



## **The Pygmalion Effect: From Youth at Risk to Kids at Hope**

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In 1916 playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote the classic play *Pygmalion*, which was later adapted into the hit Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*. Both versions featured the cockney character Eliza Doolittle. Ms. Doolittle reminds us perceptively about expectations and resulting behavior: “The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated.” In 1969 researchers Jacobson and Rosenthal profoundly underscored Doolittle’s prophecy when they dramatically demonstrated how teachers treated their students and reported on their achievements based solely on a random assignment of performance characteristics. Students who were claimed to be high achievers and those recognized for unsatisfactory performance performed at those levels regardless of their true characteristics. The Pygmalion Effect or self-fulfilling prophecy was not only institutionalized in literature and theater it was now proven scientifically.

Yet, we have failed to recognize its power. As a matter of fact, we have gone in the other direction. In 1981 the US Department of Education coined the expression youth at risk and ever since we have used that phrase to characterize almost every youth in America. What teacher, youth worker, law enforcement official, policy maker, newspaper reporter, and granting organization hasn’t used that term? What grant requirement hasn’t included specific reference to youth at risk and what grant seeking organization hasn’t responded with misplaced zeal that in fact the children it served were indeed at risk? The more at risk children we can indict the more money we can claim for our services.

The fact is, there is no upside to stereotyping a child at risk but there is a huge downside. Since the beginning of recorded history, whenever one group decides to devalue another group they find a demeaning stereotype that ignores individuality and takes the worst of behavior and then generalizes to a larger group. Therefore, children who experience poverty, language barriers, race, and family difficulties or are exposed to threats in their environment will quickly find themselves on someone’s or some group’s at risk list. Certainly our expectation of a child branded at risk is different than that of a child who doesn’t carry that “mark.” Therefore, what is the end result of our willingness to create a culture where it becomes so commonplace to toss around labels for youth without any regard to the consequences? We institutionalize and create entire industries (service and product) to serve this population, which then must perpetuate the stereotype to sustain themselves.

Most recently, The Arizona Republic reported on a study published by the Hispanic Border Leadership Institute (“Schools Fail Latino Students, Study Says,” April 2, 2002) wherein the report called for “a new mind set, among policymakers and educators, one that views Latino students capable of learning; not as students who are disadvantaged and deficient.”

This mind set also needs to be adopted by our entire community. Children don’t grow up in schools alone they grow up in our cultures. They learn about life in our community centers, churches, temples and synagogues, in our YMCA’s and Boys & Girls Clubs. They are the sum total of all their experiences, not just of one facet of their development. It becomes then a simple choice and belief. Do we believe that a great number of our children are destined to fail or succeed? Our answer will determine their future and ours. The reality that 40 percent of students in our urban communities never make it to high school graduation is testimony to the urgency of answering and understanding the importance of this question.

Fortunately for Eliza Doolittle, Professor Henry Higgins harnessed the power that much of our society has forfeited to the at risk stereotype and paradigm. However, a small and mighty group is prepared to reclaim our youth with the expectation that all children are capable of success, **NO EXCEPTIONS!** This group honors children with the expression and belief that they are Kids at Hope. They choose not to defeat children through unwittingly stealing their potential by treating them as youth at risk. Among the communities in the forefront of this effort are: Glendale, Phoenix, El Mirage, Surprise, Tolleson, Goodyear, and Avondale.

These communities are making a conscious commitment to hope. If we are to adopt or practice a self fulfilling prophecy doesn’t it make more sense to start with the at hope belief rather than at risk?