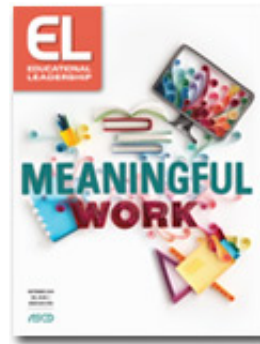


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High Expectations for All

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The idea of communicating high expectations for all students burst onto the K–12 education scene in the late 1960s. An important study indicated that teachers form expectations about their students' chances for academic success and then interact with students on the basis of those expectations.¹ That is, teachers treat their "high-expectancy" students differently from their "low-expectancy" students.

Students quickly recognize this differential treatment and begin to act in accordance with the expectations that the treatment implies.

Having high expectations for all students is, of course, a good and noble goal. Two problems arise here, however. First, expectations are subtle and difficult to change. Teachers may be unaware that they have low expectations for some students; even when they become aware, they may have difficulty changing their expectations because their beliefs and biases have developed over the years. Second, what actually communicates expectations to students is teacher *behavior*. If teachers consciously work to change their biases but don't change their behavior toward those students from whom they have tended to expect less, their change of attitude will have little effect on student achievement.

A Four-Step Process

In working with teachers on this issue, we have found it helpful to think of communicating high expectations as an instructional strategy that involves four steps.

Step 1: Identify students for whom you have low expectations.

Do this as early in the school year or the course as possible, because once you form expectations, it's hard to change them. Teachers might simply scan their class rosters and mentally place students into two categories—"I expect them to do well" and "I don't expect them to do well." This is not an easy task because it requires teachers to admit that they have formed negative expectations about some students.

Step 2: Identify similarities in students.

This is the most difficult part of the strategy because none of us likes to acknowledge that we automatically form conclusions about certain types of people. For example, a teacher might find that the students for whom she has low expectations all tend to look a certain way, speak a certain way, or come from a certain ethnic group. Research has demonstrated that such characteristics are commonly the basis for early expectations about students.²

If teachers do find patterns in their expectations, it does not necessarily mean that they are racists or bigots. To some extent, all adults have preconceived notions regarding different groups of people, simply because they are influenced by the biases of the people who raised them and the people with whom they interacted as children and by their personal experiences growing up. A bigot or a racist knowingly or unknowingly behaves in accordance with such notions. However, an individual who actively seeks to behave in a manner that is *not* controlled by biased patterns of thoughts or behaviors is anything but a bigot.

Step 3: Identify differential treatment of low-expectancy students.

In practice, teachers' *behaviors* toward students are much more important than their expectations: Students cannot know what teachers are thinking, but they do observe how teachers behave—and they make inferences on the basis of these behaviors.

In general, there are two ways that teachers treat low-expectancy students differently. One involves the general affective tone established between teacher and student. With low-expectancy students, teachers tend to make less eye contact, smile less, make less physical contact, and engage in less playful or light dialogue.

The second way involves the type and quality of interactions regarding academic content. Teachers tend to call on low-expectancy students less often, ask less challenging questions, delve into their answers less deeply, and reward them for less rigorous responses. Teachers can determine their differential treatment of low-expectancy students simply by noting and recording their behavior toward those students.

Step 4: Treat low-expectancy and high-expectancy students the same.

It is fairly easy to establish a positive affective tone with all students. Teachers simply make sure that they exhibit the same positive behaviors to all students—smiling, involving students in good-natured discussions, and engaging in appropriate physical contact. All students will typically respond well to this type of behavior.

Providing equal treatment is more difficult when it comes to academic interactions, however, particularly when questioning students. Students for whom teachers have low expectations become accustomed to the teacher asking them fewer and less challenging questions than other students. When teachers change this behavior, some students might feel uncomfortable. They will probably need to go through this uncomfortable phase, however, to arrive at a place where they will risk putting forth new ideas and asking questions that disclose their confusion about certain topics. Because this is the goal—for all students to embrace complex and challenging issues and for the teacher to acknowledge and respect their ideas.

Out in the Open

Addressing the issue of low expectations and differential treatment is a powerful strategy to enhance the achievement of those students who traditionally do not do well in the K–12 system. One of the more challenging aspects of effective teaching is confronting one's own expectations openly and productively.

Endnotes

¹ Rosenthal, R., & Jacobs, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

² Dusek, J. B., & Gail, J. (1983). The bases of teacher expectations: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75(3), 327–346.

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