

3.3 Holding High Expectations For All Students

In *Visible Learning: The Sequel*, John Hattie begins his summary about the effect of teachers with, “The most critical teacher influences relate to their having high expectations for all students.” (Hattie, 2023, p.240)

This is not some throwaway line in the middle of a 500-page book. It is Hattie’s considered opinion based on his synthesis of 47 meta-analyses covering 2,238 studies, all of which examine how teachers can best affect student learning. That in itself should be enough to emphasise the huge significance of teacher expectations. When, however, you drill down to the differences in effect size between teachers with low expectations and high expectations, it becomes even more astonishing.

The effect sizes range from $d = -0.03$ to 0.20 for those with low expectations and $d = 0.50$ to 1.44 for those with high expectations. That is the difference between ‘slight negative to low impact’ on the one hand to ‘between high and very high impact’ on the other. To use the colloquialism: wow. Just wow!

Whatever you do, please, please, please hold high expectations for your students. Everything else will follow after that.

Expectations refer to the “inferences that teachers make about the present and future academic achievement and general classroom behaviour of their students” (Good and Brophy, 1997. p. 79).

Put simply, the measure is to do with holding expectations that are significantly above or below students’ demonstrated level. For example, if I view the ‘D grade’ a student has secured in their last exam as a challenge to do everything in my power to lift their performance over the course of the next set of lessons so that they achieve a significantly better grade in the next exam (because I believe they are capable of it), then that would be a strong indicator of holding high expectations. Whereas if I view that same grade as a predictor of what to expect from that student in subsequent lessons or exams, then that would indicate average expectations. If, however, the ‘D’ grade surprises me because it was higher than I had anticipated bearing in mind the student’s background, condition, label or behaviour then that would be low expectations.

“The evidence ... (suggests) that teachers generally predicted students’ ability and performance based on students’ previous academic achievement. However, in addition to prior performance, several studies showed that expectations could also be affected by other factors such as information about students’ socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, and other personal characteristics of students.” (Wang et al., 2018, p.4)

The expectations we hold for our students’ progress is significant in many ways. Not only does it determine how we interact with our students, how much we expect from them, and how much we challenge them, but it also plays a significant role in how students view their own capabilities and possibilities. Students tend to be very accurate in observing and interpreting our behaviours. For example, by comparing the changes in the self-perceptions of students who were in classes with high, average and low expectation teachers across a year, Rubie-Davies (2006) found students’ self-perceptions changed over the year in line with their teachers’ expectations. Woolley et al. (2010) found that teachers’ high expectations led to significant and positive correlations with students’ confidence and interest in their studies; whereas low expectations were significantly and negatively associated with students’ anxiety about their studies, particularly in maths.

Figure 22: High Expectations Versus Low Expectations

LOW EXPECTATIONS $d = -0.03$ to 0.20	HIGH EXPECTATIONS $d = 0.50$ to 1.44
✘ View low performance as understandable and expect this low performance to continue.	✓ Expect improvements for all students. View current ability as the launchpad not the predictor.
✘ Hold a fixed view of ability and intelligence (see Section 5.4 for more).	✓ Hold an incremental view of ability and intelligence (see Section 5.4 for more).
✘ Inappropriate levels of challenge for high-ability and low-ability students.	✓ Challenge is closely matched so that all students go beyond their current ability.
✘ Expect progress for some students, not all.	✓ Expect all students to make good progress.
✘ When grouping students, they do so by ability; students rarely change groups. 'Once a middle band, always a middle band.'	✓ Group students according to interests and current learning (see Section 5.6) These groups are fluid, changing often.
✘ Distinctly different tasks set for high, middle, low groups. Lots of repetition and lower-level tasks for lower-ability students.	✓ All students engage in similar activities. Differentiation allows different paths and timing for the successful completion of similar success criteria.
✘ More time spent with lower-ability students. Higher-ability students are expected to work independently.	✓ Similar amount of time spent with all students, encouraging, challenging, questioning and guiding.
✘ More time spent on 'crowd control' (patrolling the classroom, giving praise for compliance, giving warnings to those not on task, reminding students about procedures and routines).	✓ More time spent on feedback, helping students a) accurately identify how much progress they've made so far and b) deciding what to do next to make even more progress.
✘ Ask mostly closed questions (see Section 2.1.2 for more).	✓ Ask mostly open, higher-order questions (see Section 2.1.2 for more).
✘ Very few conversations with students to assess and monitor their learning.	✓ More time on assessment for learning conversations (see Section 4.6 for more).
✘ Reference to prior knowledge based on year group and school calendar. 'This class is in the second semester of grade nine, therefore they will know ...'	✓ Strategies such as preview (see Section 6.1) are used to identify what students know so that activities connect to, and build from, these points.
✘ Lessons follow earlier planning. Very few adjustments are made.	✓ Lessons are adjusted in response to student need and questions.

Based on the research evidence shown in [Figure 22](#), it is clear that we must view ourselves as agents of change. We should not think of ourselves simply as facilitators of student activity or mediators of behaviour. We have to expect every single student to make excellent progress from wherever they are starting.

This does not mean that every student will achieve a top grade; with the norm-referencing underpinning most grading systems, that would be impossible. However, it does mean that learning

TEACH Brilliantly (publication date, Dec 2023 – not for distribution)

should be accelerated for every single student. The trajectory of progress for everyone should be steep.

To achieve this, challenge must be just right. Identify where your students are right now, connect to their prior knowledge and interests, and set challenges that will take them just out of their comfort zone into their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978); or, as I call it, through the Learning Pit (see [Section 3.7](#)).

Some other helpful terms are 'desirable difficulties' and 'appropriately challenging' goals.