

Teachers' Expectations Can Influence How Students Perform

This document is an amended, pdf version of the original article, authored by Alix Spiegel (www.npr.org). Some information found in the original article has been adapted to fit the current context.



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Just how much can teacher expectations affect the performance of students?

The first psychologist to systematically study this was a Harvard professor named Robert Rosenthal, who in 1964 did a wonderful experiment at an elementary school south of San Francisco.

The idea was to figure out what would happen if teachers were *told* that certain kids in their class were destined to succeed. So, Rosenthal took a normal IQ test and dressed it up as a different test.

"It was a standardized IQ test, Flanagan's Test of General Ability," he says. "But the cover we put on it, we had printed on every test booklet, said 'Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition.' "

Rosenthal told the teachers that this very special test from Harvard had the *very special ability* to predict which kids were about to be very special — that is, which kids were about to experience a dramatic growth in their IQ.

After the kids took the test, he then chose several children from every class, totally at random. There was nothing at all to distinguish these kids from the other kids, but he

told their teachers that the test predicted the kids were on the verge of an intense intellectual bloom.

As he followed the children over the next two years, Rosenthal discovered that the teachers' expectations of these kids **really did affect the students**. "If teachers had been led to expect greater gains in IQ, then increasingly, those kids gained more IQ," he says.

But just *how* do expectations influence IQ?

Rosenthal found that *expectations affect teachers' moment-to-moment interactions* with the children they teach in a thousand, almost invisible, ways. Teachers give the students that they expect to succeed **more time to answer questions, more specific feedback, and more approval**: They consistently touch, nod and smile at those kids more.

Since expectations can change the performance of kids, how do we get teachers to have the right expectations? Is it possible to change bad expectations? According to educational researcher, Robert Pianta, it is *extremely hard* for teachers to *control* their expectations.

"It's really tough for anybody to *police their own beliefs*," said Pianta. "But think about being in a classroom with 25 kids. The demands on their thinking are so great."

Still, people have tried. The traditional way, Pianta says, has been to sit teachers down and try to change their expectations through talking to them.

"For the most part, we've tried to convince them that the beliefs they have are wrong," he says. "And we've done most of that convincing using information."

But Pianta has a different idea of how to go about changing teachers' expectations. He says it's not effective to try to change their thoughts; the **key** is to train teachers in an *entirely new* set of behaviors.

For years, Pianta and his colleagues have been collecting videotapes of teachers teaching. By analyzing these videos in minute ways, they've developed a good idea of which teaching behaviors are **most effective**. They are able to see how **teacher expectations affect both their behaviors and classroom dynamics**.

Let's look at an example: the belief that boys are disruptive and need to be managed.

"Say I'm a teacher and I ask a question in class, and a boy jumps up, sort of vociferously ... 'I know the answer! I know the answer! I know the answer!'"

"If I believe boys are disruptive and my job is to control the classroom, then I'm going to respond with, '*Johnny! You're out of line here! We need you to sit down right now.*'"

This response will likely make the boy frustrated and emotionally disengaged. He will then be likely to escalate his behavior, which will simply confirm the teacher's beliefs about him, and the teacher and kid are stuck in an unproductive loop.

But if the teacher *doesn't carry those beliefs* into the classroom, then the teacher is unlikely to see that behavior as threatening.

Instead it's: " *'Johnny, tell me more about what you think is going on ... But also, I want you to sit down quietly now as you tell that to me,'* " Pianta says.

"Those two responses," according to Pianta, "are dictated *almost entirely* by two **different interpretations of the same behavior** that are driven by two different sets of beliefs."

Pianta recently conducted an interesting study looking to see if teachers' beliefs would be changed by giving them a new set of teaching behaviors.

Pianta and his colleagues recently conducting a study, assessing a group of teachers' beliefs about children. Then, they gave some of them a standard pedagogy course, including information about appropriate beliefs and expectations. Another portion got intense behavioral training, which taught them a whole new set of skills based on those appropriate beliefs and expectations.

In the training, the teachers videotaped their classes over a period of months and worked with personal coaches who watched those videos, then gave them recommendations about different behaviors to try.

After that intensive training, Pianta and his colleagues analyzed the beliefs of the teachers again. What he found was that the *beliefs of the trained teachers* had **shifted way more** than the beliefs of teachers given a standard informational course.

This is why Pianta thinks that to change beliefs, the best thing to do is ***change behaviors.***

"It's far more powerful to work from the outside in than the inside out if you want to change expectations."

Robert Pianta compiled **seven suggestions** for teachers who want to change their behavior toward challenging students, which you can find on the page, below.

7 Ways Teachers Can Change Their Expectations

1. **Watch** how each student interacts. How do they prefer to engage? What do they seem to like to do? Observe so you can understand all they are capable of.
2. **Listen.** Try to understand what motivates them, what their goals are and how they view you, their classmates and the activities you assign them.
3. **Engage.** Talk with students about their individual interests. Don't offer advice or opinions – just listen.
4. **Experiment:** Change how you react to challenging behaviors. Rather than responding quickly in the moment, take a breath. Realize that their behavior might just be a way of reaching out to you.
5. **Meet:** Each week, spend time with students outside of your role as "teacher." Let the students choose a game or other nonacademic activity they'd like to do with you. Your job is to NOT teach but watch, listen and narrate what you see, focusing on students' interests and what they do well. This type of activity is really important for students with whom you often feel in conflict or who you avoid.
6. **Reach out:** Know what your students like to do outside of school. Make it a project for them to tell you about it using some medium in which they feel comfortable: music, video, writing, etc. Find both individual and group time for them to share this with you. Watch and listen to how skilled, motivated and interested they can be. Now think about school through their eyes.
7. **Reflect:** Think back on your own best and worst teachers, bosses or supervisors. List five words for each that describe how you felt in your interactions with them. How did the best and the worst make you feel? What specifically did they do or say that made you feel that way? Now think about how your students would describe you. Jot down how they might describe you and why. How do your expectations or beliefs shape how they look at you? Are there parallels in your beliefs and their responses to you?