

From [\*Education Follies: four decades of tilting at windmills for no apparent reason\*](#)  
by Jeff Lee Byrem, (c) 2016

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## *The Three C's and Teacher Expectations*

Intrinsic motivation is influenced by three things: having an opportunity to feel as though one has some **control** over one's life, being **connected** to another significant being, and being provided with opportunities to feel **competent**. These are basic components of [Self-Determination Theory](#)<sup>1</sup>, with which far too few educators are familiar.

As described by a [Morning Edition story](#)<sup>2</sup>, conveying to students that a teacher believes they can learn is accomplished in a myriad of subtle ways, one of which does not include the teacher telling the students, "Class, I truly believe you can learn." I suggest

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<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/>>

<sup>2</sup> Teachers' expectations can influence how students perform:

<<http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2012/09/18/161159263/teachers-expectations-can-influence-how-students-perform>>

that in those classes where teachers *do* have high expectations for their students, those high expectations impact the three things that fire the intrinsic motivation in each of us to learn:

### Control

Teachers with high expectations do not coerce, threaten, or provide tangible rewards to produce desired behaviors, they simply teach with enthusiasm and skill. In the absence of external rewards or punishments, there is an implication that students do have the choice to participate in the class, i.e. students feel the freedom of controlling their own individual involvement.

### Connection

Teachers with high expectations provide a classroom culture where even the most reticent of students cannot help but feel a personal connection with the adult in that tiny world.

A strong memory I have is the distrust in the eyes of many (most?) of the economically and educationally disadvantaged children who met me for the first time in my seventh and ninth grade classrooms, but I did not figure out how to begin to cut through that distrust until a year after I had returned to teaching (after a six-year hiatus as a human resources manager in what my non-educator friends continually reminded me was “the real world”).

The usual, often principal-required, first-day ritual of going over classroom rules and procedures had bored me to death during my original stint in the classroom, and I was certain students were more bored than I because every teacher did the same thing. If any students come to the first day of the school year enthusiastic about learning—especially middle school students—I suggest that enthusiasm is often diminished by

the persistent drone of teachers telling them about rules and consequences from the beginning to the end of that first day.

As I was considering my first week's lesson plans the year I returned to teaching, it occurred to me that basic classroom rules and procedures were fairly uniform across all classrooms, and by seventh grade, there would not be one student who did not know what those rules were likely to be (especially those students who consistently challenged them!). I asked myself, if they already know the basic rules, why not do something on our first day together that challenges their intellect and lets them know what they're in for with me as a teacher?

I decided to flip my day 2 lesson with that of day 1 (rules and procedures), and the student response during my first period lesson on my first day back to the classroom told me I was onto something.

I began by telling the students, "We're not going to talk about rules and procedures today because you've been in school long enough to know the basics. We'll talk about rules tomorrow. Today we're going to do science."

Then I asked this question: "Does air have mass?"

For the next six years, my last years as a classroom teacher, I began each year in the same way (sometimes changing the question, e.g. "Can listening to music change your pulse rate?"). After welcoming the various student points of view, which always included contradictory positions, I noted that some students thought (e.g.) that air had mass. I then asked the class, how could we prove it? And we did prove it, based totally upon input from students. I suggest the experience allowed students to realize they had collectively met a significant intellectual challenge and been recognized for doing so by their teacher.

In other words, my students had the opportunity not only to feel competent, but to feel the high level of my expectations.

Because humans have a natural proclivity for problem-solving, what the students suggested each year had an uncanny resemblance to the basic components of The Scientific Method. In the pre-standards world, teaching students the Scientific Method was the instructional objective on which I had based that first day's lesson. At the end of each lesson on that and subsequent "first days," I was able to identify specific components, among the procedural steps the students had identified, as comprising a process that had a name: The Scientific Method.

*Sidebar: Constructivist teaching occurs when students are involved in meaning and knowledge construction instead of passively receiving information; how many things are taught—e.g. presenting the steps of the Scientific Method and then giving students a canned experiment that models the process—is the opposite of how humans naturally learn.*

Because of that simple change in lesson plans, I noticed far fewer expressions of distrust the following day. Students were more willing to connect with me, which was an ongoing challenge that I do not believe I failed to achieve, but it took time (sometimes weeks, and with some individuals, months).

Those students with histories of academic and discipline problems took the longest with whom to forge a connection, which is understandable. School, to many of them, was a place where they did not feel competent, a place where they believed their failures were not of their own doing but were inflicted upon them by adults they did not trust.

The approach to building that trust, to encouraging that connection, involves doing what every teacher knows s/he should do: be firm (there ARE rules and procedures), be fair, be compassionate (NEVER, EVER use public humiliation or yelling as a way

of being “firm”), and be persistent and tenacious: strive every day to present instructionally sound, standards-based lessons that challenge, reinforce, and when needed, remediate; in other words, develop and present lessons that convey high expectations for all students.

### Competence

High expectations from teachers may be rare occurrences for many students, especially those students who are submerged in disadvantaged circumstances. When students sense that a teacher has high expectations for them as individuals (experiencing high expectations is a “feeling” or affect phenomenon), those high expectations, I suggest, contain a strong subliminal message to them that they can interpret as, “this adult actually thinks I can do these challenging things; maybe I actually *can* do what I’m being expected to do; maybe I’m *not* as stupid as some teachers have seemed to think I am.”

It is very possible that sensing high expectations from an adult with whom a child feels emotionally connected can begin to foster a sense of competency inside the child’s mind, which brings about a self-fulfilling prophesy of manifest competence.

*Afterword: I fully realize there are students who are burdened with serious emotional challenges. Borderline Personality Disorder among students who have been exposed to significant trauma is one such challenge that is difficult for a competent classroom teacher to overcome without significant professional support for the student, which is seldom available in the most challenged of schools; “...even the most reticent of students cannot help but feel a personal connection with the adult in that tiny world” is a strong statement—it is important to me that you know I have personally experienced exceptions to that strong statement*