

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Pygmalion in the Classroom

Rosenthal, R. and L. Jacobson (1968). "Pygmalion in the Classroom." The Urban Review 3 (1): 16-20.

Key Words: Pygmalion, expectations, self-fulfilling prophecy, performance

Summary/Conclusions

The present study, conducted in 1965, tested whether teacher expectations of students could actually impact the real performance of students over the course of a school year. Students were given a test and randomly assigned to either a high intelligence group "spurter" or a control group. The students that were assigned as "spurters" showed significant gains in standardized test scores in the first and second grades.

Limitations of Information

The study did not control for teachers attributes (e.g. effectiveness, warmth, demographics). The researchers also did not control for administrators expectations of the teachers. It is unclear if the test by itself influenced learning for students. The study is on student/teacher expectations and may not apply to other forms of expectations. There was no way to measure or account for a change in expectations over the course of the school year.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Expectations Influence Performance

This RIB is the second in a series looking-back to review classic research. Research in educational institutions has provided insight into the power of expectations. In 1965, Rosenthal and Jacobson conducted an original experiment focused on factors that influence learning. At the beginning of the school year 255 children, in grades 1-6, took a test called the "Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition". The test examined verbal IQ, reasoning IQ, and total IQ. The tests were scored and individual scores saved as a baseline. Researchers then randomly assigned children to either an experimental group called "spurters" or a control group. The researchers explained to teachers that the "spurters" were kids who scored well on the test and showed a great deal of potential. The real test scores were not shared with teachers and the "spurter" label was not linked to test scores in any way.

At the end of the school year, children once again completed the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition. The results were compared against their first test to determine gains in IQ. Children in the 1st and 2nd grade "spurters" group showed significant increases in total IQ. The total overall IQ gain for all grades was 8.42 in the control group and 12.22 in the "spurter" group. It is unknown why the earlier grades showed such dramatic improvement while the later grades did not. Researchers theorized it might be due to teacher skill or attunement to expectations. This study was one of the first of many studies to identify how expectations can shape performance.

Practical Applications with Probationers:

- ✓ List and acknowledge all the reasons (e.g. stability factors, protective factors, strengths) why an individual can be successful on supervision instead of just focusing on their deficits.
- ✓ Seek opportunities to express hope and optimism that a probationer can complete probation successfully.
- ✓ Believe that all probationers can be successful.
- ✓ When receiving a case from another officer or reviewing previous records, try not to form assumptions or perceptions of the individual prior to interactions. Such perceptions may influence small unconscious mannerism such as tone, non-verbal cues, and word choice.

Practical Applications with Probation Staff:

- ✓ Believe in the skill and talent of probation staff. This not only includes the ability to help probationers be successful, but also the integration of new concepts like SBC, the ability to adapt to changes, and their ability to change thoughts/attitudes/behaviors.
- ✓ Ask staff how they perceive probationers chances of success.
- ✓ Challenge officer perceptions that do not align with hope, optimism, and success.