



Expectations can shape performance: A lesson for teachers on stereotype threat.

In 2009 President Obama hosted Rebecca Mieliwocki, a seventh grade teacher from California and the teacher of the year at the White House. In an audio clip I heard of the speech Ms. Mieliwocki challenged other teachers to have the highest expectations for their students. She added that teachers should have even higher expectations for themselves. The expectations of others can be a huge factor influencing behavior. Expectations can shape performance. They can motivate us, they can inspire us and they can give us confidence. Low or negative expectations can lead to low achievement and limit success.

Clase Steele in his ground breaking work on stereotype threat (described in his book *Whistling Vivaldi*) has shown negative perceptions or expectations can impact performance. *"Stereotype threat refers to being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group."* Any non-dominant culture group could experience stereotype threat. So when it comes to educational performance Rebecca Mieliwocki was right on both counts. Students need positive expectations and teachers should raise their self-expectations be conscious of how their interactions with students could trigger poor performance. Students, especially students from non-dominant cultures often perform poorly when they perceive themselves to be seen in a negative light by teachers.

The reverse is also true. Student performance can be improved by developing what Steele and his colleagues call a growth mindset. The intellect, once thought to be static, can actually be reshaped to improve performance. The growth mindset offsets stereotype threat by reminding students of their positive potential. For example; reminding girls with low math and science grades at a failing school, "women ARE scientists and engineers" helped spark improvements in their math and science scores. The growth mindset offsets the stereotype that girls don't do well in math and science. Those kinds of positive expectations can motivate performance improvements. When I was growing up there was an expectation from my parents and family members that I would work hard at school and reach for the highest goals. Those expectations were my main motivation for working hard in school work.

Expecting great positive things from students and helping them to see their potential for growth can help offset some things that seem to perpetuate the "achievement gap."