13.6B: Teachers’ Expectations

Teachers’ perception of students’ knowledge and abilities influences classroom processes and student achievement.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss how a teacher’s perception influences student performance, in terms of expectations and gender stereotypes

Key Points

• The Pygmalion effect refers to the phenomenon in which the greater the expectation placed upon people (such as children, students, or employees) the better they perform.

• The Pygmalion effect is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

• Within sociology, the effect is often cited with regard to education and social class.

• Gender stereotyping within classrooms can also lead to differences in academic achievement and representation for female and male students.

Key Terms

• **Pygmalion effect**: The phenomenon in which the greater the expectation placed upon people (often children, students, and employees), the better they perform.

• **Gender Stereotyping**: When one believes that an individual will behave in a particular way simply because of his or her sex.

• **self-fulfilling prophecy**: a prediction that, by being voiced, causes itself to come true
How teachers perceive students’ knowledge and abilities influences classroom processes and student achievement. In other words, when teachers believe students will be high achievers, those students achieve more; conversely, when teachers believe students will be low achievers, those students tend to achieve less. This is a case of a self-fulfilling prophecy, or the Pygmalion effect.

The Pygmalion Effect

The Pygmalion effect refers to the phenomenon in which the greater the expectation placed upon people (often children or students and employees) the better they perform. The effect is named after Pygmalion, a Cypriot sculptor in a narrative by Ovid in Greek mythology, who fell in love with a female statue he had carved out of ivory after it became human due to his wishes. The Pygmalion effect is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, and, in this respect, people will internalize their negative label, and those with positive labels succeed accordingly. Within sociology, the effect is often cited with regard to education and social class.

The Pygmalion effect was famously applied to the classroom in the Rosenthal-Jacobson study, published in 1968. In this study, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson showed that if teachers were led to expect enhanced performance from some children, then the children did indeed show that enhancement. This influence can be beneficial as well as detrimental depending on which label an individual is assigned. The purpose of their study was to support the hypothesis that reality can be influenced by the expectations of others. Rosenthal posited that biased expectancies can essentially affect reality and create self-fulfilling prophecies as a result. In this experiment, Rosenthal predicted that, when given the information that certain students had higher IQs than others, elementary school teachers may unconsciously behave in ways that facilitate and encourage the students’ success.

Gender Stereotyping

How might teachers’ expectations create a Pygmalion effect? Teachers usually have higher expectations for students they view as higher achievers, and treat these students with more respect. For example, studies have found that when students are split into ability-based groups, the students in the higher-ability groups are more likely to demonstrate positive learning behaviors and higher achievement. Teachers’ expectations may also be gendered, perhaps explaining some of the gender achievement gap. Gender stereotyping within classrooms can also lead to differences in academic achievement and representation for female and male students. Math and science are often perceived as “masculine” subjects because they lead to success in “masculine” fields, such as medicine and engineering. English and history, on the other hand, are often perceived as “feminine” subjects because they are more closely aligned with “feminine” jobs, such as teaching or care work. Research on the stereotype threat has shown that gender stereotypes decrease the mathematical self-esteem of many female students, and that this lack of academic confidence leads to anxiety and poorer performance on math exams. Therefore, these stereotypes can influence student achievement in these areas.

Gender-specific evaluations from teachers are implicit; usually the teachers have no idea that they are favoring one gender over the other until they are shown concrete evidence, such as a video recording of their classroom. However, even though the discrimination is implicit, it still has negative effects on both male and female students.
Teacher-student Monument: The teacher-student monument in Rostock, Germany honors teachers.

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