

High Expectations Teaching:

How We Persuade Students to Believe and Act on “Smart is Something You Can Get” By Jon Saphier (Corwin Press, 2017)

Extracts from Summary by The Main Idea

We often say that we believe *all* children can learn, but we don't really believe that. The view that intelligence is fixed is more ingrained in the United States than in any other country in the world. The problem with this strong belief is that beliefs shape all of our actions as teachers. In fact, most of our successful teaching behaviours stem from our beliefs. Therefore, the degree to which we can influence what teachers believe can significantly impact their practice.

Where do these fixed beliefs come from? They have not always existed throughout the history of the United States. The concept of intelligence emerged at the turn of the last century and was the result of several different historical forces. Without going into great detail, with the emergence of an industrial economy and an influx of immigrants, there was a need for a stratified workforce that could accomplish very different types of work from sweeping the factory floors to overseeing the entire corporation. Varying views of intelligence were introduced, some of which were quite harmful (like the eugenics movement that posited that only superior people should breed and resulted in the forced sterilization of thousands of people).

IQ tests and later SAT tests were invented and this impacted K-12 education by contributing to the sorting and segregation of students based on test results. Few people challenged either this testing or tracking even though experts, such as Alfred Binet, the developer of one of the early intelligence tests, said that the scores “do not define anything innate or permanent.” And yet these tests have led to a major misuse of science that has impacted education for over a century. During a deeply divided time when white Americans experienced a great deal of anxiety and fear about foreign-born families coming to the US, intelligence tests provided a less-than-scientific rationale for sorting students and claiming certain groups were superior than others.

Despite the fact that these beliefs remained pervasive for the following century, and had significant ramifications for schools, there has been an abundance of data that now debunks these beliefs. It is not easy to challenge these beliefs because teachers see every day that some students learn quickly and others need more time. But the data has shown that this is primarily the result of environmental factors not innate ones. There are several examples of this research. For example, one researcher found that IQ does affect academic performance, but it is only responsible for about 25% of it. This means that most of what affects a student's performance in school is tied to *other* factors. Another research project showed that the IQ scores of Americans have grown 9 points every generation since 1932. If intelligence were fixed, this number would have remained constant. Still another important study showed that intelligence is absolutely malleable and is more likely to be affected by environmental factors such as the quality of schooling. For example, a child could lose as many as six IQ points for every year she does not receive a high-quality education. A final study that has important implications for schooling showed that lower-IQ children born to higher-IQ parents saw their IQs increase and get closer and closer to the level of their parents each year they lived.

Overall, the evidence strongly shows that our intelligence is not fixed and in fact, the quality of environmental factors, such as schooling, can have a significant impact on our abilities. Therefore, it is imperative that we accept the idea that differences in student achievement levels come from effort.

This is not to say that there aren't differences in children. As was mentioned earlier, we see these differences every day in our classrooms. But the question is what we *attribute* those differences to – innate ability or effort and environment. Interestingly, children themselves usually begin by believing that success comes from effort, and then slowly begin to attribute academic achievement to innate ability. When this happens, they often give up when they struggle because it is better to be seen as lazy than stupid. The beliefs teachers hold and the actions they take can help students develop an *incrementalist* view – the idea that skills are built incrementally through effort and feedback from the environment. Teachers play a vital role in shaping students' mindsets about their abilities through their daily interactions.

Main Idea: Responding Orally to Students

In our everyday interactions with students there are multiple opportunities to: convince students that “smart is something they can get, show them how, and get them to want to.

There are specific actions when teachers interact with students orally such as when responding to a student answering a question in class. Below are four arenas--or regularly occurring classroom events--in which teachers can more purposefully teach to high expectations.

⇒ELIMINATE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS WHEN CALLING ON STUDENTS

It's disconcerting, but studies have shown that teachers convey their perceptions of student ability through inadvertent and subtle ways. For example, they might smile more at students they believe to be “bright” and place fewer demands on students they perceive to be “slow.” These subconscious perceptions may affect a teacher's body language, demands placed on students, persistence in sticking with a student response, frequency of interaction, and the type of feedback given. This differentiated approach reinforces students' own beliefs about themselves which in turn influences how students actually perform. The questions below can help teachers examine their own practice and guide their future interactions in order to eliminate this inadvertent differentiation:

Body language: It has been found that when teachers interact with students they believe to be “bright” they nod more, look them in the eye, and lean toward them more frequently.

- Do I smile and nod more toward “highs”?
- Do I lean more toward “brights”?
- Do I look “brights” more in the eyes?

Demands: It has been found that teachers give students labeled as “slow” fewer opportunities to learn new material.

- Do I give “slows” fewer opportunities to learn new material?

Persistence: Teachers have been found to give more opportunities after answering a question incorrectly to those they consider “bright.” Teachers also give “brights” more time to respond and pay closer attention to their responses.

- Do I stay with “highs” longer after they give an incorrect response? Do I give them more time initially to respond?
- Do I pay closer attention to the responses of the “gifted”?

Frequency of interaction: Teachers have been found to spend more time interacting with students they perceive as high ability.

- Do I have more frequent academic contact with “highs”?

Feedback: Teachers are found to more often praise high-expectation students and criticize low-expectation students.

- Do I give the “highs” more praise and the “lows” more criticism?

⇒STICK WITH STUDENTS WHEN THEY ANSWER INCORRECTLY

Hundreds of times a day, teachers ask a question, a student answers, and then the teacher must respond in some way. The variety of ways teachers choose to respond has a significant impact on students' beliefs about their abilities. For example, if a student answers incorrectly, but the teacher sticks with the student, the teacher sends the message that she has confidence that with help or time, the student can think it through and arrive at a correct answer. In contrast, immediately calling on another student conveys that the teacher does not believe the student has the capability of getting to the correct answer. Below are several ways to stick with students when they answer incorrectly:

- “No, but it’s good you brought it up because others probably thought that, too. Try again.”
- Give the student wait time for a correct response.
- Follow up with a statement of confidence or encouragement, “I think you know.”
- Ask the student to elaborate. “Can you say a little more, you need to be more specific.”
- Validate what is right or good about a response, then cue and stick with the student
- Supply the question for which their incorrect answer is now right, provide a cue, and hold the student accountable
- Call for a self-evaluation of an answer
- Ask a follow-up question to clarify, “Are you saying that...?”

While it may seem to take a lot more time to stick with a student, consider the cost of not sticking with a student who answers incorrectly -- that student may shut down in a way that prevents academic achievement.

⇒CHANGE ATTITUDES TOWARD ERROR

To help build a growth mindset, teachers need to help their students change their attitudes about error. Rather than reinforcing the idea that errors are to be avoided, they must convey that errors are not only expected in the learning process, but can actually present an opportunity for learning.

One teacher begins every class with a Do Now in a segment she calls, “My Favourite No,” meaning, her favourite mistake. She collects student responses on index cards, quickly sorts them, and from the erroneous answers chooses the best mistake to put under the document camera and share with the class. <https://learn.teachingchannel.com/video/class-warm-up-routine>

Simply adding the word yet can help convey this sentiment, “Oh, well, you haven’t got it yet, but you will.” One teacher hands out a “Great Mistake” (deliberate error) award to a student each week to reinforce this idea. Another way to help students believe in themselves even when they make an error is called Persevere and Return. This is when a student gets an answer partially or completely incorrect, the teacher relies on other students to help fill in the missing pieces, and then returns to that original student to provide a complete answer.

⇒GIVE MORE THAN “PURE” FEEDBACK

“Pure” feedback includes no judgment; it simply shows students what they have and have not yet accomplished. However, giving feedback provides teachers with a perfect opportunity to provide effort-based messages in way that deeply impacts performance. In fact, research shows that giving effective feedback is one of the most important skills for teachers to master given how much it can improve student achievement. For this reason, teachers should give more than pure feedback by including encouragement and suggestions for improvement. By carefully crafting the choice of words in their feedback, teachers can help students reap even more benefits from it. Take a look at the messages each piece of feedback sends to the student:

“You listed your findings in the lab report but never addressed the next two questions about the conclusions. This isn’t up to your best work.” (*Implied message: You are capable of good work*)

“So, these are the parts you have to improve to have a first-class essay.” (*Implied message: You can, indeed, make this first class.*)

Students are so used to feedback being judgmental, that teachers need to raise their awareness of their choice of words, body language, and tone of voice to send a more positive message. This doesn’t mean teachers should praise low-quality work (this actually has a detrimental effect, particularly on students of color and students in poverty) nor does it mean that teachers should praise ability, “Oh, you’re so smart!” but it does mean that teachers should provide objective information and do so with warmth, enthusiasm, and encouragement: “So, if you do that missing step in the science experiment, I know you’re going to have your eyes opened to this amazing process, and you’ll write a great lab report!”