

Pygmalion effect: fostering performance among adolescents

Nidhi Chadha and Bani Narula

*Department of Psychology, Post Graduate Government College, Sector-11, Chandigarh, India
Department of Psychology, D.A.V College, Sector-10, Chandigarh, India*

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of self-fulfilling prophecy in context of education (teaching and learning). The prophecy in form of Pygmalion effect has the ability to boost performance through communication of high expectations. Though the concept is decades old, yet holds utmost relevance in prevailing ethos and so it becomes **vital to harness** the Pygmalion effect and the efforts can be done by educators by being motivating and acting as a role model for students, praising the efforts done by students, reinforcing their talent, hard-work and by taking pride in students achievements. Thus, incorporating the principle of Pygmalion effect perhaps can bring out more potential of the students, without which their psycho-social development is curtailed.

Keywords: Pygmalion effect, performance, potential

No concept is introduced pertinently until talked about its origin and history. Therefore, the present paper examines an in-depth analysis that gives us an insight of practical approach to the concept. The term 'self-fulfilling prophecy' was born in sociology and is used in reference to a prediction which owing to positive feedback between belief and behaviour, causes itself to come true.

The distant past provides for the roots of many of today's notions on such prophecies. From ancient Greeks to modern thinkers, all have queried the nature of self-fulfilling prophecy. The conception is rooted in Thomas' theorem (1928) i.e. "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". People react more strongly to the way they perceive the circumstances they are in, and to the meaning they assign to these perceptions, rather than to the situations themselves. Merton (1948) introduced the expression of self-fulfilling prophecy and defined its structure and consequences in his theory called "Social Theory and Social Structure". According to him, expecting an event to occur will increase its likelihood of occurrence. Interestingly, even Hindi cinema propagated the notion of self fulfilling prophecy recently in the movie 'Om Shanti Om' with

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Address for correspondence

Department of Psychology, Post Graduate Government College, Sector-11, Chandigarh, India

E-mail: baninarula@yahoo.com

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its famous dialogue *"Itni shidaat se maine tumhe pane ki koshish ki hai, ki hr zarre ne mujhe tumse milane ki saazish ki hai. Kehnte hain ki.... Agar kisi cheez ko dil se chaaho ton puri kayanat usey tumse milane ki koshish mein lag jaati hai"* i.e. emphasizing believing something to be true actually becomes true one day.

Also it is necessary to touch upon the distinction between the two effects namely *Pygmalion effect* and *Golem effect* which represent theoretical counterparts with similar underlying principles. Pygmalion effect explores the positive influence of expectations on performance, whereas, the Golem effect illustrates just the opposite i.e. how negative expectations can lead to poor results. Thus, self-fulfilling prophecies represent *"a double-edged sword that can either boost or depress performance, depending on the expectations fueling it"* (Eden, 1992).

Pygmalion effect has been well established in various set-ups like schools, work organizations, armies, courtrooms, summer camps, and nursing homes, as well as in the practice of clinical psychologists and consultants (Eden, 2015). Similarly, research on 'affective priming,' suggests that expectation has a tremendous impact on client functioning. When people are informed that they or their group generally do poorly on a task, their performance declines. In contrast, groups or individuals who are told that they perform well tend to do better than those who expect themselves to do poorly (Cooperrider *et al.* 2003).

The effect is an interpersonal motivational phenomenon that begins with high teacher expectations. A teacher conveying to his/her students whether verbally or nonverbally (gestures, nodding of head, giving a smile etc) reflects high expectations from students, which helps in realizing their potential and self-efficacy (Bamburg, 1994; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Thus results in boosting their motivation, hard work and culminating in an enhanced effort which in turn reinforces teacher's high expectations. Therefore, implying that this interpersonal exchange leads to an upward spiral of high expectations which promotes higher performance. In this way, self-fulfilling prophecy can become self-sustaining prophecy. It is worth mentioning here that such prophecy can be summarized in the following four key principles and which also creates a circle of self-fulfilling prophecies.

- ❑ We form certain expectations of people or events
- ❑ We communicate those expectations with various cues
- ❑ People tend to respond to these cues by adjusting their behaviour to match them
- ❑ The result is that the original expectation becomes true

To put in plain words people do better when more is expected of them, this is called the Pygmalion Effect.

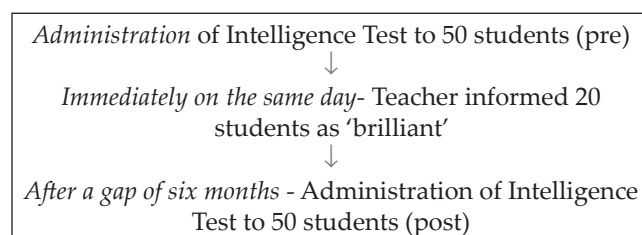
Case-study

The present case-study is based on Rosenthal & Jacobson, (1968) classic experiment conducted in an elementary school at San Francisco. A total of fifty students from a senior secondary school of Chandigarh were targeted for the study and were administered General Mental Ability Test of Intelligence by (Jalota, 1976). The inclusion criterion for the sample of the study was as follows:

- ❑ Age would range from 16-18 years
- ❑ Students from intact families and urban middle class were included
- ❑ Students from eleventh class (commerce stream) comprised the present study

Another important fact kept in mind was that the teacher was unknown to her students i.e. she had no clue about them. The teacher was informed by the researchers that twenty students scored very high on Intelligence test and that they would do extremely well academically and in life as well. Further, six months later, those fifty students were again administered General Mental Ability Test of Intelligence (Jalota, 1976).

Flowchart displaying the design used for the present case-study:



Results and Discussion of results of the case-study

The findings of the case-study were quite interesting i.e. students who were initially reported as 'brilliant' showed larger gains on Intelligence test in comparison to their other classmates. The results raise an imperative fact that – it was the teacher's beliefs about the students which operated in a self-fulfilling manner. The students which the teacher believed 'brilliant' actually did prove it subsequently.

Researchers in the following sections attempts to contemplate on the underlying mechanisms that lead elevated expectations to promote greater achievement among students.

The first and foremost evidence comes from the fact that it's all in the *mind of the teacher* which makes an enormous difference. Higher expectations lead teachers to *act differently* in regard to their students in the following ways:

Secondly, these teachers created a warm social and emotional climate for their students whom they regarded as high-potential, often conveying this warmth through non-verbal signals i.e. *a nod, an encouraging smile, a pat on the shoulder.*

Thirdly, they teach *more study material, more difficult and innovative material* to that chunk of students whom they see as promising.

Fourthly, they gave these students more *challenging tasks* and opportunities to contribute in terms of usage of audio-visual aids and extra time to respond to questions.

Fifthly, teachers even offered those students feedback on their performance vis a viz their class notes, tests and assignments *quite in detail* covering almost all aspects and not just simply remarking a 'good job' done.

Further, researchers endeavours to explain the psychological perspectives of Pygmalion effect from emerging trends and newly christened discipline of Positive Psychology. Presented below are some theoretical conceptualizations that support the results of the present study:

Pygmalion effect is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy that had the potential that boosted student's *self-efficacy of the positive expectations* shown by their teacher. Positive expectations improve performance in a wide range of relationships i.e. teacher and students, therapist and clients, leader and team members and manager and

employees. A meta-analysis by Avolio *et al.* (2005) found that leadership training focusing on the Pygmalion effect was the most effective leadership intervention.

Deci and Ryan (2000), *Self-determination theory* postulated the existence of three inherent universal needs, or basic psychological nutrients i.e.

- ❑ Autonomy: the need to choose what one is doing, being an agent of one's own life
- ❑ Competence: the need to feel confident in doing what one is doing
- ❑ Relatedness: the need to have human connections that are close and secure, while still respecting autonomy and facilitating competence

SDT asserts that satisfaction of these needs enhances motivation and well-being, and that deficiencies of these needs undermine effective functioning and well-being. These needs inspire progression from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, thus enabling individuals to feel more self-determined. Self-determination, in turn, is associated with higher self-esteem, work enjoyment, and other positive outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Cognitive Hope Theory is particularly important for performance (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2002). According to this theory, hope is comprised of two aspects i.e. 'waypower' and 'willpower.' The 'waypower' is a process that involves identifying goals, and finding ways to achieve goals despite obstacles. 'Willpower' involves a general belief in one's own ability to achieve goals (i.e., 'agency beliefs;' Snyder, *et al.* 1991). Hope inhibits handicapping and self-deprecatory thoughts, as well as negative emotions. Hope also promotes academic achievement, and is one of the strongest predictors of overcoming adversity (Snyder *et al.* 2002).

Fortunately, an emerging theory called Growth Mindset by Dweck (2006) put forth an important fact that growth mindset students don't mind failure much because they realize their performance can be improved in comparison to those who believe their success is based on innate ability and so are said to have a fixed mindset. According to Dweck (2006), students having growth mindset are aware of where does achievement comes from.

Findings raise an important fact that Pygmalion effect can be elucidated in terms of students schemas (mental framework) formed i.e. to do better or perform better when more is expected from them as one of the basic component of *social cognition is schema*. Once formed, schemas exert powerful effect on what we notice (attention), enter into memory (encoding) and later remember (retrieval). Schemas can also exert *self-confirming effects*, causing us to behave in ways that confirm the schemas (Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2007).

Another most intriguing aspect of the study is that the concept of Pygmalion effect was) goes parallel with The PERMA Model (Seligman, 2012). The model is a theory of well-being that forms the foundation upon which a happy and flourishing life is build. "PERMA" stands for Positive Emotions (P), research has identified certain skills and exercises that can boost our experience of positive emotions. We can learn to feel them more strongly, and to experience them for longer. Engagement (E), i.e. it involves identifying and cultivating personal strengths, virtues and talents. Positive Relationships (R), i.e. key to all relationships is balance. It is not enough to surround ourselves with 'friends' - we must also listen and share, make an effort to maintain our connections, and work to make those connections strong. Meaning (M), i.e. people who belong to a community and pursue shared meaningful goals are happier than people who don't. Lastly, Achievement/Accomplishment (A) i.e. creating and working toward goals helps us anticipate and build hope for the future. Past successes make us feel more confident and optimistic about future attempts. *Students became aware of their own expectations and valued the significance of positive expectations. These expectations facilitated by focusing on their strengths and using an optimism mindset.*

Final Remarks

Towards the end, findings of the case-study can be considered vital in applications in school settings especially as the rationale of the effect can be incorporated as part of *teacher training programs and life skills development* as it is seen that teacher's expectations powerfully affect student performance. Teachers who genuinely believe that their students have great potential

are more likely to have students who perform well on objective measures of academic success (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Therefore, is crucial that teachers and mentors identify and harnesses this 'Positive Pygmalion' effect to genuinely believe in the potential of their students.

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