# "I Have High Expectations!" But What Does That Mean in Practice? Contrasting Empowering Vs. Disempowering Applications of the Same Term

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*While it is a commonly accepted assumption that teachers who have "high expectations" for their students are more effective, how that expectation manifests is often largely undefined. And if we were to examine the various operational definitions used by teachers for that goal, we would see a large variation in both theory and practice. This article examines the difference between two general orientations related to the term "high expectations." The first – perspective A is characterized by high standards for student performance on outcomes such as tests and assignments, and usually includes an implicit norm reference in which students are compared to one another. The second is perspective B in which students work as much as possible toward their own goals and the focus is on quality and their level of investment to the process in the work. These two perspectives are compared across various criteria including the three elements of a success psychology – internal locus of control, belonging, and growth mindset. Upon analysis, perspective B is shown to encourage significantly more positive outcomes in both student achievement as well as social-emotional well-being.*

## INTRODUCTION

One thing we all seem to be able to agree on in education is teachers should have "high expectations." And when we survey teachers, we find the vast majority of teachers report that having high expectations is important, and that they in fact have high expectations for their students (Shindler, 2006). But, when we examine this notion more deeply, what we find is, one, what people mean by the term high expectations varies greatly, and two, how we define the idea of high expectations can in some cases either promote healthy and empowering learning and student success, or a disempowered student mindset and actually undermine student success. In this article we will explore how the term high expectation can vary so dramatically, and how we can steer toward the most growth promoting application.

In 1965 Rosenthal and his colleagues in the famous *Pygmalion in the Classroom* study (Rosenthal 1968) demonstrated the power of the teachers' expectations on student performance. In this groundbreaking experiment, teachers were told that a few of their students had been identified as "rising stars." In truth, these rising star students had been randomly selected from the class list and were no more likely to be exceptional than any other student. The teachers were told that these rising stars would demonstrate their aptitude, superior ability and rising *star-ness* as time went on. The students themselves were not made aware of this identification. The result was that over time the students who were identified as rising stars did in fact out-perform their peers – by quite a lot. Therefore, the researchers demonstrated that simply by having teachers believe students were worthy of high expectation it translated into higher performance on the part of the students.

Since that time most teachers will not go more than a few days between reminders from their administrators to have high expectations for their students. It is an accepted part of what teachers do these days. And it is justified. In our research (Shindler, 2006, 2016), we find a strong correlation between a) the teachers and student perceptions at the school related to whether the teachers have high expectations for all students and b) other outcomes such as student achievement and school effectiveness generally. So, an intention for having high expectations for students is certainly warranted. But when we explore what takes place in the classroom, we can quickly recognize that what it means to have high expectation is rarely defined. In fact, my observation is that if asked, most administrators would not be able to produce a very cogent operational answer to the question, "What does having high expectations look like in the classroom or other school setting?

We could probably agree that having no faith in one's students and seeing them as useless and lacking potential would qualify as having "low expectations." But as we explore classrooms generally, what we find is that both in concept and in practice, what it means to demonstrate high expectations varies greatly from teacher to teacher. While there are probably several definitions, for the purpose of this analysis, we will begin by comparing two disparate operational definitions – Perspective A, and Perspective B.

**High Expectations: Contrasting Perspective A Vs. Perspective B**

To better operationalize Perspectives A and B, we might compare two classrooms representing each respectively. Both Ms. Smith and Ms. Jones consider themselves to be teachers who have high expectations. Ms. Smith demonstrates what we could refer to as *Perspective A*. She has a very high grading standard. She sees herself giving all her students an equal chance to access the material, and score well on assignments and test. She does not accept late work and she keeps her test grade level high and even grades on a curve occasionally. She tries to be objective, and her students perceive her as tough but fair. She believes that to give high grades for work that is not relatively high performance is a disservice to her students and sends the message that poor effort is being rewarded. She tells all her students that if they study and apply themselves, they can be a high achiever in the class. But unconsciously she feels like only a few of them are truly "A" students and the others need to be shown that they are not up to that standard. Ms. Smith regularly has her students reflect on their current grade score in the hopes that it will motivate them. She is enthusiastic with praise for students who accomplish a task to her high standards. And she does not openly post student grades but finds subtle ways to have them see one another's grades in an effort to motivate them to do better. She does some group work, but most of the work and all of the assessments focus on countable outcomes.

Ms. Jones, who takes what we could term *Perspective B*, takes student success upon herself. Therefore, she creates lessons where the learning targets are clear and standing still. Very little of her emphasis in the class is on grades and countable outcomes but instead on the process and execution of the important skills. She is demanding that students apply the correct processes in their work and/or keep at it until they are able to. Her students feel like she is patient, dedicated and empathetic, but is obsessed with *how* they approach their work and the effort level that they put into their projects, assignments and skill building activities. It took them a while to get used to how Ms. Jones does not make them feel bad for wrong answers or for making mistakes but is intolerant of poor application and investment. Tasks take longer in her class because she does not move on if the quality is not happening, and students spend more time than they ever have before preparing for doing tasks and getting clear about what they are doing and then another large amount of time debriefing at the end of the task to critique, reflect upon and improve what they did. She makes a point to enthusiastically offer positive verbal recognition of incidence in which students persisted, challenged themselves and worked through their self-doubt. Grading is usually done with rubrics that focus on the process and quality, and almost always involve student self-assessment and peer feedback.

Each of these teachers consider what they are doing as having high expectations. Yet, when we compare them, we find that they lead to vastly different outcomes when it comes to classroom climate, student motivation, social emotional well-being, and in the long-term student achievement.

In the work of Carol Dweck (2000, 2006), what she and her colleagues found over the course of 30 years of research was that these two classroom contexts gradually encourage two distinctly different ways

of approaching learning and interacting on the part of the students. And those differences are increasingly manifested as time goes on. Students who were encouraged to achieve to external standards (in the Perspective A context) were conditioned into what Dweck termed a "helpless orientation," and would later term a fixed-ability mindset. Each of these terms provides a useful insight into the influence of the perspective A classroom. Students who were encouraged to use internal standards and do their best and learn for the sake of learning she originally termed "mastery orientation," and would later refer to as a growth mindset. Again, each of these terms offers a useful insight into what is created within a perspective B classroom. The ways in which Ms. Smith or Ms. Jones defined high expectations was not simply a matter of academic preference, and/or personal inclination toward grading. When these two distinct contexts are played out in application day in and day out they function to create a broad set of effects on how students view learning, motivation, others, the collective, themselves, and even defines what it means to be successful in life generally.

## TABLE 1
### HIGH EXPECTATIONS: CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVE A VS. PERSPECTIVE B

| Category | Perspective A | Perspective B |
|---|---|---|
| **Nature** | Product (static) | Process (dynamic) |
| **Goal** | Achievement standard (outcome) | Quality investment and learning |
| **Locus of Control** | External standard and reward | Intrinsic motivation and internal standards |
| **Mindset** | Fixed ability – Fear of failure | Growth orientation – keep trying |
| **Logical Outcome** | Top 20% = stress and fear Middle 50% = anxiety and resentment Bottom 30% = resignation and retaliation | Students learn to increasingly own their outcomes and make the cause and effect connection between effort and results. Over time they grow in their appreciation of their own capacity to produce quality work. |

**Exploring the (Problematic) Nature of High Expectations From Perspective A**

It is logical to expect that if we hold our standards high enough and give students apparent opportunities to reach those standards, students will eventually learn to raise their game and meet those standards. This is often loosely implied in the concept of "rigor." But as we observe more closely this logic breaks down, and when we examine those contexts that employ this logic, we find that they encourage both a less than healthy psychological climate as well as disappointing levels of performance.

When we put the focus on external outcomes, we encourage what could be termed an external locus of control. When one's goal is to achieve at a static standard that is outside of us, we learn to see ourselves as adequate or inadequate based on how we do. If we do well, we are probably relived. If we do poorly, we will likely over time, learn to care less and find ways to rationalize and devalue the task and the standards. If we explore the motivational levels of students in classrooms where there is implicit or explicit comparison on external standards (like test scores, or reward systems, etc.), we find that the primary motivation is a fear of failure (Dweck 2000). Those students who are the top performers learn to perform at a high level to keep from experiencing the pain of unfavorable comparison. It will not readily lead to happiness or satisfaction of the development of a love of learning. The result is more likely to learn to *do what it takes* not to

experience the discomfort of losing. We can say that these students have high expectations for themselves. But usually it is more accurate to say that they have expectations that compel them to win, because losing is unacceptably uncomfortable.

For the middle performer students in the perspective A classroom, they likely learn to rationalize a relative performance level in which they are not at the top. They can take comfort that they are not at the bottom, which provides some comfort, so they are probably the happiest of the bunch. But as time goes on, they likely result is to learn that school is a game with ups and downs and therefore one need to find ways to deal with the lack of satisfaction and the anxiety that comes from feeling at least a little inadequate. For most that means settling into a mediocre level of investment and an expectation that results will not be stellar, but they will get a win now and then.

For the students at the bottom of the curve, on some level they recognize that the system is designed in such a way as to punish and shame them. Therefore, it only makes sense that they would respond as any of us would in that case, in one of two ways - resignation or rebellion. To meet their basic need for power, it is a reasonable response for them to find ways to take power within the situation. One reasonable strategy is to stop caring entirely or punish the system/teacher with a total lack of effort. Other responses might include attempts to take power and fight the system or to increasingly manifest a negative identity pattern (Shindler, 2009).

In perspective A, no matter how much the teacher tells the students that as a collective they should exhibit the qualities of a community, or a family or a supportive team, the systemic reality is that they are in competition with one another. It is likely that Ms. Smith spends a good amount of time implementing strategies to promote belonging in her class. And it is also a good bet that they fall flat. The reason is that Perspective A encourages the two belonging killers – competition and comparison. If success is defined by the attainment of static external outcome standards and we are each put in a situation in which we are rewarded to the extent that we attain them, comparison is inevitable. And as a result, that sense of comparison will ultimately manifest, in such forms as the lack of trust, a limited desire to collaborate, rivalry, resentment, and pay back.

> A student who is working toward an external standard or reward and feels validated when they succeed and fearful they will not is a student who will lose ground as a learner and a grower each year of their schooling to students with a more intrinsic motivation pattern and a growth mindset.

If we were to identify the three qualities that are most responsible for student achievement, mental health and healthy social bonds within a class – they are the degree to which we have promoted a) more internal vs. external locus of control, b) growth vs fixed ability orientation, and c) a sense of belonging and acceptance (Shindler, 2009). We could term this triad – a "psychology of success". As we explore the effects of the Perspective A form of high expectations, we see that it encourages all three qualities of the opposite – which we could term a "failure psychology." It is not just that Perspective A is ineffective at promoting an empowering climate but is actually encouraging a disempowering climate. Being evaluated on external standards for things that I may or may not care about, feel like I control or for which I do not feel a great deal of ability or aptitude, will promote my movement toward more of an external locus of control mindset (Deci, 1999). Being in a context where I am in competition and continuously explicitly or implicitly compared to the other students will cause me to feel mistrustful, a lack of belonging, and anxious about my adequacy in the eyes of others and myself – i.e., alienation and inadequacy (Shindler, 2009). And when it is the outcome that matters, I learn to fear failure, and limit my investment only to things in which I feel like I can demonstrate success so I can feel some sense of competence and worth to others and myself, i.e., a fixed ability mindset (Dweck, 2006).

**Exploring the (Healthy/Empowering) Nature of High Expectations From Perspective B**

To begin the process of designing the most empowering context for learning, one that promoted the highest potential of the learner, we would need to start by identifying the basic nature of that learners' needs, psychology and humanity. A useful place to begin would be to examine what the research says about what leads to happy, satisfied, high achieving learners. The factors of a psychology of success described earlier (i.,e., internal locus of control, belonging and acceptance, and growth orientation) have in fact been shown across decades of research to correlate strongly with mental well-being and academic success (Auer, 1992; Benham, 1993; Dweck, 2000, 2006; Klein & Keller, 1990; Joseph, 1992; Rennie, 1991). Therefore, a great place to start in our exploration of how to create a classroom defined by Perspective B, is to ask ourselves the basic questions – "How can I promote more student internal locus of control (i.e., empowerment, agency, self-responsibility, sense of cause and effect, emotional maturity, etc.)?" "How can I encourage my students to develop a sense of collective belonging and an unconditional acceptance of themselves and others?" and "How can I encourage my students to approach their work, successes and failures with a growth mindset?" When we ask those questions and use that lens to evaluate our practice, what we find is that we will tend toward creating a Perspective B classroom.

**Sub-factors for the Theoretical Construct of Psychology of Success (POS)**

| Psychology of Success (POS) | Psychology of Failure (POF) |
|---|---|
| Internal Locus of Control | External Locus of Control |
| Belonging & Acceptance | Alienation and Worthlessness |
| Growth-Orientation | Fixed-Ability Orientation |

Second, we might ask how the structures and practices in our class will function to meet our students' basic human needs (Glesser,1990) for power, freedom, fun, love, competence, and emotional safety. Perspective A assumes that students act to attain a reward. So, in that paradigm, the students' basic need is to get the thing the teacher tells them is important. Upon closer examination, especially as we examine our own motivations, we can recognize that a) the reward being a manufactured entity cannot represent a true basic need, and b) it can only represent a need in as much as that need has been cultivated by the system. Moreover, the true basic needs are left unaddressed in the equation. Perspective B implies a goal of creating an environment that both seeks to meets students' basic needs, but also empowers them to advocate for their own needs.

In operation, Perspective B starts with a *process focus* and the cultivation of dynamic personal goals for growth. Individually and collectively, we approach the task at hand with the goal of simply learning, getting better and embracing both the challenging and intrinsically rewarding aspects of the task. Any extrinsic reward would be counter-productive and ultimately undermine our growth. So, then what is the reward? This is a critical self-reflection question for the teacher committed to Perspective B. In the broadest sense any answer within this paradigm would imply that the reward for engaging in any task would have an intrinsic nature, so the reward is the process itself, not something that one gets later for engaging in the task. So to be able to cultivate that ethic of growth being its own reward, the teacher will need to be able to look out at their students and believe that in the most essential aspects of their being, what they want is to learn, become better at things, celebrate the successes of others, become more mature and responsible, become more self-disciplined, discover new things, become a more valuable member of the human family, and feel trusted to do what is right. In many cases, the teacher will need to convince his/her students that they do in fact want those things and that they will be trusted (eventually). But they will need to convince themselves first. In the Perspective B classroom, it does not matter so much about where we are on our journey today, it is about where we are going, and that is toward more intrinsic motivation and collective function for the good of all.

What do high expectations look like in this classroom? The expectation for commitment to excellence needs to be high, and that means the teacher needs to be demanding when it comes to the amount of *investment*, effort and commitment to executing the necessary processes. Next, the focus on *quality* needs to be part of most every discussion and project. Students need to learn to be good judges of the quality of their work as well as the work of their peers. Eventually, students need to create their own standards for quality, and increasingly take pride in having high personal standards. There is very little place for a standardized test that does not align with the students personal learning goals. If tests are necessary, they are put in perspective, and probably given a lower importance relative to the students' own standards of performance for the work that is most valuable to them.

In the perspective B classroom, the operative questions include "Did I do my best?" "Am I proud of what I did?" "What would I want to do better, if I could do it again?" "What did I learn about myself, about the task from my involvement and the work of others?" "Did I make the group better today?" None of these questions involve any comparison, competition or norm referenced thinking. Success is defined by maximum investment and taking advantage of their opportunities. Relative performance is unimportant. But making progress is important, progress toward valid standards and personal (dynamic/process and outcome/objective) goals. And toward progressive improvement in the collective function. Getting better needs to include the whole getting better, and each member experiencing the positive emotions related sharing their gifts and being a positive contributor to the classroom community.

Examining our research data from over 500 schools (Shindler, 2016, 2020), what we have found has been that schools that demonstrate more qualities of perspective B outperform their counterparts on both school climate dimensions as well as student achievement. Schools that have high expectations defined by perspective A tend to fall somewhere in the middle range on each of these measures. They tend to perform higher than schools that exhibit clearly low expectations for their students, but far lower when compared to those schools who are committed to doing what it takes to create a success psychology including a perspective toward high expectations defined by perspective B. In fact, much of our work related to school improvement is characterized by helping schools make a shift from values and practices defined by perspective A to B. And when they are able to make that shift, we see substantive improvement across multiple outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

If we examine the nature of each classrooms' definition of "high expectations," what we might recognize is that each is defined by a series of daily choices, driven by a global intention and informed by a view of what students need. We can create vastly different environments based on those choices. As you examine the differences between Perspectives A and B, discussed here, you are encouraged to consider

how your practices, policies as well as basic assumptions about what high expectations mean in your building, ultimately manifests as student outcomes. The reality is that most schools reflect more Perspective A than B. This is likely encouraged by the policy that includes school-school comparisons in the effort to promote accountability. And you are on to something when you ask, "Well isn't the accountability movement and all the standardized testing encouraging Perspective A among the adults as well as the students?" The answer is unfortunately "Yes!" And that is a valid excuse for being able to do less of what we feel is right. But also recognizing this reality may spur our motivation to engage in effecting changes to those policies where we can. Nevertheless, what we can control tomorrow is what we do within the sphere of our influence. If I am an administrator, I can encourage Perspective B within the school as a guiding value and in policy. And, If I am a teacher, I can use the lens of a POS and basic student needs to elevate my practice and create a Perspective B world to the extent possible.

In any case, it makes sense to examine our personal definition of what high expectations means to us. And if we find ourselves defending perspective A, we might reflect on why. Is it that that it was what we had to live with in our schooling? Is it that we fear not being able to raise our game to the level needed to pull off perspective B? Is it that we feel like some students just need to learn how the real world works so they can change their ways? As we examine our answers to the question, "why not B?" we will find that our reasoning tends to fall apart in the face of reality - in the form of the research, the clear and observable success of others, and even what our hearts and consciences tells is right.

In the Table 2 below, the concept of a psychology of success is operationalized. The table outlines each of the three qualities and its opposite and describes four manifestations of each quality – a) general principle, b) personal application, c) classroom application, and d) whole school application. The table is offered to support your effort to first understand each area in more depth, and then to use those qualities as a lens to assess your school policies and teaching intentions and daily practices.

## TABLE 2
## PSYCHOLOGY OF SUCCESS – EXPLORING WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE AT THE PERSONAL, CLASSROOM, AND SCHOOL LEVELS

| | Psychological Principles | Personal Application | Classroom Application | School-wide Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Internal Locus of Control** | Life is in our hands We are the authors of our own fate There is cause and effect in the world, and the first cause is our attitude We are responsible for own success or failure. | I move through the day feeling responsible for how things go and my level of happiness. I am the kind of teacher who holds the belief that their student's welfare depends mostly on things they can control. I look for ways to help my students grow. | Promote a clear and consistent cause and effect world in the class – actions have consequences positive and negative. Encourage increasing levels of freedom and wise choices. Promote student ownership and voice. Create clear learning goals and assessment outcomes that students can attain | What strikes one first is that there is a high level of order at the school. It is the results of clarity of expectations and norms and TRUST that others are self-responsible. There is minimal supervision, but immediate follow-through by adults when students violate the school's social contract. Evidence of student ownership is all over the school from the walls to the student self-led activities everywhere. Students feel a sense of power and are not afraid to question the authority at the school. Teachers feel |

| | | | with full application. | validated and empowered by leadership, and they in term empower their students. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **External LOC** | External events are the cause of what happens to us. Life is an accident It is someone else's fault Things just happen. | I experience an underlying feeling that there is little I can do to improve things. I see mostly evidence that no matter what I do, not much gets better. Parents, the system, and kids are too much to overcome. | Create vague and shifting rules and be inconsistent in applying them. Be autocratic and ignore students need for power. Compare students to one another on variables over which they have no control. | What strikes one first is the huge amount of adult effort expended nagging, corralling, and supervising students. Policies are constantly being generated to stop bad things from happening. Adults seek obedience and are continuously offended by the students' lack of respect for their authority. Students assume that random acts of abuse are around the corner when there are no adults around. Most student complaints are met with annoyance from adults. Students learn to make good excuses. Teachers learn to make lots of calls home. |
| **Acceptance and Belonging** | We are unique and great the way we are. We have unique and valuable gifts to share. We are part of a supportive collective. Others appreciate us and are interested in helping us thrive. | When it comes down to it, I like and respect myself. I have others that I actually like and respect too. I feel like at least some people are supportive of me and what I am trying to do. I feel like the school team has its heart in the right place even if it is not perfect. | Create an emotionally safe class defined by intolerance for putdowns and abuse. Encourage students to work together and support one another toward personal and collective growth. Focus on strengths of each student and the idea that there are different gifts. Find ways for the class to win together. | The school puts a lot of attention into creating rituals and celebrations. Students are celebrated for a wide range of efforts and gifts. Collaborative projects in and out of classes are frequent. School wide expectation exist related to appreciating and showing respect for one another, and adults take that job seriously starting with no tolerance for verbal abuse on campus. Faculty are given time to collaborate and make plans for both classroom and whole school initiatives. Students are included in leadership meetings when possible. Parents are welcome in the school. The school takes its identity seriously and seeks |

| | | | | to connect membership with excellence, positive character, and service to others. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Alienation and Inadequacy** | We see mostly our inadequacies and perceived weaknesses. We feel separate from the group and not appreciated. We do not feel able to trust others and do not perceive the world as a supportive place. | I am not sure that I am doing very well, and I spend a lot of time feeling defensive. When I walk into a room, I wonder what others are thinking and I suspect that they say negative things about me when I am not around. | Create a competitive class where students struggle against one another for recognition, grades, and approval. Define ability in a single way. Grade only what you can count. Make it about you and demand obedience as you ignore student-student mistreatment. | The school puts a lot of attention on grades and test scores. There is a subtle or not so subtle message to students that they are as valuable to the school as their test scores or athletic ability. Teachers and administrators use a lot of student-student comparisons. Traditions, school spirit and non-sports extra-curricular activities are an afterthought. In class students do a lot of independent work and traditional assessment, out of class there is mostly a focus on a desire for sports success and individual student's academic awards. Adults do not know many of the students who are walking in the halls. The school culture is tolerant of casual putdowns between its members. |
| **Growth Orientation** | We accurately perceive that if we apply ourselves, we improve in anything we attempt. We trust the process to get us results. We focus on growth and the journey and not so much temporary relative abilities. We use mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow. | I feel pretty free and trusting of myself to take risks and try things. I am not too worried if things don't go perfectly. In my class we are free to make mistakes and I include myself in that. I see my growth as a teacher and follow my vision of getting more | Value the process over the product. Encourage a system of self-reflection and feedback. Encourage a climate where it is ok to make mistakes and good to take risks. Focus on growth and learning and not on relative attainment. Project high expectations for all students, especially in the area of investment | When one looks around the school there is a distinct message that it is about growth, rather than relative performance. Teachers are encouraged to try innovative practices, and students are encouraged to take risks and try new things. There is little patience for those that do not try or bring a negative attitude. Quality in every area of school life is defined and discussed, and students are asked to continuously self-reflect based on those criteria. Student-student comparisons are avoided, |

| | | effective all the time. | and quality of effort level. | and tests are de-emphasized. Students who have overcome challenges are celebrated. As a school there is a feeling that things are getting better all the time and adults find regular opportunities to support that notion with evidence. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Fixed Ability Orientation** | We inaccurately perceive our abilities as a fixed quantity. So, we do not see the need to persist if things do not go well initially. We eventually learn to fear failure and are crushed by mistakes and unfavorable comparison. | I see that I have some gifts in this job, but I know that other teachers are much more gifted in some areas, and so I stick to what I am good at. When things don't go well in a day, I feel crummy and stupid, and a part of me just wants to quit and do something that is less brutal to my ego. | Value just the final product. Focus on who is good at this or that and compare student's work and aptitude. Use destructive criticism or subtle judgment for mistakes. Encourage and/or allow students to connect their grades to their self-worth. Promote a fear of failure motivational mindset. | Very quickly in the school, one will hear about the limits and challenges of the students and the neighborhood. Soon after will be the percentages of students who did not pass various tests. The haves and the have not's at the school are clear to everyone, and people know their place. Innovation is seen as a waste of time because "those students" will just make a mess of it. Students learn to stay out of trouble and avoid being criticized by peers and adults. As far as teachers go, the students are their grades, and try to motivate students by using the promise of a good grade, public shame and comparison to motivate. |

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