

Introduction

Interrupting the Cycle Begins With You

Adrian walks into class with earphones in and his music turned up loud. He sits at his seat and starts to shout hello to his friends in his class. He then sings loudly while also drumming on the table. After he has finished his song, he puts down his head and pushes away all the work in front of him. His teacher then asks him to step outside for a conversation, and he replies, “Nah, I’m good.” The teacher describes Adrian as disrespectful, disruptive, a behavior problem, and a student who can’t be reached. “I’m just trying to make it through the year with him. I’ve given up.”

What’s Really Going on Here?

How often have you seen these words used to describe a student (or used them yourself)?

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confused• Struggling• Doesn’t know basic facts• Slow learner• Behavior problem• Unmotivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hyper• Careless• Lazy• Stubborn• At-risk• Disadvantaged
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Some of these terms are more charitable than others, but their use sets into motion a cascade of diminished expectations, negative self-image, and self-fulfilling prophecies. Adult knowledge and the culture in schools perpetuate formal and informal labels like these. Words like these also diminish our own effectiveness as educators. There is a saying that “the words you use are the house you live in.” When we build a classroom that is

filled with words like these, whether spoken or unspoken, we unintentionally undermine our own efforts. In this case, we are our own worst enemy—and our students', too.

Every teacher—no matter their years of experience, their role at the school, or the grade level they teach—interacts and connects with a diverse student body. Each year, educators experience a new group of students walking through their doors, each bringing their own personalities, histories, experiences, and stories. We humans make assumptions about individuals based on what we see. Many claim to not make assumptions about any individual until they get to know that person. But experiments on this have demonstrated that people make trait judgments based on seeing someone's facial features after 100 milliseconds (Willis & Todorov, 2006). That's one tenth of a second before we begin to make assumptions about other people's likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness. We all bring our viewpoints and personal biases to every interaction we have with others. Acknowledging that fact is an important first step in addressing implicit biases that negatively affect students.

The purpose of this book is to interrupt the cycle caused by labeling students, to the best of our abilities. As caring educators, we all seek tools that can help us push the pause button, ask clarifying questions, and improve communication. It is only by taking action—by working to disrupt the cycle—that we will be able to remove underlying attitudinal barriers that feed institutional and structural barriers. In other words, we need to remove labels from students and focus on their strengths—but removing labels takes some work.

Biases turn into assumptions, which feed expectations and then become labels. And labels can define how we interact with and what we expect from others—and ourselves. We understand how this can happen; we all have done it and experienced it. For example, Dominique realizes that he has made assumptions about the parents at his son's baseball games, new teachers walking into his school, the families of students he is meeting for the first time . . . in other words, about people he doesn't know. Disrupting one's thinking about another person takes a concerted effort to understand who that person really is. We have challenged individuals across the educational world to go through this process with us.

In Dominique's equity workshops with teachers and school leaders, he leads his audience through an intentionally awkward activity. Dominique asks participants to find a partner they do not know and then ask them to guess the following information about the person they are facing:

- Country of family origin or heritage
- Languages spoken
- Hobbies or interests
- Favorite food to eat
- Preferred movies or TV shows
- Preferred type of music
- Pets or favorite animal

He asks participants to avoid showing any emotions as they are hearing their partner's guesses. Later, they will be provided with an opportunity to share the accurate answers. Assumptions related to age, ethnicity, gender, race, class, and region of the country come to the surface. A 55-year-old white woman from Kentucky is assumed to like country music, even though in truth she is passionate about hip-hop. A 29-year-old Black man from Oakland is assumed to enjoy action and horror movies, when in truth he majored in film studies and would rather discuss the aesthetics of Jean-Luc Goddard and French new-wave cinema. Interactions like these allow participants to see how fast assumptions are formed. The experience provides people with insight about how others might view them based solely on appearance. In turn, it provides them with insight about how quickly they form inaccurate assumptions about others based on everything but knowing who an individual truly is.

When Assumptions Become Expectations

Our explanations and justifications become the expectations we have for students. A study of the explanations of teachers in Grades 3–5 sheds light on this phenomenon. As Evans and colleagues (2019) noted, when teachers examine students'

assessment data over the course of a school year, they tend to attribute performance to student characteristics rather than their own teaching. Fully 85% of their explanations focused on

- student behavior (e.g., “not paying attention”),
- a mismatch between the assessment demands and the student (e.g., “he’s an English language learner”),
- students’ home life (e.g., “they don’t read at home”), or
- suspected or established underlying conditions (e.g., “I think she’s dyslexic”).

Teachers’ explanations focused on instruction only 15% of the time. What is particularly troubling is that many of the explanations were based on perceptions and assumptions, specifically as they related to home life and underlying conditions. Some of these may in fact be the case. However, educators need to “differentiate between teachers’ claims about students that are verifiable and those that are subjective, particularly negative, opinions about children” (Evans et al., 2019, p. 26).

That’s the heart of the issue, isn’t it? We concur with the researchers in this study that these findings are not about blaming teachers. It is essential to note that a teacher’s hunches about a student can be invaluable. The social sensitivity of teachers at noticing shifts in a child’s demeanor have sparked investigations about disability or abuse that have triggered critical interventions. But in a professional climate that stresses evidence-based approaches to learning, it is our duty to interrogate our own unspoken claims and those of others about our students. There’s an itch, and then there’s a scratch. A suspicion or a hunch of an underlying cause without looking deeper into the problem can breed assumptions about students that lead to lower expectations.

Assumptions also taint the relationships that we have with families. Teachers, like all people, bring implicit bias into their professional lives—and with it their view of families and their children. These implicit biases are often based on a white, middle-class culture that is viewed as normative and is reflective of the experiences of many teachers, 85% of whom are white (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for

Educational Statistics, 2020). Socioeconomic status can further shape assumptions about what goes on in the lives of families. All three of us have heard stated assumptions about families that are destructive: “No one at home cares about that little girl. No one reads to her.” *How could you possibly know that?* Making destructive assumptions about families makes it impossible to truly collaborate with them. And these assumptions influence our expectations of their children.

The Impact of Teacher Expectations

Teacher expectations can be powerful. The Pygmalion effect, named after the Greek myth about the sculptor who fell in love with a statue he carved, which then came to life, is among the most discussed phenomena in educational research in the past 50 years. The term was coined to describe the self-fulfilling prophecy: We become what others see in us. The finding: Teacher expectations, for better or worse, influence student outcomes. Rosenthal and Jacobson’s landmark experimental study in 1968 demonstrated that student achievement could rise and fall depending on teachers’ expectations of their learners. When teachers expected students to excel based on fictitious prior achievement data they believed to be true, the students performed at high levels. The reverse was also true. When teachers were given false low prior achievement data, the students did not perform as well. But how could this happen?

We telegraph our expectations of students in a myriad of ways. Our interactions with students and our willingness to demand more or less of them come through verbally and non-verbally. Another seminal study in education demonstrated how these expectations were telegraphed to students through teacher interactions. Good (1987) chronicled how teacher expectations translated into observable differential interactions depending on whether students were perceived by the teacher as high- or low-achieving. In particular, students perceived as low achieving

- are criticized more often for failure,
- are praised less frequently,
- receive less feedback,

- are called on less often,
- are seated farther away from the teacher,
- have less eye contact from the teacher,
- have fewer friendly interactions with the teacher, and
- experience acceptance of their ideas less often.

There is another term for this: a “chilly” classroom climate, in which some students do not feel they are valued and instead feel that “their presence . . . is at best peripheral, and at worst an unwelcome intrusion” (Hall & Sandler, 1982, p. 3). We do not in any way believe that these differential teacher behaviors are conscious and intentional. One speculation is that because educators don’t feel successful with students they view as lower achieving, they subconsciously avoid contact with them. After all, we were human beings long before we became educators, and as social animals, we attempt to surround ourselves with people who make us feel good about ourselves. Students who are not making gains make us feel like failures, so we detach ourselves even more.

Now view Good’s list from the opposite direction—students we see as high achieving get more of us. Our attention, our contact, and our interactions are more frequent, sustained, and growth producing. It is understandable that we gravitate to those students who make us feel successful as educators. But it is also a version of the Matthew effect—the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer. It’s our positive attention that is gold.

It isn’t only academic achievement that influences teacher expectations. Nonacademic factors, such as a student’s self-confidence, their popularity among peers, and the relationship between student and teacher, also factor into teacher expectations (Timmermans et al., 2016). To be sure, social skills and behavior matter, and we are not suggesting they should be ignored. Many of these skills and behaviors are important for executive function, including a child’s ability to make decisions, pay attention, and set goals. But there is also evidence that a child’s gender, race, ethnicity, and language status influence teachers’ ratings of the child’s executive function (E. B. Garcia et al., 2019). Given that these rating scales are used as

part of determining initial eligibility for special education, the ramifications can be significant.

Further proof of the influence of teacher expectations comes from John Hattie's meta-analytic work on influences on student learning. The Visible Learning database, as it has come to be known, is comprised of more than 1,800 meta-analyses of 95,000 studies involving more than 300 million students. A meta-analysis is a statistical tool used to combine findings from different studies, with the goal of identifying patterns that can inform practice. In other words, it is a study of studies. The tool that is used to aggregate the information is called an effect size. An effect size is the magnitude, or size, of a given effect. Effect size information helps readers understand the impact in more measurable terms. In Hattie's work, the average effect size is 0.40, so influences that exceed this level accelerate learning. Teacher expectations have an effect size of 0.43, meaning that as an influence, this is close to the overall average of all 250+ influences, which is 0.40 (Hattie, n.d.). That might not seem overwhelmingly compelling, given that we have laid out an argument that says that teacher expectations are important. Stated differently, then, this effect size demonstrates that teacher expectations are quite accurate when it comes to student achievement. Students track closely to the expectations of their teachers. Expect more, and you'll get more. Expect less, and that's pretty much the result you'll get.

The Impact of Teacher Estimates of Achievement

Far more interesting is the evidence of teacher estimates of achievement. It sounds a lot like teacher expectations, but here's the difference: Teacher expectations are drawn from a stew of perceptions, past performance, and personal experiences and are therefore somewhat subject to uninformed judgments. Teacher estimates of achievement, on the other hand, are informed by assessment data that are used to set the next challenge. These informed judgments are drawn from monitoring a student's progress and leveraging it to accelerate learning. Teacher estimates of student achievement have an effect size of 1.44, highlighting the very significant and powerful influence they have on student learning (Hattie, n.d.).

The strength of teacher estimates of student achievement spotlights what we know about the value of formative evaluation, instruction, and feedback. When we pay careful attention to how a student is progressing, understand the impact of our instruction, and make adjustments to our teaching in response to that evidence—a concept called Visible Learning—we accelerate student learning in material ways (Hattie, 2012). That is actually very good news and exemplifies why teachers are so important.

The Consequences of Labeling

Humans seek patterns to understand and navigate the world—it is fundamental to the survival of the species. This is especially true when it comes to understanding the other humans we interact with. In schools, these patterns can become labels, as any fan of *The Breakfast Club* can attest. The athlete, the brain, the princess, the criminal, and the basket case were memorable characters in that 1985 film about high school students who confronted the limitations these labels had in their lives. But as educators, there is a tension between noticing patterns and making sure that we are meeting students as unique individuals.

Unfortunately, labels can have a negative effect that extends from the classroom into the wider world. Twenty percent of schoolchildren are diagnosed as having a learning or attention problem. These diagnoses include executive function deficits, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia and collectively are referred to as learning disabilities. A 2017 study by the National Center for Learning Disabilities found that 33% of educators believed that “sometimes what people call a learning or attention issue is really just laziness” (Horowitz et al., 2017, p. 1). School-based negative attitudes affect perceptions by others, with 43% of parents reporting that “they wouldn’t want others to know if their child had a learning disability” (Horowitz et al., 2017, p. 1). Families who feel the stigma about their child’s negative school reputation can reinforce a sense of shame that further amplifies the child’s difficulties in the classroom. In no way are we suggesting that students should not be identified for supports and services to which they are entitled. But too often, the label becomes the prognosis for

the future and the excuse for why a student fails to progress. Having said that, there is a saying in special education that goes back at least 30 years: Label jars, not people. Labels limit expectations and thus access to a wide range of experiences.

Labels contribute to the identity and agency of a student. Identity is how we define ourselves. People learn from their lives through the stories they tell to and about themselves. Agency is belief in one's capacity to act on this world. People with a limited sense of agency may be immobilized, be angry, blame others, and even lash out. Labeling theory suggests that the social messages from others that accompany the label cause the problematic behavior (Becker, 1963). Negative messages from society and those around you accompany labels about race, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and disability. In fact, the label becomes the story the student tells about themselves, both internally and to others. Dominique has lost count of the times an incoming ninth grader has said, "I'm the bad kid."

The challenge is in weighing the positive arguments for obtaining intervention and supports against the negative implications of labeling. Not labeling a student has a potentially notable positive influence on learning, with an effect size of 0.61 (Hattie, n.d.). And it is important to keep in mind that labeling extends beyond formal diagnoses to include labels used to describe students (e.g., "a behavior problem," "lazy and disengaged"). Think of some of the comments you have read on report cards or overheard in the teacher's lounge. Doug's report cards in elementary school consistently included notes such as "off task," "talkative," and "finishes work quickly but then gets distracted." His teachers came to expect that from him, and he delivered year after year. Nancy, on the other hand, had report cards with remarks such as "always submits work on time" and "a pleasure to have in class." Nancy's teachers, when reading these comments, expected the same from her, even though they had not yet met her.

The labels educators use influence the interactions they have with students, as Good (1987) described in the differential treatment of students. Importantly, the labels we place on children can prove to be the catalyst for what we see—or at least what we pay attention to, even if we see more. It is often our own actions that trigger negative expressions of behavior in some students. "When we expect certain behaviors of others,

we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur” (Rosenthal & Babad, 1985, p. 36). In other words, teachers become the antecedent for what follows.

The Consequences of Not Being Liked

Differential interactions, low expectations, and labels that are perceived negatively often fuse together and are internalized by the student. You hear it when students say, “The teacher doesn’t like me.” Being disliked by the teacher or peers has a profoundly negative influence on learning, with an effect size of -0.13 (Hattie, n.d.). In fact, it is one of the few influences (of 250+ influences) that actually *reverses* learning. As teachers, we try not to make our personal feelings known, but they come across. And being disliked spurs mutual dislike, as students put up their defenses in order to endure the psychological and emotional repercussions of not being liked by an authority figure. The wheels are set in motion, as people don’t learn from people they don’t like (e.g., Consalvo & Maloch, 2015). Teacher–student relationships can have a strong positive influence, with an effect size of 0.48 (Hattie, n.d.), but student resistance toward an adult they do not like can interfere. No matter how otherwise excellent the instruction is, learning will not happen for disliked students.

Further, a teacher’s dislike for a student is rarely a secret to the student’s classmates. Students are exquisitely attuned to the emotions of the teacher. Think about it: They are observing you closely day after day, and they get very good at being able to read the social environment. They watch how you interact verbally and nonverbally with classmates. You are actually modeling how peers should interact with the specific student. Sadly, students who are disliked by the teacher are more readily rejected by peers than those who are liked by the teacher (Birch & Ladd, 1997). This phenomenon, called social referencing, is especially influential among children, who turn to adults to decide what they like and do not like. Elementary students are able to accurately state who is disliked by their teacher. In a study of 1,400 fifth graders, the students reported that they also did not like the children whom the teachers told the

researchers they did not like. As the researchers noted, the “targeted” students were held in negative regard 6 months later, even though they were now in a new grade level with a different teacher (Hendrickx et al., 2017). Much like a pebble dropped into a pond, being disliked by the teacher ripples across other social relationships and endures well beyond the time span of a negative interaction.

The Consequences of Stereotype Threat

Classrooms don't exist in a vacuum, and some of the assumptions and expectations about students come from outside school walls. Children who feel labeled in negative ways internalize societal signals they are bombarded with, including messages related to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Stereotype threat is “the threat of confirming or being judged by a negative societal stereotype . . . about [a] group's intellectual ability and competence” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). It is believed that stereotype threat has an unfavorable effect on memory and attention and therefore interferes with academic performance. This is evidenced as early as preschool. The fear of confirming a negative stereotype can inhibit a student's performance, as demonstrated in multiple studies. For example, college students' performance on the same test varied depending on what they were told the purpose of the test was—to measure intelligence or to compare them to other students:

In the 1990's, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson tested a number of situations in a laboratory setting where they gave tests to different groups of African American students. For one of the groups, they told them it was a test of intelligence. For the other group, they told them it was simply a test of comparison. Without the threat of believing that the test measured intelligence, the African American students scored nearly the same as their white student counterparts. (Sparks, 2016, p. 5)

Since these first studies began almost 30 years ago, nearly 19,000 studies from five countries have confirmed the

detrimental effects of stereotype threat for Black students (Walton & Spencer, 2009). The phenomenon has been further documented among Latinx students, Asian American students, and female students in mathematics and science classes, as well as LGBTQ students. The overall effect size for stereotype threat is -0.33 , a profoundly negative influence on learning and achievement, outranked only by illness, anxiety, and boredom in terms of its debilitating impact (Hattie, n.d.).

Intersectionality amplifies stereotype threats. Intersectionality is a means for understanding how a variety of sociocultural identities are interwoven in ways that further marginalize people, especially as in terms of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, Black female students identified as gifted and attending STEM classes with few other Black students are especially vulnerable (Anderson & Martin, 2018). Membership in a group doesn't automatically mean that a student is experiencing stereotype threat. But singling out students is not the answer, either. Praising mediocre performance and withholding feedback have the opposite effect and reinforce stereotype threat. Classroom teachers are, as Sparks (2016) notes, the "starting point for *all* significant progress in the field of stereotype threat" (p. 13), and these efforts begin with the intention to create a growth-producing climate for every student.

Disrupting the Cycle

It is our hope that this book provides tools for you to disrupt the cycle of assumptions, expectations, labels, and stereotype threats that interfere with student learning. In the following pages, you will find several techniques for taking action to prevent negative interactions from taking hold and for working proactively to shift students' self-concept when previous influences have already diminished their potential.

We have divided the book into three major sections: Individual Approaches, Classroom Approaches, and School-wide Approaches. You will find strategies to help you build relationships, focus and restructure classroom management techniques, create new learning strategies, build on powerful teaching strategies, and understand the power of social and emotional learning in the classroom.

We believe that optimal levels of responsiveness require a coordinated effort on all three levels. However, the inability to do *everything* should never become the reason for doing *nothing*. Your own personal influence on the learning lives of students is profound and long-lasting. If the evidence of the negative implications of teacher beliefs about students feels discouraging to you, then you have missed a vital point. It is a testimony of just how powerful you are. Rabbi Harold Kushner interviewed hundreds of people who had found success despite setbacks early in life and asked them how they succeeded. He said that invariably the answer began with these four words: “There was this teacher . . .” (Scherer, 1998, p. 22). We challenge ourselves to *be the hero in someone else’s story*. Are you ready to accept the challenge?

One of our students, Giovanni, wrote the following poem when we told him that we were writing a book about labels. He replied, “I have something to say about that.” We invited him to contribute, and the following day, he sent this poem:

LABELS

Why am I attacked by you
 Why do you think this is fine
 Who do you think you are to judge me in such a way
 Who are you to try to overpower my life in this way
 You are society
 You think but you never know
 You see but you never hear
 You assume but you never ask
 The simple things that can change it all
 But you believe what you want
 You feed into the fake
 And forget about the real
 You only see what you want to see
 You only see the bad and ignore the good
 You see the crime in the streets
 You see the stories on the news

You only see what is shown to you
You are society
You have placed this label above my head
You are society
You see me for the color of my skin
But you don't see the innocence underneath
You see a criminal in the streets
You see a thief in the stores
A problem starter wherever he goes
You engraved these labels onto me
You place these above my head
Like a tattoo being shown wherever I go
These labels were placed by you
You are society
I bring fear to another's face
Because of the label that you have placed
Is he this is he that
You will never know because of the fear you have been
taught to have
Have you seen the hard work that has been done
From the people with different color skin
We are all different
We bring you many things
We bring you food
We bring you life
We helped your wealth
We build your structure
We have taught you culture
We come from different places you and I
But you still only see what you want to see
You are society
You will only ever see the bad and never the good

But even then we will all stand up and show them the work
we put in

When driving down that road ask yourself

Who built this road I ride on

Who worked on these buildings I work in

Who helped this place function

Why do we have so much hate for the people who help us
the most

You are society

And you need a change

We are different people

From different places

We come together as one

No judgement or criticism

Everyone seen for who they are

WE ARE EQUALITY

I am proud of where I come from

You place this label I will always live with

But you will never change the heart of a proud one

There will be a day where you will no longer be this way

We will make the change

One day these labels will disappear

You will see me as me and not what you've seen on TV

I am the change that proved you wrong

I am NOT a thief

I am NOT a criminal

I am NOT a dropout

I AM A LEADER

I AM EDUCATED

I AM THE CHANGE YOU NEEDED TO SEE

—Jiovanni Gutierrez Montano