

High Expectations and Differentiation Equal Academic Success

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Henry Ford, the Founder of the Ford Motor Company, once said, “Whether you think you can or think you can’t- you are right.” This also applies to teacher expectations toward student success. Teacher beliefs tend to create a self-fulfilling prophecy: teachers will get the outcomes that they expect from their students.

Consciously or unconsciously, teachers often act differently toward students based on the assumptions they have about the individual learner’s capabilities. Jerry Bamberg, professor and director of the Center of Effective Schools at the University of Washington, notes that teachers tend to use more verifying non-verbal mannerisms like smiling, creating eye contact, and positive body language toward students who they believe are high-level achievers, and less verifying mannerisms toward students who they believe are low-level learners (Bamberg, 1994).

Studies show that the lack of high expectations tends to go hand-in-hand with low achieving classrooms (Cotton, 2001). In these classrooms, teachers generally view their students as limited in their ability to learn, and this view tends to create an atmosphere of failure. Adversely, research also shows that when teachers increase their expectations of student success, academic gains are made. (Good, 1987).

There are strategies that teachers can apply to their daily activities to ensure that all students are being held to high expectations, especially for those who are thought to be at risk of failure:

- Concentrate on offering encouragement and support to all students.
- Monitor student achievement closely, and make certain that interventions are in place for students who are at risk of falling behind.
- Provide useful feedback. When assessing student work, make sure that your feedback explains what they did right as well as wrong, and give suggestions as to how they can improve.
- Stay away from unreliable “hearsay” about students and their ability to learn.
- Group students heterogeneously, therefore profiting from students’ weaknesses and strengths.
- Communicate to students that they have the ability to meet the standards that you hold for your class. The more often you affirm their ability to learn, the more likely they will try to meet your goals.
- Allow a decent amount of wait-time for student answers. This will increase the quality of answers as well as increase class participation.
- Lastly and most importantly, differentiate instruction. Use the old analogy of getting into a house when teaching students: the easiest way into a house is through the front or back door, but you can also get into a house by using a window, crawlspace, or chimney. Be prepared to offer alternative teaching methods for children who don’t learn in a conservative manner.

Differentiated instruction has been a buzz word and research-based best practice in educational circles for a little under a decade, but is a concept most effective teachers have unintentionally done in their classrooms for centuries. Carol Ann Tomlinson, one of the main authorities on this topic, defines it as a way to “match instruction to student need with the goal of maximizing the potential of each learner in a given area”

(Tomlinson, 2003). Due to its popularity and effectiveness, many teachers are now incorporating differentiation into their instructional strategies intentionally, and a practice becomes much more powerful when it is deliberate. These educators reflect on how diverse students encounter information and deliver the curriculum in a way best suited to the individual learner. The educator takes into consideration how all types of learners process information to produce meaningful and engaging projects or assignments in a safe and positive environment where learning is fostered and cherished.

Tomlinson identifies four student traits that teachers must take into consideration to promote successful learning in the classroom:

- Readiness- “A student’s knowledge, understanding, and skill related to a particular sequence of learning”
- Interest- “Topics or pursuits that evoke curiosity and passions in a learner”
- Learning Profile- “How students learn best”
- Affect- “How students feel about their work, and the classroom as a whole” (Tomlinson, 2003)

Once these traits are taken into account, a teacher responds to the student’s needs and differentiates through curriculum and instructional strategies:

- Scaffolding must be in place and tailored to the students as they move through the strand and concept levels of content.
- Formative assessment is key to working smarter not harder. Ad hoc flexible groups are created as needs present themselves across a variety of curricular areas.
- A tiered approach may be called for as different levels of difficulty are developed for students at varying levels of understanding. All tiers must demand a specific standards-based outcome.
- Assignments should be focused, perceived as meaningful, and engage the student. The product must be challenging to provide the student with satisfaction of “a job well done.” Although students may be working on different products, the rigor is not dumbed-down, but rather adjusted to meet the individual student learning styles.
- Teachers should present curriculum using different approaches to meet diverse learning styles giving attention to gender, multiple intelligences, and culture.
- All assignments and tasks are respectful and considered important in a caring and supportive atmosphere of learning.

Exemplary teachers deploy a variety of differentiated instruction strategies in their classrooms daily while holding all students to high expectations, and their students are the beneficiaries. This leads to a place of learning where students feel nurtured and expectations are high. This leads to the type of classroom other educators want their children and relatives taught.

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