

San Diego State University

Program in Educational Leadership Dissertation Defense Announcement

Student Name: Patricia Lissette Garcia Zuniga

Committee Chair: Dr. Nancy Frey, Department of Educational Leadership

Committee Member: Dr. Douglas Fisher, Department of Educational Leadership

Committee Member: Dr. Deborah Hernandez, San Diego Unified School District

Title of Dissertation: An Examination of High Expectations Teaching in Secondary Schools

Date of Defense: Thursday, July 30, 2026

Time of Defense: 2:00 PM

Location of Defense: Virtual via Zoom <https://SDSU.zoom.us/j/83153129379>

Abstract

High Expectations Teaching (HET) has been identified as impactful in student outcomes (Rubie-Davies and Hattie 2025), yet limited research has examined it for secondary settings. The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to explore current self-declared teacher practices and their alignment with HET in secondary schools. The literature review examined theory related to teacher factors that have proved most impactful on student achievement, beginning with Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and Teacher Credibility Theory, before focusing on High Expectations Teaching (HET) as per Rubie Davies (2007, 2010, 2015), which provided the primary theoretical framework for this study. Exploring the manifestations of HET can potentially inform administrators and teacher leaders in their instructional leadership. This study seeks to answer how aligned or misaligned current teacher classroom practices are in four dimensions: (1) communicating high expectations to students; (2) in-class student grouping; (3) creating classroom community; and (4) goal setting. An explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. An online survey was distributed to 906 high school and middle school teachers, yielding 71 responses, followed by interviews with 21 teachers representing multiple subject areas. Findings from the study show usage of teaching statements to communicate the daily learning target (not individualized SMART goals), scaffolding, positive messaging, and routine or structure in classrooms. Data on grouping showed a high incidence of heterogeneous grouping, but the rationales vary. Although several practices aligned with HET, alignment was inconsistent, sometimes diverging between quant and qual data (i.e., differentiation, use of open

questions). The implications for educators are the need for professional training in practices that convey high expectations to students, in support of a self-fulfilling prophecy between teachers' beliefs and students' achievement. For educational leaders, to obtain a more cohesive HET alignment, besides considering training, it implies the consideration of instructional leadership that accounts for observable practices such as in-class flexible grouping, the use of open questions, opportunities for students to contribute to goal setting, among others.