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## Schooling and the power of perception

Lewis Andrea Brownlee

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While in grad school, I was introduced to Ray Rist's work on the association between children's socioeconomic status and their educational performance. In one article, Rist (1970) described how a classroom teacher divided her pupils into three learning groups: The "quick learners," as the teacher called them, were seated in the front row, while two groups of "slow learners" were seated in the back. When



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Rist examined these groupings, he discovered that the group of "quick learners" was made up of middle-class pupils, while the "slower" groups were made up of lower-class children. Economic status was a stronger predictor of student grouping than any assessment. Rist deduced from his statistics that by the eighth day of kindergarten, each child was assigned a label that set them on a path that might have long-term consequences, entirely due to the unconscious biases of the teacher. In this case, the bias was based on class, but biases having to do with race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or even language could just as easily influence the path students are placed on, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: Low expectations lead to fewer learning opportunities, which lead to poor outcomes. So, here is the million-dollar question: *How many teachers allow their biases to determine students' scholastic achievement?*

I think about this a lot when it comes to my upbringing. When I share my story, most people cannot believe that I was able to work as a civil/mechanical engineer for seven years and later as an educator. During my time as a K-12 student, those careers were not presented as options for me. As a young child, I was hyperactive and had a difficult time adhering to classroom rules that encouraged conformity to Eurocentric standards of sitting still and learning quietly, versus my cultural norms of learning through movement (Kunjufu, 2010). Educators focused more on my behavior than on my academic abilities. And when they did look at my academic work, they focused on *how* I did it, not whether I did it well. For example, when I was given a multiplication problem like  $37 \times 16$ , I would double the 37 and half the 16 and turn it into  $74 \times 8$ , then into  $148 \times 4$ , and then  $296 \times 2$ . This was much easier to multiply, and it led to the correct answer: 592. Teachers did not like it when I did that sort of thing, however. I learned early on that autodidacts are not welcome in school. Fortunately, I believed in myself.

## Making meaning in trauma

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According to the Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1946), “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death.” When a drug epidemic engulfed my community in the late 1980s, I was traumatized, watching my mother, my uncles, my brothers, and my friends’ mothers struggle with this new, merciless, and unforgiving thing called “crack.” My teachers did nothing to help me understand my suffering, but eventually, I found my way to make sense of things. As Tupac Shakur (1995) put it in his undying song, “Dear Momma,” “I hung around with the thugs, And even though they sold drugs, They showed a young brother love.” Plus, as I spent time with my homies, hanging out, and watching movies like *Menace II Society*, I taught myself a lot about mathematical conversions. For example, marijuana was measured in pounds, and cocaine was measured in kilos. It didn’t take me long to figure out the relationship between these two different systems of measurement. Mr. Hodgson, my science teacher, was shocked by how quickly I could convert grams into ounces into pounds. Living in a crack house had some educational benefits.

## Cultural lessons

Not by choice, the drug culture was my culture and its particular sociocultural beliefs and practices — such as “no snitching,” hyper-masculinity, hustling, never writing anything down, and doing numbers in your head — helped shape me. Growing up around adult addicts and teenage drug dealers played a central role in my approach to life.

Little did I know that this trial by fire would equip me decades later with the necessary compassion and empathy toward others needed to be an educator. I understand high school bullying because I was bullied verbally. I understand hunger because most days in high school I only ate once a day. I needed to go to the dentist; I needed a haircut; I needed a coat, shoes, and a jacket. Being able to see my mom, other moms, dads, and close friends struggle with addiction and being near the dealers allowed me to see that both sides were being oppressed and the schools and teachers were silent on the matter. So, I did not objectify them because I understood the struggle.

The books I was reading in school, such as *Lord of the Flies* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, simply did not help explain my reality. They addressed struggle but not *my* struggle. I could relate, somewhat, to Tom Robinson from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye*. But I was well aware that my school wasn’t teaching me much that helped make sense of my world, beyond occasional lessons about slavery and the civil rights movement.

It turns out that there was a lot I should have learned. Little did I know that the sentencing policies of the “War on Drugs” era caused an exponential growth in incarceration. In the 1980s, the number of people in jail increased by 500%, which can be attributed mostly to changes in sentencing guidelines, not an increase in criminal activity (Alexander, 2010). For the most part, my teachers were not prepared to discuss such issues. Fast forward 15 years or so, while earning my teacher certification, my classmates and I had no opportunities to learn about poverty and dysconscious racism (i.e., the racism that accepts white standards as the norm; Brownlee, 2020; King, 1991). Nor were we encouraged to confront the xenophobia and ethnocentrism embedded in the curriculum, largely because of the teaching profession’s cultural homogeneity of white middle-class customs and mores.

You can say that, yes, I made it. I have a doctorate. But I am lucky. Poverty, imprisonment, and racism are tangled together in the United States. Ample research evidence shows that poverty is both a cause and a result of incarceration. We often do not think of teachers perpetuating this cycle — but that is what they do when, as Rist described in 1970, they allow their biases, even if unconscious, to shape their expectations and drive their instruction.

## Self-fulfilling prophecy vs. Pygmalion effect

Teachers can be emancipators or captors — what power to have unchecked!

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Educators and activists who are reading this, please hear me. We have tremendous power to influence and impact young minds, adults who are seeking career development, and first-generation students seeking to uplift their families and communities out of poverty. I suggest, as educators, we turn the negative self-fulfilling prophecy on its head in favor of the Pygmalion effect, a term that refers to the phenomenon in which the greater the expectations placed upon children, students, or employees, the more they achieve.

So, in limited words, teachers can be emancipators or captors — what power to have unchecked! How we view students could have either a highly uplifting or deeply damaging effect on a child's success in the classroom and beyond. School districts develop their own cultures, and we need to make sure that these cultures focus on understanding and encouraging students. Positive expectations influence students' performance positively, and negative expectations influence students' performance negatively. How we see students will have an impact on their success. So it starts with us.

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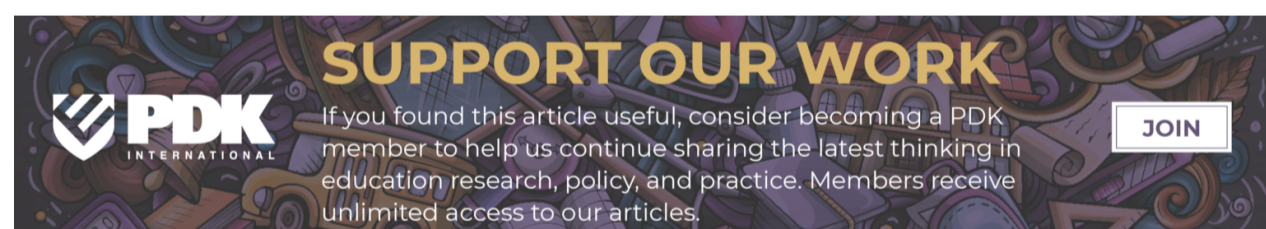
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