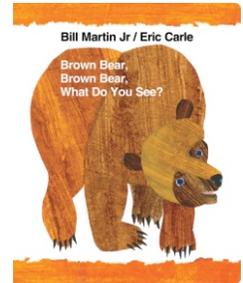


Pygmalion and The Teacher's Eyes

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“Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?”

These words have been known, loved, and repeated by thousands of early childhood teachers and children in schools around the nation and the world for years. They are the opening lines of the favorite book with the same title, written by Bill Martin and illustrated by Eric Carle. The book has been used to teach very young children their colors, the names of animals and, more importantly, how to read for themselves. Parents have opened its pages at bedtime to lull their youngsters into sleep with its sing-song cadence. With millions of copies sold since its publication in 1967, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* has opened up a world of learning to over two generations of children.



The pages of this iconic read-along are populated by a brown bear, yellow duck, white dog, red bird, black sheep, and gold fish, all asking and answering the same happy question. Yet Bill Martin must have been inspired when he changed focus on the last two pages. Leaving the animals and their bright colors, he suddenly asks, “Teacher, teacher, what do you see?” Her reply: “I see children looking at me.”

I emphasize to you that this always is the response of the successful early childhood educator. “I see *children* looking at me.” The successful teacher does not see *poor, ADHD, dysfunctional, or slow learner*. There are no handwritten

signs affixed to small foreheads that stigmatize or pigeon-hole them according to society's negative assessment of their worth. The successful, caring teacher only sees the *children*. The successful, caring teacher only sees promise, possibility, and potential on the young faces in the classroom.



Why is this so important? It is important because expectations lead to practice. The impact of high or low expectations in school has been researched for years. The “Pygmalion Effect” is the term coined from a now-classic study by Rosenthal and Jacobson. In the study, all students in a single California elementary school were given a pseudo-IQ test. Teachers then were given the names of certain students chosen at random and told that, based on the IQ test results, these youngsters could be expected to do better academically than their classmates. These children were designated as the control group. At the end of the study all students again were given the same test which had been used at the outset. Children in the control group showed statistically significant gains over their classmates. This led the researchers to the conclusion that teacher expectations can influence practice and subsequently influence achievement, particularly for the youngest children.

James Rhem, executive editor for the online National Teaching and Learning Forum, has stated that the Rosenthal and Jacobson study was not without its critics and actually “...caused quite a stir with its basic conclusion [that] when teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they do; when teachers do not have such expectations, performance and growth are not so encouraged and may in fact be discouraged in a variety of ways ... one's expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that confirm those expectations”.

Nonetheless, despite years of analysis and debate, this theory regarding the effects of teacher expectations, also known as the “Self-Fulfilling Prophecy”, is part of the educational canon. Educators have been observed subconsciously teaching their students differently based upon pre-conceived expectations of their ability to achieve. Often these preconceptions are not related to cognition but rather to the children’s ethnicity, socio-economic status, special needs, home language, family makeup, or various other non-academic factors. For children whom they deem to be motivated and capable of high cognitive learning, they energetically pour themselves into providing them with many skills and filling them with affirmations. For children in the same classroom whom they deem to be unmotivated or less capable than the others, these teachers brush over the concepts, fail to offer many words of encouragement, and do not give as much help in understanding the lessons. When the child’s level of achievement matches the teacher’s expectation, they wrongly attribute it to aptitude rather than correlating it with their teaching or interactive style.

A decade ago, the phrase "the soft bigotry of low expectations" became a familiar and even acceptable phrase in educational circles. It was part of a speech made by a prominent politician who referred to it as one of the challenges faced by disadvantaged and ethnic-minority students. Actually, raw ugly bigotry which manifests in name-calling, rock-throwing, or other overt acts of discrimination may result in scars and wounds that cause the recipient to flee in escape. Unfortunately, in the school setting young children have no way to escape an uncaring environment that repeatedly sends the unmistakable message that they are not worth the teacher’s time. This type of atmosphere erodes the self-esteem which may result in emotional wounds that never heal. James Rhem quotes Rosenthal as saying, “Superb teachers can teach the “unteachable”; we know that. So, what I think this research shows is that there’s a moral obligation for a teacher: if the

teacher [believes] that certain students can't learn, that teacher should get out of the classroom”.

Either covertly or overtly, bigotry is never “soft”. The child who endures multiple years “of low expectations” will sustain far-reaching ramifications that limit college, career, future income, and lifestyle choices. That type of bigotry cannot be glossed over by calling it “soft”. There is no such thing.



In the year 2013, the question is still: “Teacher, teacher, what do you see?” In the year 2013, the correct answer is still: “I see *children* looking at me.”

Atlanta attorney Hakim Hilliard quotes these words given to him by his father in referring to the fact that caring teachers evidently wear a “special set of glasses” – “Every child can learn if they are inspired to, but they can only be inspired by teachers who believe in them, who see ... a vision that can take your breath away, and give you moments of inspiration that will stay with you for a lifetime.”

The eyes of Eric Carle’s colorful animals saw many happy things. The eyes of the teacher must see the same – happiness, hope, belief, and promise. They must see the future of the children as bright and as colorful as the pictures in the storybook they are reading to them. The teacher’s eyes always see the best.

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