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SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A Practical Guide to Its Use in Education

Robert T. Tauber

 **Greenwood**
PUBLISHING GROUP

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*A Practical Guide
to Its Use in Education*

ROBERT T. TAUBER

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tauber, Robert T.

Self-fulfilling prophecy : a practical guide to its use in
education / Robert T. Tauber.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-95502-8 (alk. paper).—ISBN 0-275-95503-6 (pbk. :
alk. paper)

1. Teacher-student relationships—United States. 2. Self-
fulfilling prophecy. 3. Teachers—Psychology. 4. Multicultural
education—United States. I. Title.

LB1033.T19 1997

371.1'023—dc20 96-33192

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available

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reproduced, by any process or technique, without the
express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-33192

ISBN: 0-275-95502-8

0-275-95503-6 (pbk.)

First published in 1997

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PREFACE

Too often what we expect is exactly what we get. Nowhere is this more true than in education, where teachers' expectations of students are crucial. The self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP), therefore, should be of great interest to teachers, both those in training and those in service.

Whether or not a teacher is aware of it, the SFP is at work, impacting students either to their benefit or their detriment. It follows, then, that teachers should be made aware of the SFP and how it can be used effectively in education. This is the goal of this book.

For teachers in training, the SFP should be addressed in a variety of required teacher education courses including, but not limited to, Educational Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Secondary Teaching Methods, and Elementary Teaching Methods. For student teachers, the SFP should be addressed in seminars that accompany their semester-long practicum. For in-service teachers, the SFP should be dealt with via a variety of ongoing professional development endeavors—induction year programs, inservice offerings, graduate study, professional conferences, and so forth.

This study of the SFP also is appropriate for undergraduate special education, diversity, and multicultural courses (a current emphasis in most colleges and universities), as well as for graduate-level administrative, special education, supervisory, and counseling and guidance courses.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, educators are finding themselves teaching students who are very different from themselves. Those most likely to pursue a teaching career—white, Anglo-Saxon, average or above in intelligence, middle-class, females—are entering very diverse classrooms. For instance, urban schools are likely to have a high concentration of minorities—as defined by race and ethnicity. Special children, once segregated to physically handicapped and/or emotionally disturbed classes, now are mainstreamed into “regular” classrooms.

More and more students are enrolled in votech-type programs where their time and interests are shared between their trade and their academics. Many schools regularly find themselves filled with students, from inner-city residents to recent immigrants, who have English as a second language. Nontraditional adult students also are appearing in classrooms in increasing numbers. All of these various and sundry student bodies can present a special challenge.

Teachers must cope. In order to cope effectively with a growing student body that differs from themselves, teachers must recognize, understand, and then control the expectations they bring to the classroom.

One way to gauge the timeliness of the contents of this book is to examine how often the subject of the self-fulfilling prophecy appears in the title of education-oriented publications. A CD-ROM search of ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) from 1983 to 1995 reveals 798 article titles containing the term “expectations”—the basis of the SFP. The same search reveals over 100 citations with the words “expectations” and “teacher” in the articles’ titles.

A CD-ROM search of ERIC’s Word/Phrase Index using the key words “expectation,” “expectation effects,” “expectation (psychology),” or “expectations” reveals over 7,900 *CIE* (*Current Index to Journals in Education*) and *RIE* (*Resources in Education*) citations. The majority of these deal with school-related expectations by teachers, peers, and parents. Note that ERIC is described in detail in chapter 16.

Clearly, the self-fulfilling prophecy, as evidenced by the large number of articles, documents, and dissertations written on the topic of “expectations,” is of great and continuing interest to educators at all levels.

If educators themselves were to obtain and read the many journal articles and doctoral dissertations dealing with the subject of the self-fulfilling prophecy, there would be no need for this book. But the fact is that most busy educators, whether preservice or in-service, either may not possess the skill and/or means to secure these resources or, if obtained, may lack the time and energy to wade through them all. Hence, the need for this book.

Although the official title of this book is *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: A Practical Guide to Its Use in Education*, its use is not limited to just education (i.e., kindergarten through 12th grade). Anywhere and anytime two or more people get together, expectations are formed and hence the self-fulfilling prophecy is activated. The contents of this book, therefore, apply to the armed services, homes, businesses, industry, marriages, and so forth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Cecelia Anne, my wife and very best friend, who has exceeded even my wildest expectations, to David Madison and Rebecca Anne, our children, who we predict will continue to exceed our expectations, and to all those Pygmaliions in my life, especially my mother and father, without whom I never would have succeeded, thank you.

To Wendy Eidenmuller, a special friend and division secretary, who without her untiring services little or none of my work would ever make it to press, thank you.

To Sheila Feathers, a special friend (in memory), we expected a lot from you, and you gave us so much more. We miss you.

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SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

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PART I

SFP MECHANISMS

Following an introduction to the self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP) in chapter 1, the step-by-step mechanics of the SFP process are presented in chapter 2. Chapter 3 ends this portion of the book by noting that the SFP is a worldwide phenomenon.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate function of a prophecy is not to tell the future, but to make it.
—Wagar (1963, p. 66)

INTRODUCTION

How many of you think that you are a reasonably good judge of character? With years of experience under your belt, are you more often than not able to size up people correctly? Sure, occasionally you are wrong, but most often you are correct. Right? Most people believe that they can tell—sometimes at just a glance—just how certain kinds of people they come in contact with are likely to act.

Do you ever catch yourself, or do you overhear others, saying such things as, “Look, here comes so and so, just look at how he is dressed! He’s just a big show-off, don’t you think?” or “Look who just pulled up in her new flashy car. She’s really stuck on herself, isn’t she?” In both of these scenarios, each person in question has had his or her basic personality sized up according to the clothes he wears or the car she drives. Once he has been pegged as a show-off or she has been labeled as “stuck up,” then “evidence” to support these assertions will be sought. Without even realizing it, the self-fulfilling prophecy is off and running.

OPENING EXERCISE

We all know what certain people are like, don’t we? Granted, all of “them” (i.e., flashy dressers) are not like that, but, generally, most of “them” are. Everyone knows basically that this is a fact! It’s just how “they” are.” Sounds like a “Seinfeld” show dialogue between Jerry Seinfeld and his friend George Kostanza, doesn’t it?

Even though there may be some of “these” people who are exceptions to the rule, you probably know what the prevailing view is about “these” kinds of people. Once in a while one or two of “them” will prove you to be wrong, but most of the time you can just about tell ahead of time how “they” are going to act—can’t you? With this view in mind, complete the following exercise. This exercise follows a “free-response approach” rather than an “adjective checklist approach.” The difference between these two data collection methods is that in the former, subjects are asked to describe various groups’ stereotypical behavior without putting words into their mouths or at the tips of their pencils as is the case with adjective checklists.

Directions

Here are some labels that categorize different kinds of *those* people. Take out a sheet of paper and jot down the first descriptive thoughts that come to your mind when you think about *these* kinds of people. Be honest, now; no one but you will see what you write.

Generally, what descriptors would most people offer when asked to characterize:

A “jock” taking an introductory history course

A significantly overweight (fat) girl

A cheerleader

An engineering student

A minority woman with four kids at the market using food stamps

A Hispanic

An A.M. (versus P.M.) kindergarten child

A person standing outside smoking on a cold February day

Even though your written responses may not represent your personal views about these kinds of people, the majority of the time, stereotypical descriptions emerge from this exercise. This tells us, generally, that there is a prevailing view commonly held by respondents. Does this prevailing view, then, influence how these kinds of people are treated? By and large, the self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP) would say yes!

How are these kinds of people viewed? An informal anonymous survey of primarily middle-class, white undergraduate students taking a Management of Interpersonal Relationships course, most of whom were Education, Psychology, or Management majors from a small college within a larger university system, generated the following responses to these kinds of people. Compare their comments to the ones that you wrote.

A “jock” taking an introductory history class

1. Someone else doing his homework, lazy
2. A big guy who isn’t very intelligent
3. Aspiring for something more than sports
4. Taking it for the credits—not really interested in class
5. Underachiever, loves to party
6. Stupid
7. Disinterested, if he understands it at all
8. Not interested
9. Struggling to understand the syllabus
10. Athlete, dedicated, interested in learning
11. The jock is dumb
12. Probably not going to do well
13. Kiss-up for a grade
14. Slow person sleeping through class
15. Passing—barely getting by
16. A student filling a general education requirement
17. Slackers, not too bright, care more about sports
18. Has test file from fraternity, just getting a passing grade
19. Think about their sport during class
20. Needs it just to be able to keep up his GPA to play sport

A significantly overweight (fat) girl

1. Sad, unhappy with herself, no friends
2. A person who is sloppy and eats a lot
3. Low self-esteem
4. Lacking something in her life, missing something
5. Lonely, depressed
6. Quiet
7. Lazy, sloppy, depressed, doesn’t care about herself
8. Unhappy
9. Low self-esteem, quiet, eats a lot
10. Nothing specific comes to mind
11. Nice personality
12. Lazy
13. Eats a lot, dirty, gross
14. Has a hormone problem, just doesn’t take care of herself
15. Low self-esteem
16. Someone with “eating disorder” thyroid problem