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Mind

The Pygmalion effect: do teachers' expectations affect pupils?

The experiment by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968), the criticism that followed and what remains today of the idea that believing in someone helps them progress

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In the Greek myth told by Ovid, the sculptor Pygmalion makes a statue so beautiful that he falls in love with it, and the goddess Aphrodite brings it to life. In the twentieth century his name was given to a psychological idea: our expectations of someone can change that person.

The experiment

In 1965 the psychologist **Robert Rosenthal** and the school principal **Lenore Jacobson** gave the pupils of a primary school in San Francisco an intelligence test. Teachers were told that the test could predict which children would have an intellectual "bloom" during the year. They were then given the names of about 20 per cent of the pupils as "future bloomers". In fact, these children had been chosen at random.

Eight months later the pupils were tested again. According to the results published in the book Pygmalion in the Classroom (1968), the "chosen" children had on average made larger gains than the others, especially in the first and second grades. The authors suggested that teachers had, without realising it, treated them differently: with more warmth, more time and more chances to answer.

The criticism

The study was criticised from the start. Some psychologists pointed out problems with the test, which was not suitable for the youngest children, and with some strange results. Later attempts to replicate it gave mixed results. A meta-analysis by Stephen Raudenbush in 1984 found that the expectancy effect was small overall, and most visible when teachers knew the pupils only a little before receiving the false information.

> *Expectations do not work miracles. But they affect how we behave, and our behaviour affects others.*

What remains

Later reviews, such as that by Lee Jussim and Kent Harber in 2005, reached a measured conclusion: the effects of teachers' expectations are real but usually small, and teachers' expectations are often accurate because they are based on real performance. Even so, larger effects have been found in groups that face prejudice or among pupils with low achievement.

How to use them honestly

1. **Expect progress, not perfection.** Believing that someone can learn gives them room to try.
2. **Beware of labels:** "not a maths person" can affect how you explain things and how much time you give.
3. **Give everyone the chance to answer,** not only those who seem "bright".
4. **As a parent or manager,** notice whether your expectations rest on facts or on first impressions.

Sources

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