

The Power of Teacher Expectations

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In a certain school, a class of students proved to be unmanageable. Not surprisingly, their bad behaviour led to low achievement, and no teacher was willing to teach these students. The principal was in a quandary. Where could he find a teacher who had the ability and patience to teach a class of rambunctious boys? On hearing of the principal's dilemma, a reputable retired teacher living in the neighbourhood decided to take up the challenge. The principal was delighted to hire Mrs. Brunette, and pledged his support all the way.



Mrs. Brunette appeared before the grade 9 class early Monday morning and observed the students as they entered the classroom. The students ignored her presence as they casually strolled into class and took their seats. After introducing herself, Mrs. Brunette gave them a simple assignment, which they completely ignored. Assessing the situation, Mrs. Brunette decided to do away with all written assignments and engage the students in conversations on topics of choice. She did this for a couple of days and became acquainted with the students' strengths, needs, desires and challenges.

Within a few days, noticeable changes were taking place in the class. Students were showing up early for class, handing in their homework, working enthusiastically on classroom assignments, behaving well and collaborating in small group projects. The swearing and fighting disappeared, and no one was sent to the office for discipline. The classroom atmosphere was transformed from negative to positive and the classroom itself changed from a place where students misbehaved and disrespected their teacher to a place where teacher support, student empowerment and collaboration were evident.

The principal was keeping a close eye on the teacher and the happenings in the classroom. He was amazed by the transformation that took place in that class in such a short space of time. Since Mrs. Brunette had taken over the class, not a single student had been sent to his office. How could this be? What was her secret for turning this class around?

At a staff meeting, the principal complimented Mrs. Brunette for the way she had transformed the grade 9 class, once the most notorious class in the school but now a model class for the school. Fellow teachers also praised Mrs. Brunette for her accomplishment. How did she do it? This was the question on everybody's lips. "Please let us know what secret management strategy you employed to turn around this class of misbehaving boys," the principal said to her.

The super teacher calmly replied by saying that all she did was to befriend her students and treat them with the respect that was due to them. She said that when she discovered that all the students had high IQ scores of 120, 121, 122, 123, etc., she realized that she was teaching a class of geniuses. So she began treating them as geniuses. She told them that they had the ability to become doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and anything they wished to become for they had leadership potential.

There was silence in the room as the teachers looked at one another with questionable expressions on their faces. The principal was dumbfounded, not knowing what to say. Seeing

how befuddled they all looked, the super teacher asked for an explanation. “Mrs. Brunette,” the principal said, “that list of numbers you saw in the class file was not the student’s IQ scores; it was their locker numbers.”

Whether this story is truth or fiction, I cannot tell. But research on the Pygmalion effect (self-fulfilling prophecy) indicates that how a teacher thinks about her student can eventually lead that student to behave and achieve in ways that conform to the teacher’s expectations. The basis of this self-fulfilling prophecy is that once a student has been branded or pegged in a certain way ahead of time, the chances are increased that a teacher's treatment of that student will help the positive or negative expectations come true.

Thus, if a teacher believes that a low-performing student has what it takes to do well in school and supports and encourages that student to perform well, over time that student would most likely show an improvement. On the contrary, if a teacher pays no attention to a student who is doing poorly because she does not believe he or she can improve, that student will not rise beyond the teacher’s expectations of him or her.

Every day teachers get the opportunity to influence the learning and behaviour of their students. The teacher’s job is not simply to teach, but to inspire, encourage and motivate her students. Teachers must see the potential in students and dream with them. The more teachers dwell on the positive and avoid focussing on the negative, the more likely students will show positive results. Like Mrs. Brunette, we should treat every child in our charge as if he or she has an IQ of 120 or more and we will undoubtedly observe a transformational change in attitude, behaviour and school achievement.