

Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education

Pygmalion Effect

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The *Pygmalion effect* refers to the notion that teachers' expectations of their students may come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The process can be summarized as follows: Teachers form certain expectations about their students. These expectations are then communicated through teachers' day-to-day interactions with their students, their educational planning, and the way they assess their students. Students tend to respond by adjusting their behaviors to correspond with teachers' expectations and interactions. Teachers' expectations are eventually fulfilled and a circle of self-fulfilling prophecies is created. This entry describes the history of the idea and its implications for education.

Historical Context

The phrase *self-fulfilling prophecy* was coined in 1948 by twentieth-century sociologist Robert K. Merton, who asserts that once an expectation is formed, even if it is erroneous, people tend to act in ways that are consistent with that expectation and, quite often, the expectation will come true. Merton describes a self-fulfilling prophecy as an initial false belief about a situation that guides a person to take on a new behavior that causes the original false belief to come true.

[p. 626 ↓] Self-fulfilling prophecies can be observed in a variety of social institutions, and educational institutions are no exception. The *Pygmalion effect* takes its name from the mythological sculptor, Pygmalion, who created a woman, Galatea, so beautiful that he prayed to the gods to make her a real woman. It was first demonstrated in a classic study by Harvard University professor and psychologist Robert Rosenthal and elementary school principal Lenore Jacobson. Concerned about the failure of disadvantaged children in the public school system, Rosenthal and Jacobson set up a study in an elementary school they called Oak School. The researchers hypothesized that a relationship exists between teachers' expectations and students' academic performance.

In the spring of 1964, they administered an intelligence test they called The Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition to all students who might return to Oak School the following fall. They led the teachers to believe that the test could identify those students who

would intellectually “bloom” and show a “spurt” of rapid, intellectual growth within the near future. Just prior to the beginning of the following school year, teachers were given a list with the names of those students who, on the basis of the test, could be expected to intellectually “bloom” and “spurt.” However, these lists contained the names of students who were randomly selected by the researchers; the only difference between the identified “spurters,” 20 percent of the student body, and the rest of the children was in the minds of the teachers.

At the end of the academic year, Rosenthal and Jacobson readministered the intelligence test to all the students. Results indicated that students labeled *bloomers* and *spurters*, outperformed students in the control group. This was particularly true for first and second graders. First graders in the experimental condition showed average gains of 15.4 IQ points compared to gains of 12 IQ points for control students, while second graders in the experimental condition showed average gains of 16.5 IQ points compared to 7 IQ points for the control students. In general, students in the experimental condition showed a 12.22 IQ-point gain compared to an 8.42 gain for the control students across all grades.

It was also found that the academic performance of students in the experimental group improved, and they were described by their teachers as more likely to succeed in the future, more intellectually curious, and happier. Rosenthal and Jacobson concluded that a relationship *does* exist between teachers' expectations and students' academic performance and that the Pygmalion effect or self-fulfilling prophecy was at work in the classroom.

Implications for Education

Rosenthal and Jacobson's study serves to alert educators about the role that teachers' expectations may have on students' academic performance. Expectations based on preconceived notions about students' abilities can be communicated in a variety of ways, including but not limited to paying more attention to students perceived to be high achievers, giving more praise for correct responses and criticizing less for incorrect responses, allowing more waiting time for responding to questions, providing more accurate and more detailed feedback, and assigning more demanding work.

Expectations may also be based on factors that extend beyond the cognitive capabilities of students and may lead to inequalities in the classroom. For example, teachers' beliefs about gender differences, student behavior, ethnically different students, and students from different socioeconomic classes may direct teachers to create a type of classroom environment in which their treatment of these beliefs and the accompanying expectations will, in effect, help their prophecies come true. Furthermore, teachers' expectations may also impact students with special needs since these students are often labeled according to their performance on tests, which may in turn lead some teachers to justify reduced expectations.

Rosenthal and Jacobson's model of Pygmalion in the classroom remains relevant to contemporary classroom practice. Given the diversity of students in today's classrooms, teachers can use the *Pygmalion effect* to help them eliminate inequalities in the classroom by fostering a climate of positive expectations for all students. James Rhem urges teachers to realize that teaching involves more than just the transfer of facts. Teachers should expect more from their students than what they think is possible and create conditions [p. 627 ↓] to help students fulfill positive teacher expectations. Despite the great pressure to meet the required standards, teachers need to find ways to help all students reach their potential beyond the minimum expectations. Essentially, every teacher should strive to become a Pygmalion and transform every student into a Galatea.

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See also

Further Readings

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