**Teaching and Learning**

High Expectations

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**The Pygmalion Myth**

In Greek mythology, Pygmalion was a sculptor who fell in love with his own creation: an impossibly beautiful carving that he named Galatea. The strength of his feelings for Galatea were so intense that Aphrodite, the goddess of love, transformed the sculpture into a real woman. They married and – yep, you guessed it – lived happily ever after.

**The Pygmalion Effect**

If we have high expectations our of students, they will typically rise to meet them. Conversely, low expectations tend to be conducive to undesirable behaviours (this is called the Golem effect).

**The Study**

In the 1960s, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted an experiment that hinged on a lie: they told teachers that a group of their students were potential high achievers when, in fact, they had been chosen at random. The progress of the students was monitored for a year, and Rosenthal and Jacobson published their [findings](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/59c1/4fab51544dc9c5ec4e56c5a962346859c06a.pdf). The key one is below and, intriguingly, it was very **young children**, **boys** and students from **minority ethnic backgrounds** (i.e. Mexican students in the context of the study) who seemed to particularly benefit.

‘*When teachers expected that certain children would show greater intellectual development, those children did show greater intellectual development*.’

In the spirit of looking beyond the headlines, if you have the time and inclination, click [here](https://studysites.sagepub.com/scarlettstudy/articles/Jussim.pdf) to access a paper published by Lee Jussim and Kent Harbour in 2005; they argue that the gains in achievement during the Pygmalion study ‘hinged on the occurrence of bizarre outliers and out-of-range IQ scores’ and that the conclusions were ‘**highly limited and constrained**.’ The correlation between expectations and achievement isn’t disputed, just the significance of the accumulated benefits.

**Classroom Implications**

Ultimately, as teachers, we are all responsible for establishing, promoting and exemplifying high expectations.

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| 1. Truly **believe** that all students can succeed 2. **Embody** the behaviours you want students to adopt 3. Don’t ‘dumb down’ aspects of the **curriculum** 4. Remember that academic learning is ‘**unnatural**’ and **effortful** (see: David Geary’s essay on [folk knowledge](http://web.missouri.edu/~gearyd/FolkKnowledgePDF.pdf)...) 5. **Never apologise** for getting students to engage in effortful thinking or tasks which require sustained effort 6. Accept that **progress takes time** and doesn’t follow a nice and tidy flight path 7. Reflect on which students you provide the most **feedback** to and typically ask the most **questions** 8. Consistently praise good behaviour and **challenge** bad behaviour |