

Hannah Adams

Public Education for the Public Good

Public Intellectual Essay

There's A Golem in our Schools!

If no one believes you are going to do well, why should you? Especially if you try your personal hardest to excel in whatever task you are presented with, and still get no recognition from those who the task was supposed to serve. One of the dangers inherent in public education is that one teacher is in charge of many children's developments, and even well meaning adults can foster detrimental situations when left with so many people to care for. If our teachers don't expect much from certain (or all) students, those students have no reason to try and succeed academically, as all they are met with is doubt and neglect inside school.

Especially along socioeconomic and racial lines (which are to a large extent linked) gaps in both educational opportunity and educational achievement persist in our supposed democratic, egalitarian society. If we really want to be what we say we are by claiming to be true Americans, we need to start by trying to level the educational playing field. One place to start (and a really good one, as its potential for positive change is high) is teacher expectations of their students; and then, in particular, along racial and socioeconomic lines.

Since the publication of the now infamous "Pygmalion" study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (which holds that if teachers have high expectations of their students, their students are more likely to succeed academically), many debates have circulated around

the ideas of teacher expectancy and its effects on student performance. Rosenthal and Jacobson (along with many studies that followed) found a distinct correlation between the high performance of students (falsely) expected to be high performers by their teachers; such students were ahead of their peers by the end of the study, and the only reason seems to be because of what their teachers were led to believe about their abilities prior to instruction.¹

Another study done in 1991 by Babad et al, finds that people of all ages respond immediately to both verbal and nonverbal behavior of teachers based on what they expect from a student. This research was conducted primarily to highlight the connection between teacher expectations and teacher actions; when teachers were speaking *about* their students, their verbal cues predominately relayed how they felt about each student's ability. However, when teachers were in front of these individual students, it was through their nonverbal cues (much more than verbal) that their (either low or high) expectations were communicated. This means then, that even when teachers have the best intentions to treat all of their students equally (by speaking to all of them the same, for example) they are partially incapable of doing so, as their nonverbal actions reveal their true feelings that they are trying to mask verbally.²

The main problem with *Pygmalion* and the research that has piggy-backed on it is that the correlation between high teacher expectations and high student performance varies, and at times, seems negligible. It seems that sometimes if teachers think students will do well, then they will; but, the discrepancies in correlation come from the fact that

¹ Rosenthal

² Babad et al

sometimes high expectations do not necessarily yield high achieving students.³ Part of this issue comes from the scenarios that Babad et al were studying, the nonverbal cues that may convey a different level of expectation to the student than what the teacher intends. However, the answer to this discrepancy may be found in a different look at *Pygmalion*: the Golem effect.

As explicated by Susan H. McLeod in her article geared at compositional writing teachers, the Golem effect holds that low expectations of students has a much higher rate of occurrence in terms of its effect on student performance; in other words, it is much more likely for kids to fail if you think they will fail than it necessarily is for them to succeed based on the same level of expectation for their success. This means that the *negative* expectations teachers hold for certain students are much more determinant in student success or failure than any positive ones are and that we must worry about our teachers' disbeliefs more than their beliefs.⁴

Regardless of our American 'equality for all' rhetoric, severe inequalities exist in our society; and one of the most clear ways to see how inequalities are determined in our country is by looking at our public education system. The richest schools are predominately White; the highest ability tracks are as well; rich and poor students are segregated between schools, with less resources going to the kids whose families cannot afford to provide them themselves.⁵ If we are so egalitarian, why do these gaps persist? Why are Black students kept out of the academic power structure? Part of it starts with teacher expectations. We are socialized as Americans to disbelieve in Black ability and achievement and when teachers (socialized under the same dogma) communicate this

³ Hoge; Rosenthal

⁴ McLeod

⁵ Hochschild and Scovronick

(dis)belief to Black students, these kids are less inclined to try hard. They get behind, which frustrates more teachers and further lowers the expectations of them. So they fall further behind. This is a perfect equation for an ostensibly *self*-perpetuating undereducated class of Blacks; perfect in terms of its ability to maintain the status quo of White power holders while simultaneously putting the onus of the inequality on Black shoulders (so as to quell any potential cries of ‘racism’).

What Now?

Confronting Buried Biases

What is interesting about this Golem effect is that for a long time after the Rosenthal/Jacobson study, the educational trend was to project the overall expectation of high ability to all students, even if the teachers’ personal beliefs about student ability conflicted with this projection. What Golem means then (as well as what can be gleaned from the Babad et al 1991 study), is that what needs to be concentrated on are exactly those real expectations of low performance that were called to be repressed for so long. The initial educational reaction to the Pygmalion effect ignored the high importance of nonverbal communication in student-teacher interactions – particularly important because nonverbal types of communication stem mostly from those buried biases that all of us hold (such as low expectations for a certain race of student, for example).

Part of digging up and confronting buried biases - and establishing a culture of doing so – can also start in the classroom. If curriculum focused on positive cognitive

development instead of strictly academic, broader lessons could be learned in class that could be applied to many situations (such as good critical thinking skills). With an emphasis on positive cognitive development, teachers could not only encourage attitudes that would embrace questioning (and therefore acceptance) but also would de-emphasize quantitative academic analysis that can more easily lead to ranking students based on ability (real and therefore perceived).

A good starting place to improving the state of teachers' negative expectations is with their own buried biases. This is a hard thing to tackle, however, as each individual has their own unique set of conceptions about others. Even so, it is the necessary thing to change in order to overcome the Golem effect and the inequities it perpetuates. Both teacher education in colleges as well as school administrations need to start supporting teacher confrontation of their prejudices; and everyone (teachers, teacher-educators, administrators, parents, community members, etc.) should start acknowledging the existence of all of our own biases based on personal experience and socialization.

If a teacher has had little contact with non-English speaking students, and suddenly has six in a class one year, a potential (and in many cases, probable) outcome would be that the teacher's frustrations with newness (as well as the language barrier) would manifest into a lack of expectations (and therefore opportunity) for these students. Would any of us want those children to be ours? Or ourselves? If a culture of honesty were established on our communities and our schools, teachers could be more honest about their apprehensions in such situations, and could as well hear what the students' apprehensions are from the other side of the discussion.⁶

⁶ Lucas and Borders

Ability Tracking and the Perpetuation of Inequality

One of the major manifestations of expectancy in education is our system of ability tracking, at least on the basic level of the titles we assign to each separate track. When I was in public school, there were three tracks: the Advanced, Honors and Regular programs. When looking at these titles through a Pygmalion lens, Advanced and Honors look like promising titles; but if looked at through a Golem lens, only the Advanced tracked students would be free of negative teacher expectations (at least on a general level). And even then, these titles foster an environment of elitism by separating one group of students out as advanced in opposition to a group called simply regular; and even the most encouraging and high-expectation projecting teachers are faced with a huge problem in teaching kids who are told they are merely regular.

In light of the Golem effect, it seems that tracking by ability is not such a great idea; especially not if what we want out of public education is to encourage positive cognitive growth and decrease the persistent gaps in education. Part of encouraging well rounded cognitive development means instilling good general problem solving skills; the more types of learners there are in one classroom, the more opportunities for healthy problem solving will arise – which means ability tracking could no longer be in play, to accomplish this goal.

But what does getting rid of ability tracking mean? The group that could potentially be negatively effected (at least at the outset) by an elimination of the current tracking system would be those in the highest tracks. We must acknowledge that with every change there is loss, and we would be losing the ultra-academic and challenging overall environments present in advanced classes. Those students currently in advanced

classes must acknowledge, however, that it is better for all students (including themselves) to encounter multiple perspectives daily, including perspectives differing as to ability level.

Students in honors and regular classes will benefit most directly from the elimination of tracking, as the negative stigma inherent in the group separations will be eliminated. Also, getting rid of tracking will force teachers to look at their own personal biases and how they may be affecting a student's poor performance as they can no longer use students' low ability levels as excuses for low achievement. We need to seriously consider the benefits of mixed level classrooms for the future of our citizenry – sure, kids in advanced classes won't have as easy a time succeeding in our society, but it is for the good of all to have harder, more fair competition overall.

Ability tracking also separates students early on in their educational careers, not giving every student adequate time to display what their ability or potential might be. Had you reached your potential by sixth grade? I sure hadn't, and I bet there are a lot of students labeled as regular or honors that could have easily been labeled advanced, had they been given a little more time before separation. Also, because students are tracked so early (and haven't shown all they are capable of when tracked) it is much easier for those buried biases inherent in all people to manifest themselves as decisions regarding a particular student's ability level; without adequate proof from students as to what level they should be in, teachers and administrators are pressed to use other factors (such as race and socioeconomic status) to predict the ability level of each student. (And so often, well intentioned or not, teachers place poor and non-White students at much higher percentages in the lower level tracks, based primarily on falsely but deeply held biases.)

One problem with looking at the current education situation through a Golem lens, is that the importance of reasonable but high expectations is downplayed as that of negative expectations is highlighted. The ideal classroom would be one taught by someone who would take both the Pygmalion and Golem effects into account; an ideal teacher would be both encouraging and deeply mindful of avoiding discouragement. However, that raises another problem: teachers are afraid to express disappointment when a student does not live up to the high expectations set for them. But it isn't a bad thing for a teacher to be honest and express those feelings of disappointment (constructively); then, it may be possible for both student and teacher to work out together both parties' fault in the situation (teacher had too high expectations; student had home problems, etc).

Exorcising this Scholastic Demon

I want to live in a more equal society, where the benefits and burdens are widely shared by all – that is my vision of a healthy America. But we can't get there with these persistent gaps in education and educational opportunity – especially because the inequalities exist primarily for those who have been systematically excluded from the American power structure since this country's beginning. We have an obligation to well-educate all of our citizens so as to give each person an equal chance at success and failure. We cannot accomplish these goals as long as negative expectations exist for so many of our students. If we want overall success, we must not believe in or anticipate failure.

By eliminating ability tracking in our public schools, we could take the first step towards realizing a more egalitarian society by creating scholastic environments of inclusion as opposed to the separation that tracking incurs. By confronting our hidden biases daily – and, more importantly, by instilling that value in our schoolteachers – we can make strides in thwarting the numerous (and in many ways, more powerful than verbal) nonverbal cues we give off that may hold certain people to low standards, regardless of our intentions. We cannot call ourselves a free democracy if we don't look out for the well being of all of our citizens – and the first step towards actually *being* a free democracy lies in the exorcism of this Golem from our classrooms.

Further Reading:

Babad, Elisha Y. "Some Correlates of Teachers' Expectancy Bias." *American Educational Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (1985): 175-183. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

A nice introductory discussion of the correlation between teacher expectations and student performance. Babad has done a lot of work/research in the field of teacher expectancy, and therefore is a good author to begin with.

Babad, Elisha Y., Frank Bernieri and Robert Rosenthal. "Students as Judges of Teachers' Verbal and Nonverbal Behavior." *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (1991): 211-234. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

This study is really important in that it not only shows the strength of nonverbal behavior/actions, it also demonstrates how young children can pick up on these nonverbal cues really strongly – as strongly as adults in most cases. This study also looks at the difference between when teachers talk about students and when they talk to them, and how their verbal and nonverbal behaviors switch depending on context.

Ball, Arnetha and Ted Lardner. "Dispositions toward Language: Teacher Constructs of Knowledge and the Ann Arbor Black English Case." *College Composition and Communication* 48, no. 4 (1997): 469-485. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

The Ann Arbor case was a court case that claimed discrimination was at play in the public schools of Ann Arbor by holding Black students back in English classes because of their uses of traditional Black American English. Teachers viewed these children's dialects as poor grammar and this case forced school officials to consider the grammatical validity – for the first real time – of Black American dialects.

Hughes, James R. "How Do You Behave? Your Nonverbal Actions Are Critical to Student Motivation." *Music Educator's Journal* 67, no. 5 (1981): 52-53. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

Written by a teacher, this article delves in practical applications of teacher expectancy research. Good ideas on how to teach effectively with teacher expectancy bias in mind can be found here.

Lucas, Ceil and Denise Borders. "Language Diversity and Classroom Discourse." *American Educational Research Journal* 24, no. 1 (1987): 119-141. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

This article explores the issues involved in teaching in a multilingual society, offering a unique perspective on the teacher expectancy debate. Teaching across bias is one thing, but teaching across a language barrier is much harder to surmount – especially considering the biases many Americans hold regarding non-English speakers (or English as a second + language speakers). Lucas and Borders also look at the Black English case in Ann Arbor, to have diverse language types in consideration.

McLeod, Susan H. "Pygmalion or Golem? Teacher Affect and Efficacy." *College Composition and Communication* 46, no. 3 (1995): 369-386. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

This article is incredibly interesting as it gives McLeod's entire breakdown of the Golem effect, what it does and what its manifestations are. Further understanding of my essay can be gleaned from this article, as much of my arguments came out of it.

Rosenthal, Robert. "'Pygmalion' Effects: Existence, Magnitude, and Social Importance." *Educational Researcher* 16, no. 9 (1987): 37-41. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

Rosenthal examines in this article the criticisms to date of his original *Pygmalion* study, highlighting again his original's validity as well as revising some of his research methodology in light of certain criticisms.

Additional Resources:

Cooper, Harris M. and David Y. H. Tom. "Teacher Expectation Research: A Review with Implications for Classroom Instruction." *The Elementary School Journal* 85, no. 1 (1984): 76-89. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

Cooper, Harris M. "Pygmalion Grows up: A Model for Teacher Expectation Communication and Performance Influence." *Review of Educational Research* 49, no. 3 (1979): 389-410. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

Fuchs, Lynn S., Douglas Fuchs and Norris Phillips. "The Relation between Teachers' Beliefs about the Importance of Good Student Work Habits, Teacher Planning and Student Achievement." *The Elementary School Journal* 94, no. 3 (1994): 331-345. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).

Hoge, Robert D. "The Definition and Measurement of Teacher Expectations: Problems and Prospects." *Canadian Journal of Education* 9, no. 2 (1984): 213-228.
<http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Nov. 5, 2006).