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# Role of Teacher Attitude in Educating the Disadvantaged Child

**HAROLD A. HENRIKSON**

**T**HE failure of the disadvantaged child in the classroom has been documented and studied with increasing concern through the 1960's. Considerable evidence reported by Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc. (1964) has indicated the progressive deterioration of performance and IQ of the culturally disadvantaged child as he advances from the third to the sixth grade in the nation's schools. Various reasons have been cited for this failure.

Bernstein (1960) has attributed the restrictive language pattern of the lower class family to school failure. Sexton (1961) has equated income and education, finding a strong correlation between family income and school achievement. In her study, when the average family income was below \$7,000, the achievement level of the child dropped below grade level.

Charters (1963), following an exhaustive review of the literature, confirmed that social class position determined or predicted all school-related success to the extent that it could be regarded as "empirical law."

The nationwide concern for the failure of the disadvantaged child in the classroom has led to the development of compensatory education programs directed at changing the status of failure in the classroom through

various educational processes. These educational processes have held in common the belief that the failure of the disadvantaged child in the school rests within the child himself, and that the child must be compensated to offset the progressive retardation observed in him within the classroom.

Compensatory education programs have used the middle class home environment as a standard in the belief that this environment nurtures achievement motivation, and the development of the learning and language skills which appeared to be lacking in the disadvantaged child.

Compensatory education programs have demanded new procedures and new materials at a considerable expenditure of money, yet they have not been recognized as unqualified successes. The Westinghouse Report (1969) indicated that results from testing in Head Start programs had not shown retention of the initial gains by the children in these programs. This report also questioned whether long range help for the disadvantaged child lay in the direction of helping him obtain middle class standards, or perhaps whether the influence of the child's home environment was such that school programs could not hope to compensate for its influence.

Many researchers have taken a position opposed to compensatory education. These men have placed the responsibility for the failure of the child directly on the school, indicating that it is the school that must change to meet the needs of the child, not the child who must be compensated to meet the needs of the school.

A study of Chicago schools by Becker (1952) found that teachers (a) used different teaching techniques in slum schools than in middle class schools, (b) had a conflicting middle class value system that alienated them from lower class students, (c) wanted to transfer to a better school as soon as possible, and (d) were prone to expect less from lower class children.

Goldberg (1967) stated that the school and the teacher were two of the recognized causes of academic retardation of the disadvantaged, as the school had no expectation for the child to learn, and the teacher was failing to do an adequate job of teaching him. Kozol (1967) and Holt (1969) have also placed a great share of the blame for the failure of the child on the schools and the teachers. Kozol emphasized the degree of hostility toward the disadvantaged child that he had seen in many school situations, while Holt accused the schools of adopting a deliberate failure strategy, stating that too many teachers have a conviction that the poor children in the cities cannot be taught.

Wilson (1963) indicated that it is in part the variation of teachers' expectations and standards that contributed to the pupils' later attainment and aspirations, and that the standards set in lower class schools were set lower than those in middle class schools. Glasman (1970) indicated that many teachers with a middle class outlook experience difficulty in working with, and understanding, disadvantaged children. He stated that such teachers have serious misconceptions of the pupils' preschool experience, and display a highly pessimistic view of what the school can do to help the disadvantaged learner.

Asbell (1963) visited many schools in the large cities and reported that teachers were more concerned with what to expect

from disadvantaged children than with what they might effect with these same pupils. Deutsch (1963) has charged the school with the responsibility for the disadvantaged child's negative attitude toward learning. Davidson (1960) reported a study in which teachers rated the classroom behavior of disadvantaged children as undesirable even when their academic achievement was good. The children in his study acquired lower perceptions of themselves as they became aware of the teachers' critical attitudes and subsequently achieved less and behaved less satisfactorily.

Does attitude play the crucial role in the classroom that these men have assigned to it? Is the teacher's attitude so pervasive, as indicated by many of these researchers, that it can actually be a cause of the child's success or failure in school? If so, what responsibility must the school and the teacher carry for the failure of the disadvantaged child in the classroom?

### Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy—that one person's expectation about another's behavior may contribute to a determination of what that behavior actually will be—has been illustrated in sports by Whyte's well-known *Street Corner Society* (1943). In Whyte's study, the "self-fulfilling prophecy" of the gang acted upon one member's ability at bowling: the night the gang "knew" the member would bowl well, he did so, and vice versa.

The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy has been demonstrated in the field of education by Rosenthal and Jacobson in *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (1968). This study dealt with children in grades one through six in a school that served the lower socioeconomic segment of a community. In *Pygmalion*, approximately 20 percent of each class in the school was randomly selected, and teachers were given an expectancy advantage for those children (were told that the children could be expected to "bloom" academically). After one year a significant ex-

pectancy advantage was found, through post-testing, with those children who were expected to "bloom."

The critics of *Pygmalion* are many: those such as Jensen (1968) who question that such a concept even exists, and others such as Snow (1969) and Gumpert and Gumpert (1968) who, while accepting the presence of such a concept, point out the need for a different analysis of the data for more concise evidence of it within the study.

Clasen (1970) and Aiken (1969) are among those critics who accept the concept but suggest further research with it; Clasen, in the area of other racial backgrounds, and Aiken, in research studies with larger sample sizes, indicating his concern that the significant differences in the *Pygmalion* study might have been obtained through the extreme scores of only a few children.

Attempts to replicate and adapt the *Pygmalion* study to other research have been carried out with varying results. Research by Beez (1967), reported by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), supported the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy in a study with 60 pupils in a Head Start program. Seventy-seven percent of the children in the study alleged to their teachers to be good symbol learners did learn five or more symbols, while only 13 percent of those children alleged to be poor symbol learners learned five or more symbols. The teachers in Beez' study who had been given favorable expectations about their pupils generally saw them come true, while those teachers who were given unfavorable expectations also found what they had expected to find.

A quasi-replication of the *Pygmalion* study was done by Conn and others (1967), and reported in Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). The study was carried out with children from a middle or upper-middle class community, and teachers in the study were led to expect gains in intellectual development after having a full semester's contact with the pupils prior to being given the expectancy advantage. In this study, the expectancy advantage noted with the "special" children was small, approaching only marginal statistical significance ( $p < .10$ ).

A replication of the *Pygmalion* study by Claiborn (1969) assessed teacher-pupil behavior following communication to the teacher of the intellectual potential of certain pupils. The results of this study, too, were in contrast to those of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), since there were no significant differences between those pupils designated as "bloomers" when compared to the remaining pupils in the class. The expectancy advantage was given to the teachers approximately five months after the beginning of the school year, a time lapse which, as in Conn's study, had perhaps already given the teachers a considerable basis for forming certain expectations of the pupils.

Preliminary results of a study conducted by Evans (1968), reported in Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), again failed to show significant differences. This study was conducted with middle class pupils whose teachers were given an expectancy advantage concerning their intellectual ability.

Results of a study by Henrikson (1970), however, supported the findings of the study by Rosenthal and Jacobson in *Pygmalion*. Some striking differences were found in achievement gain scores of the experimental and contrast groups of a sample composed of disadvantaged kindergarten children. The generation of an expectancy advantage for the children of the experimental group in the study was given to teachers at the beginning of the school year. Post-test results at the end of the school year saw differences of +17.1 points between the experimental and contrast groups in achievement mean gain scores manifest across all conditions and significant ( $p < .005$ ).

The concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy as it is applicable to education demands further research to clarify its applicability to the classroom. The possibility that teacher attitude plays as significant a role in the classroom as some of the studies have indicated is of great importance to further planning in education for the disadvantaged child. It challenges the belief that the child who is disadvantaged in both home and school is so because one environment is working irrevocably against the other. It asks

whether it is not possible that the disadvantaged status of the child, as viewed by the teacher, itself creates the disadvantage for the child within the classroom.

It is possible that the Kerner Report (1968), asking for more preschool interven-

tion programs for the disadvantaged child, overlooks a basic premise—that a change in the quality of the child's education can be effected through nothing more than a change in the teacher's expectations of his abilities in the classroom.

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- HAROLD A. HENRIKSON, *Principal, Century Oaks and Hillcrest Elementary Schools, Elgin, Illinois.*



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