

Pygmalion Effect: The Power of the Teacher's Expectation

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ABSTRACT

Pygmalion effect is based on principle that the individuals expectation influences the performance as well as the behavior of others. Both positive and negative expectation of the individual has positive and negative effect upon the other's performance/outcomes. Pygmalion effect is considered as the secret and powerful psychological weapon to bring change either positive or negative within the individual. The present paper examines how the teachers expectation nudge the success/ failure of the students.

Keywords: *Pygmalion Effect, Expectation, Teacher, Student, Education.*

Teacher plays a crucial role for the intellectual growth, motivation and competence of the students. An increasing attention has been focused on the role of the teacher in the classroom, his/her attitude, beliefs, and values. Many educational researchers opinioned that teachers expectations influence students performance. If the teachers expect that student will achieve, then students will work hard to fulfill the expectation of the teacher. When the teacher expects less, students perform poorly. Teachers expectations has both positive as well negative impact upon the students performance/achievement. It depends upon two factors i) teachers knowledge about students previous grades/academic performance ii) teachers prejudices and stereotypes.

Pygmalion Effect: Concept

The concept of Pygmalion originated from the Greek mythology and dates back to 1950's. It is also known as Rosenthal effect as the concept was developed by psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson in 1968. The king of Cyprus named, Pygmalion, a sculptor in profession. He carved the statue of the women and fall in love with it. It is so real that when he kissed the statue, he felt warm. He called the statue as Galatea. Due to the intense love for the statue, Pygmalion pray to the goddess of love, Aphrodite to transform the statue to the real human. Then he married to the transformed women and blessed with a daughter named as, Paphos. The transformative effect of expectations become reality is the basis of Pygmalion principle. The converse of the Pygmalion effect is the golem effect, if we expect negative, the outcome is also negative. The negative self-fulfilling prophecy takes place, when the teacher expects negatively, students also perform negatively. If we expect positively, the outcome is positive, in the same manner negative expectation leads to negative outcomes (Figure 1: Pygmalion effect).

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Figure 1: The Pygmalion Effect

In 1948, Robert K. Merton, sociologist, published a paper on the topic self-fulfilling prophecy and described it as self-hypnosis through our self-advertisement. He described how false belief become true and created feedback loop overtime. The play written by George Barnard Shaw entitled Pygmalion. In that play, he has described the gentleman named as, Henry Higgins, a professor in phonetics tries to improve the language as well as speech of Eliza Doolittle a poor flower girl, well versed in cockney accent. Henry expects that he will bring transformation in Eliza into a well-spoken lady. The play was very famous and staged with the title as “A fair Lady”. So, the Pygmalion effect has come to mean "you get what you expect”.

Pygmalion Effect: Research Findings

According to Rosenthal (2010), the effect of interpersonal expectancies refers to the Pygmalion effect, that is what one person expects from another person. In 1960, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson have conducted a study on “Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teachers expectations and Pupils’ Intellectual Development”. In order to study the IQ of students of elementary school, they have administered the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition and found that one fifth of the students were “bloomers” on the basis of their test result. But their names were not disclosed to their class teacher. The alternate students were not considered as unintelligent, but considered as unlabeled classmates. After study period over, both the groups such as bloomers as well as unlabeled classmates were retested with IQ test. Researcher found improved performance in their IQ test in both the groups. Rosenthal & Jacobson attributed this result as Pygmalion effect. They found that if right environment is provided, then students can bloom. Their research findings showed that expectations of the teacher influence students performance. The students are not learning, as the teacher is not expecting them to learn.

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In 19th century William Von Osten, a teacher as well as a horse trainer, conducted study on horse named as Clever Hans. He stated that the horse can understand and answer the question written in the German language by tapping the hoof. But later the psychologist Oskar Pfungst contradict it. The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy was also emphasized by Sigmund Freud, the father of Psychoanalytic theory. B. F. Skinner, pioneer of operant conditioning learning, in his Skinner box experiment on rat has also explained the superior performance of rat was achieved by the expectations of the trainer. According to David McClelland and Atkinson, if the success rate goes down, Pygmalion effect also drops. When we are confident, expectation matters a lot.

According to Brophy and Good (1970), the mechanism of teachers expectancy effect include:

- Different expectancies formed by the teacher for the students.
- Teachers belief and treatment towards the students in the form i) Attention as well as support, ii) Providing materials and iii) High interaction
- Recognition and reaction of the students regarding teacher expectation.
- Improved academic performance / achievement by the students.
- Teacher recognizes positive changes among the students in the form of improved performance / result and feel supported about his /her expectancies and self-fulfilling cycle accomplished.

Research on Pygmalion effect as well as the existence of the expectancy effect has been documented in various empirical studies by the researcher such as Rosenthal & Rubin (1978), Jussim & Harber, (2005) and Tannenbaum & Ruck (2007). Various researcher conducted studies on the different areas of psychology also confirm the principle of self-fulfilling prophecy. In 20th century, Marva Collins, an educator cited the importance of the Pygmalion effect. She opened a school of her own for the learning disability as well as problem students, even one child with borderline retarded also enrolled in the school. She found that all the child scored five grades higher compared to the previous year result. She concluded that her belief on the capability of the students enable them to perform better with extraordinary results.

According to Good et al. (1987), teacher's expectancies about students achievement depends upon two factors: i) Students grades in the previous examination and their performance in the class room, ii) Prejudices and stereotypes of the teacher. According to Harvard psychologists Robert Rosenthal, (2010), the teacher expectancies have significant impact upon students achievement in future.

According to Howard Zinn (1994), a renowned author, historians and social activists, pessimism can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The experiments conducted by Brophy (1985) emphasized upon the negative expectations. He found that negative expectations, false evaluation and discrimination has harmful impact upon the motivation level of the students. If teacher tells the students that they are underachiever, the students will not perform better in order to prove the expectations of the teacher. Brophy listed eight forms of negative expectations such as: i) giving up low expectations students quickly, ii) More criticism for the failure, iii) Less praise in case of success, iv) after getting their response neglect them in giving the feedback, v) Make them to seat in the back bench, vi) Less or no interaction vii) Less interest and warmth/ cordial to them as individuals, Viii) praising inappropriately.

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Smith et al (1998) also confirmed the expectancy effect of the teacher has significant impact upon the students achievement at individual as well as group level. In spite of a very large number of studies, the questions relating to expectancy effect upon the students achievement in the class room is still unanswered. Schrank (1968) conducted experiments on the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy among the students at the group level and the findings corroborate the Rosenthal and Jacobson studies. He found that high potential group students perform better because of high expectations where as low potential group students perform poorly due to low expectations from them. Both Rosenthal & Jacobson study and Schrank study emphasized upon the positive expectations of the teacher.

Many studies confirm that the teachers expectancies on the students achievement mediated by the effect of the self-concept especially with domain specific association. (Troullidou et al., 2002). The students with or having high self-concept consider themselves as more competent and confident to perform better compared to the students with low self-concept. Even though the various studies conducted by the researcher on the Pygmalion effect but few studies examine the expectancy effect of achievement outcomes. Most of the researcher agrees that Pygmalion effect involves both positive as well as negative expectations.

Role of the Teacher

The research findings of the psychologists states that:

- Students initiative towards learning largely depends upon the teacher and student relationship.
- Students liking and disliking towards the subjects determined by teachers character.
- A positive psychological state can be created by the teacher in the classroom teaching for the students with his/her friendly, warm, caring and supportive behavior.
- By providing verbal and non-verbal reinforcement, the teacher can communicate his/her expectations to the students.
- Teacher and student relationship can be narrowed down by the caring nature of the teacher. A good relationship between them can create positive impact upon the learning of the students.
- Psychological barrier between the teacher and student can be overcome by the support and encouragement by the teacher. The teacher can instill confidence within the students that each student is unique in their strength.
- The teacher should communicate directly or indirectly to the students that they are achievers.

Use of Pygmalion Effect in the Classroom

Pygmalion effect can be used in the classroom by teacher in order to get the effective result from the students.

- **Aware of expectations:** Teacher should aware of his or her own expectations when interacting with the students in the classroom. They should acknowledge the existence of the positive expectations so that it will be reflected in their thoughts, language use for the students and at last in actions.
- **Identifying positive traits:** Sometimes the teacher is having low/negative expectations from the students due to some weaknesses/ negative qualities, that may be, behavior is not conformed with the rules of the society or personal liking and disliking. Instead of doing this, teacher should indulge in identifying positive traits within the students ignoring the negative traits he/she possess, form the positive

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expectations which in turn yield positive outcomes from the students in the form of achievement or better performance.

- **Creating challenges:** When students are achieving their goal, not only they feel accomplished but also empowered. The teacher by assigning challenging task to the students not only fulfill his/her own expectations, but also instilling confidence and develop can-do attitude within the students.
- **Use of positive language:** Belittleling the students by the teacher does not work or bring positive results. Sometimes the teacher often uses different phrases such as “You cannot do it “, “This is not possible on your part”. As a result, the students lack confidence and also believe that teacher does not have trust upon them which resulted poor performance on the part of the students. Instead, by complimenting and identifying positive traits within the students and use of positive phrases “I know You can “, “You will never let me down “by the teachers can create positive expectation as well as reflected in their actions.
- **Providing Feedback:** The teacher should provide feedback to both academically weak students as well as strong students. Sometimes teacher believe/expect that feedback will not work or they (academic weak students) cannot improve/ develop. So, feedback is not provided to them. Instead of doing this, the teacher should provide feedback for giving them (academic weak students) a chance to improve and realize their fault or mistakes.

Implications

The concept Pygmalion effect is widely used in different subjects such as Cognitive Psychology, Medicine, Economics, Social Psychology and Management. In 1969, J. Sterling Livingstone, Professor of Harvard School of Business also emphasize the importance of the Pygmalion effect in Management. According to Rosenthal (1971), though not all the studies confirm the findings that higher expectation of the teacher resulted enhanced performance of the students, but large number of studies confirm so. A number of studies also provided the evidence of importance of teaching skills in the classroom along with the expectancy effect of the teacher. Due to positive and negative effect upon the students outcomes, Pygmalion effect has significant scientific and practical relevance for the individual in order to bring desired changes within a person.

CONCLUSION

The Pygmalion effect has profound influence upon the school, organization, home business and people around us. But high expectations are also sometimes difficult to achieve due to limited capabilities of the individual which leads to stress. It also produces diminishing return. No doubt teachers motivation, enthusiasm and expectations not only motivates the student but also affect his/her performance. The training imparted to the teacher by the trainer in the various teachers training institute should acquaint with the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. The concept of Pygmalion effect should be included in the course curriculum as case study, and should be delivered by the teacher as a instruction in the classroom teaching to the students. The teacher should instill confidence within the students by using the phrases such as: “You can”, “This is possible on your part” etc. The concept Pygmalion effect is also criticized on the basis of expectations, it is not the expectations certain other factors play a significant role for the students achievement such as ability, motivation, intelligence etc. It can be concluded with the quotation of Carl Sagan, that the visions we offer our children shape their future.

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Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

How to cite this article: Subhashree, P. (2022). Pygmalion Effect: The Power of the Teacher's Expectation. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(4), 055-060. DIP: 18.01.007.20221004, DOI:10.25215/1004.007