

## Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

# The Pygmalion and Golem effects: how an educator's expectations are critical to building inclusive school communities

This tool has been developed as part of the Inclusive School Communities project. The project is facilitated by JFA Purple Orange.

### Introduction: why this tool

This tool is designed to assist educators to reflect on the expectations they carry about each student in their diverse classroom.

While there is a range of ways that a student's learning can be supported, a key determinant is the expectation the educator carries about that student's chances of success.

### Ideas and taking action

#### *The idea*

The idea we are exploring here is the phenomenon where the expectations of others in our lives can influence how we subsequently behave.

There is significant research to suggest that if other people have higher expectations of us, we rise to this in our performance and we do better as a result.

This has been referred to as the *Pygmalion* effect.

The Pygmalion effect has significant implications in education. If an educator has positive expectations about student's capacity, then the Pygmalion effect means the student will respond by rising to that expectation.

Indeed, the Pygmalion effect idea was initially tested in an educational context. The Rosenthal-Jacobson study reported that if teachers were led to expect a stronger performance from children, those children produced a relatively stronger performance as a result. While subsequent commentators have questioned the steadfastness of Rosenthal and Jacobson's original research design, many supporting studies have followed, and studies in other areas such as workplaces report a similar phenomenon. This includes a study by Beuijen et al in 2009 that reported how workers' performance responded favourably to their leader's expectations.

For a school community seeking to deepen its inclusive practices, the Pygmalion effect is important to know; if one of the ingredients for a student's success is simply the educator's positive expectation of that student's capacity, then that school would want to make sure that every educator in that setting holds positive expectations of every student in their class.

This does not mean that every educator needs to see every student as the next Albert Einstein, and that as a result somehow every student suddenly develops an IQ greater than 150. Instead, it simply means that the educator has a firm belief in the student's potential, and that the challenge is to find ways to release that. For the educator of the student with diverse learning needs, this shifts the question from 'if' to 'how'.

There is an added reason for schools to check in on their educators' expectations of their students; this added reason is that the opposite of the Pygmalion effect is also be a measurable phenomenon. This is where the educator has lower expectations of a student, and as a result that student's performance drops. This is called the *Golem* effect. This might also be called a self-fulfilling prophecy, that goes like this. An educator has a lower expectation of a student, which is then reflected in the teacher's behaviour. The student's performance/behaviour adjusts in response to the educator's lower expectations. The educator sees this lower performance (or increased problematic behaviour) and concludes it proves they were right to have lower expectations.

The message from this is that if we want students of diverse abilities to be successful within an inclusive school community, those students need to feel that they belong in this place of learning, as learners capable of success just like the other students. Key to this is that the school's leaders and educators believe this too. This can be taken further; if an educator does not see a student's capacity to learn and grow, arguably that educator should get out of the business. For any student to have the best chance of learning and growing, it is important their educators *believe* in them.

One of George W Bush's speechwriters came up with the phrase, 'the soft bigotry of low expectations', to describe how low expectations were setting the US's most disadvantaged kids apart in education and leaving them behind. This phrase has been taken up in a number of arenas since, including the Australian disability community, where former SA Parliamentarian Kelly Vincent referred to the phrase to help explain the absence of people living with disability in workplaces.

It is important to know about these effects, and what they say about how our behaviour is influenced by the expectations of others. Arguably, the Golem effect could at least in part explain the struggle of many people living with disability. Societies like ours typically have carried low expectations of what people living with disability are able to accomplish. This can then translate to people living with disability accomplishing less in their lives, through a

self-narrative that says something, "if people don't expect me to accomplish much, then it must mean that I don't have the capacity, so there may not be much point in me trying". This type of self-fulfilling prophecy can be catastrophic.

### *The Action*

What does this mean for the educator in a school striving to be inclusive?

It means every educator can take a moment regularly to check in on their own expectations of the students in their class, and to consider how these expectations are reflected in the educator's own behaviour.

It also means every educator can seek out peer colleagues to talk about the expectations they have for particular students. If an educator is struggling to see a student's prospects for success, it is important they talk this through with trusted peers, to mutually explore ways the educator can reset their expectations of that student. This is essential if that student is to have the best chance of making progress as a valued member of that school community.

Questions to ask:

- 'Are there students in my class for whom I have a lower expectation of their chances of success growing into a productive valued adult alongside their peers?'
- 'How is this lower expectation affecting the way I'm teaching the students?'
- 'Is there a peer colleague or a senior colleague I can talk to about this to help me believe in these students' capacity?'
- 'How might I change my approach to teaching to reflect this higher expectation, so that I come unlock each student's capacity and self-belief?'

For students who have a history of lower expectations placed on them, or who have had a history of trauma or other life events that have hindered their capacity for a positive self-image, this process may take time. When an educator resets their expectations and introduces practices designed to connect to a diversity of students in the classroom, then educator must not assume quick success. It can take time for some students to unlearn the previous patterns of lower expectation, or to move past the wounding aspects of trauma, or to simply discover a new belief in themselves.

So the educator needs to be persistent, and persistence feeds on belief.

## Where to get further information

To read more about the Pygmalion and Golem effects, good starting points include (chronologically listed):

- Rosenthal, R.; Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Babad, E. Y. (1977). "Pygmalion in reverse". *Journal of Special Education*. 11 (1): 81–90
- Babad, E. Y.; Inbar, J.; Rosenthal, R. (1982). "Pygmalion, Galatea, and the Golem: Investigations of biased and unbiased teachers". *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 74 (4): 459–474
- Bezuijen, X., van den Berg, P., van Dam, K., & Thierry, H. (2009). "Pygmalion and employee learning: The role of leader behaviors". *Journal of Management*, 35(5), 1248–1267

Typing Pygmalion effect and Golem effect into your search engine will bring you plenty of options to climb in to these ideas further.