mentoring at Jefferson Elementary, another Compton school with similar demographics, where academic performance has since soared.

At the age of 30, Joan Sullivan founded a high school for literacy in the New York City public school system called the Bronx Academy of Letters. Sullivan had been a teacher, whose success with her own students on the state Regents exam and her passion for education brought her to the attention of Richard Kahan, president of the Urban Assembly, an organization that supports specialty schools for inner city children. Her mission at the Bronx Academy is to give students “the gift of being able to read

widely and write clearly” (Shultheiss, 2004) . Sullivan has set academic standards high and hired effective teachers. Her passion drives her to work tirelessly, collaborating with business leaders and arranging programs that inspire students and enrich the curriculum. Students wear uniforms and are rewarded for academic excellence with dinners at Manhattan restaurants, camping trips and wear-your-pajamas to school days. “Just as Joan shows her kids the highest level of commitment, she expects the same back” (Schultheiss, 2004). And she gets it. Students at the Bronx Academy score in the 80th and 82nd percentiles respectively in math and reading on the challenging New York Regents exam. (www.greatschools.net) Her belief that all students deserve an outstanding education and the right to be provided with high expectations echoes those of Ichinaga and Davis. “It is really disrespectful to say that as a result of coming from different places they only have to meet certain standards. Education is the thing that makes democracy work and gives you options” (Sullivan, 2004).

Michelle Rhee began her career as a teacher just like all the others. Rhee’s experience teaching in inner-city Baltimore ignited a passion for educational reform. She founded the New Teacher Project in New York City and was hired to lead the DC public schools because of her leadership abilities and her reputation for results (Levy, 2007). One success story Rhee is attempting to build on is Langdon Elementary, where both the percentage of poor minority students and achievement levels are very high.

Rhee believes that the only obstacles to raising student achievement are politics and low expectations for certain children based on their situations in life (Levy, 2007). She is committed to overcoming both in Washington DC. Because to do less, in Rhee’s opinion, is “nothing less than an educational injustice” (Levy, 2007). She has set the

standards high and has enrolled her own two children in the district's schools. She believes in kids and she believes in herself. "I don't think you can do this work at any level, unless you believe in your core that poor minority kids can achieve at the highest levels" (Levy, 2008).

Recent media coverage of education reform reflects the growing dissatisfaction with the education system in the United States. Geoffrey Canada, founder of the successful Harlem Children's Zone, speaking with CNN's Campbell Brown, demanded accountability in the educational community. He called the inability to judge teachers on performance "insanity; a travesty." (Campbell Brown, 2010). *People Magazine* documented the success of Urban Prep, a charter school in Chicago, where founder Tim King has achieved amazing results by taking poor kids who could not read and providing a program that has resulted in all students heading to college. In King's opinion, the most difficult hurdle for his students, and they face many, is "low expectations." (Clark, 2010). "The Lottery", a documentary, chronicles the desperation of parents in New York City as they vie for a place in the Harlem Success Academy, a charter school where inner city children are learning and succeeding against the odds which have been set for them by failing public schools (Weiss, 2010).

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 knew from the beginning that it was embedded in my job description, although no one taught me this (or any other useful thing) in my credential program. It's not written in my union contract either. But 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 have been advised

by colleagues that this is against the law. Fortunately, my principal disagrees. I don't see it as punitive. Instead, I strive to teach my students that there are rewards for hard work and commitment to learning, and conversely, consequences for lack thereof. Neither one of us gets a coffee break. And 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.

Last year, one student proved my theory in concrete terms. John was a resource student with a learning disability. He qualified for special education assistance, which in my school comes in the form of a pull-out program offering one-on-one support with basic skills. When he began fourth grade in my class, he refused to do any of his class work, having become accustomed to low expectations. He paid no attention to the lessons, realizing he would not be required to perform on a worksheet, essay or test. He and I went head-to-head in the fall. I demanded that he do his work, and his parents backed me up.

I let John know that I knew he was smart and that I expected him to perform with his classmates. He did the same work as the other students and was required to take the same assessments. I offered him support whenever he demonstrated effort and provided appropriate consequences when he chose not to. His surly attitude improved when he realized that I would not back down on my expectations or lower standards for him. Interestingly, as the year went on his classmates began to treat him as an equal. And in this case, the proof was in the pudding. In third grade John scored in the Below Basic category (below grade level) in both language arts and math on the California STAR tests. At the end of fourth grade, he scored in the Advanced (well above grade level)

category in both disciplines.

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).

The authors of the Pygmalion effect study wrote a *25-Year Perspective* to refute others who had tried to deny its validity. In the article, they stand by the results and reaffirm their belief in the original study. They also cite countless new studies to support their conclusion that “Teachers’ expectations can affect pupils’ intellectual functioning” (Rosenthal 1995). The evidence, both scientific and anecdotal, is overwhelming. When teachers believe in their students and demand results, achievement will rise.

Furthermore, it makes no difference whether or not students are rich or poor, minority or not. There are too many examples of successes in a variety of environments. When expectations are high and supported by passionate, talented individuals, students are successful. Conversely, and sadly, there are many examples of failing schools that are failing students because expectations have been set too low. In both cases, the Pygmalion effect is borne out: students rise to the level of expectations set by educators.

As I conclude my investigation, several things have become clear. The early development of a strong sense of self is a critical factor in the growth of a child. It portends future happiness and success. High expectations on the part of educators offer

children opportunities to develop self-esteem through meeting challenges and realizing success. Putting both concepts together seems so simple, yet could prove quite magical for children, providing hope where there was none.

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