TEACH[R]

The formation and enactment of teacher expectations of student achievement in private schooling

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Abstract

This study examined how teachers form expectations of the students they teach and how their self-reported behaviours in the classroom reflect these expectations. This qualitative study, theoretically informed by phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry, used in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with six teachers in private schools in Melbourne, Australia, and results were critically analysed. The paper reports issues identified by the teachers as being important in the formation of their expectations of student achievement, particularly the idea that low achievement is closely related to students' poor self-image. It then discusses a paradox evident in the behaviour reported by the teachers: that in their attempts to build student self-image and communicate high expectations, the teachers may unwittingly communicate the low expectations they are at pains to overcome.

Introduction

Teacher expectation has long been considered a powerful pedagogical tool (Good & Brophy, 2000, p. 109), playing a vital role in determining the quality of student learning. Since the 1960s, research has suggested that teachers' interactions with students are affected by the expectations they hold about those students and there is some evidence that high teacher expectations produce high student achievement and low expectations produce low achievement (Capel, Leask & Turner, 1999). Furthermore, it is likely that student achievement may confirm teacher expectations, effectively creating a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Teachers adjust their pedagogy in line with their expectations of their students and thereby treat students differently, in line with those expectations (Diamond, Randolph & Spillane, 2004; Good & Brophy, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 2005), setting the stage for self-fulfilling prophecies to come true.

> *"Teachers adjust their pedagogy in line with their expectations of their students and thereby treat students differently"*

How do teachers form these expectations in the first place? And how do they believe they convey these expectations (or not) to their students? This paper is drawn from a study that attempted to identify the factors contributing to the formation of expectations of students, amongst a small group of teachers in private schools in Melbourne, Victoria.

Recent research (Sadker & Sadker, 2005) suggests that teachers form expectations of their students due to a numbers of factors. These include information typically recorded in schools, such as previous test scores and other documentation from previous teachers, but there is some evidence that less formal information, such as staffroom discussions, identifiable stereotypes, and even children's physical attractiveness can have a bearing (Sadker & Sadker, 2005). Several researchers (e.g. Jussim, Smith, Madon & Palumbo, 1998; Mandon, Jussim, Keiper, Smith & Palumbo, 1998) argue that teachers use personal characteristics of their students in forming their expectations and, according to Diamond et al. (2004), teachers use race and socioeconomic status to judge students' academic potential. For example, US teachers' perceptions of low income and African-American students' academic capacity are lower than those they hold for middle- and upper-income white students (Farkas 1996; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan & Shaun, 1990). Diamond et al. (2004) also suggest that widely circulating stereotypes based on racial classification may influence teacher expectations of students.

Research has shown that other types of labelling can have a significant effect on the formation of teacher expectations of academic achievement. For example, Touranki (2003) suggests that in explaining a lack of academic achievement in areas such as reading, the education system as a whole applies labels that may influence teachers' judgment. There is also evidence that teachers' attitudes and expectations regarding students vary as a function of labels attached to particular disabilities (Diebold & Von Eichenbach, 1991; Soodak & Podell, 1993). Further, Jussim and Eccles (1992) identify gender

as a variable in teacher expectation, arguing girls get higher grades because teachers perceive girls try harder than boys; teachers then reward girls with good grades for their effort. McMillan (2004) likewise argues that gender stereotypes about ability are partly responsible for teachers' expectations. For example, elementary school teachers consider boys to be more skilful in tasks that require mental or abstract operations (analysing, synthesising, hypothesising, evaluating, interpreting questions), whereas girls are perceived as more competent in skills related to completing a task (observing, measuring, communicating, graphing, manipulating equipment and material) (Shepardson & Pizzini, 1992). According to Elwood and Comber (1996), girls are generally perceived by teachers to be more motivated and conscientious than boys, but boys are perceived as more confident and carefree. Researchers argue teachers not only use gender-based characteristics (Myhill & Jones, 2006; Shepardson & Pizzini, 1992; Elwood & Comber, 1996), but even students' names (Figlio, 2004) to form their expectations of their students.

The claim that "general societal stereotypes seem to be reflected in the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of many teachers" (Tartar & Emanuel, 2001, p. 216) is hardly surprising, given that teachers are not immune to beliefs and attitudes held by society beyond the school gates. However, there is considerable evidence that the expectations of student achievement held by teachers profoundly affect teachers' classroom *behaviour*. In other words, teachers' expectations are communicated to students, with important consequences for student learning. For example, Brophy and Good (2000) argue that teachers treat high-expectancy students differently to low-expectancy students during classroom interactions. One consequence of this is that high expectancy students receive higher quality interactions with the teacher, which increases the likelihood of those students experiencing greater achievement. Hence, the students' achievements serve to fulfill the teacher's prophecy, forming a kind of 'virtuous circle'. According to Jussim and Harbar (2005), this phenomenon is more pronounced in elementary (primary) schooling than at later levels. Students in the earlier grades have more contact time with individual teachers and if their teacher consistently reveals low expectations, these are more likely to accumulate for students over a period of time, potentially distorting students' achievement and self-image (Good & Brophy, 2000). In secondary schools, by contrast, teachers have less contact time with their students so low expectations for students are less likely to have a cumulative effect.

The present study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe how teachers in independent school settings in Melbourne believe they form expectations of their students; determine whether they believe these expectations impact on student achievement; and identify how these teachers believe they communicate (or conceal) their expectations to students.

The participants were five primary school teachers from two private schools in south-east Melbourne, Victoria. The teachers were aged between 20 and 50 years and were a mix of male and female; the ethnicity and social class of the participants was not seen as important in the original selection of participants (an issue that is touched upon later in this paper). The participants had all been in the field of education for at least four years, as it was assumed that experienced teachers were more likely to provide the insight needed to inform the aims of the study. Permission was sought from the principals of the participating schools and the teachers signed consent forms agreeing to participate in in-depth, semi-structured, interviews. These interviews sought to explore the phenomenon of interest and to elicit rich descriptions of the perspectives of the teachers. With the permission of teachers, each of the approximately one and a half hour interviews were tape-recorded for accuracy (Burgess, 1984). The transcribed data was then analysed following Lichtman's (2006) three Cs of data analysis: initial coding; identifying the categories; and developing concepts / themes.

Findings and discussion

The teachers participating in this study mainly described the basis for their expectations of their students in ways that were consistent with previous research. There was one exception, however, the teachers reported that the support students get from their parents at home was an important variable in influencing their expectations. This may be superficially explained by the fact that the participants were drawn from private schools where, presumably, parents have a considerable investment in their children's education. However, on closer analysis, the issue of 'parent support' was found to *intersect* with other variables, particularly that of cultural background, a point also taken up later in this paper. In the main, the teachers claimed they base their expectations on objective forms of information about student ability (citing previous test results, previous teachers' feedback, knowledge about the state curriculum, and direct observation of students). However, the teachers also described, either explicitly or implicitly, a range of variables

"Teachers treat high-expectancy students differently to low-expectancy students during classroom interactions"

they believed were influential in the formation of their expectations of student achievement. In this section, two of these variables are discussed at length: student gender and cultural background.

Students' gender as a variable in the formation of teacher expectations

Student gender clearly impacted on the participating teachers' expectations, as they explicitly identified it is a factor in student achievement. Mary (all names are pseudonyms) stated that, despite not encouraging gender differences in her classroom:

> [I] sort of tend to think that girls are better; boys [being] sort of loud [and] they are more playful than girls. They don't seem to care as much as girls in their presentations or in their general expectations, that 'we are boys, it's okay for us if we miss this'. But again, I am not going to encourage this in my classroom. It should not be in any classroom. But I know from the result, from the work I get, you can just tell. (Mary, Gr. 1)

Malinda's ideas were consistent with Mary's, both in claiming the existence of gender differences and claiming she did not allow these to impact on her expectations.

> Girls generally are a little bit hard[er] working than the boys. Boys tend to be, particularly at the grade three age, more easily distracted than the girls. But I still have similar expectations though. (Malinda, Gr. 3)

Malinda also believes that teacher expectations influence some (but not all) children, and girls more so than boys.

> Oh yeah…not for all children…some children care for what you think…[but] it won't affect them all. But most kids, particularly girls…[it's] what you think that really matters…and they will do their best to try and please you and most kids will do their best…to fulfil what you requested of them… so [it] depends on the child a lot. (Malinda, Gr. 3)

"These teachers reported lower expectations of boys, both in terms of academic achievement and beliefs about behaviour and attitude, but had high expectations of girls"

This expectation, and its impact on practice, was described by Bob (a Grade 6 teacher) who was explicit about his awareness of gender differences in his teaching. Bob explained the way in which his decisions about how much material could be covered in class depended on the ratio of girls to boys present. More girls meant that more teaching could be done with more achievement and fewer problems; more boys meant less achievement and more problems. Bob explained that, up until last year, his focus had been on "managing behaviour" rather than on "teaching" because of the number of boys in his class. However, this year he was more focused on teaching (rather than behaviour) because he has more girls than boys in his class.

> I have no bullies. I have more girls than boys, which is a statistically good thing for me in the classroom…Last year I had a class where I [was] often managing the class and their behavioural expectations in terms of calling out and rejecting others and all sorts of behaviour. (Bob, Gr. 6)

This is potentially a circular problem. Are teachers' claims about the relationship between gender-appropriate behaviour and students' achievement preconceived or are they the result of hard-won experience in the classroom? In fact, the teachers described their management strategies, instruction, and handling of curriculum as being both guided by their experiences with the different genders, *and* by preconceived notions about different personality characteristics of girls and boys. They then consciously or unconsciously communicated, through their behaviour, their differential expectations of male and female students, including how much each gender is going to achieve. Bob, for example, stated, "We often let girls to get over things that boys might not necessarily get away [with], especially with regard to Mathematics and Sciences." Bob had gone as far as asking someone else to observe his teaching to check the gender balance in his classroom questioning, including the gender balance in his use of open and closed questions.

> My balance was fine, [although] my questioning to the girls in Science is more closed than to boys. So I know as an experienced teacher. I feel still very guilty of myself trying to elicit correct answers from girls rather than allowing them to come to appropriate answers themselves, so that may be a bit of bias from a teacher's point of view. (Bob, Gr. 6)

Analysis of the teachers' transcripts clearly indicated that the participating teachers were consciously or unconsciously gender biased, and that their male and female students receive different educational experiences based on what these teachers believe to be appropriate gender-based behaviour. These findings are consistent with research by Bennett and Bennett (1994). These teachers (see also Myhill & Jones, 2006) reported lower expectations of boys, both in terms of academic achievement and beliefs about behaviour and attitude, but had high expectations of girls, viewing them as hardworking and caring more about what teachers expect from them.

Students' cultural background as a variable in the formation of teacher expectations

In addition to differing expectations based on gender, the participating teachers reported that the cultural and linguistic diversity of students contributed to the formation of their expectations of student achievement, with students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) eliciting low expectations.

> [When children have a] non-English speaking background…expectations are going to be slightly lower than kids growing up in English speaking backgrounds. Because their ability to understand certain things is going to be a bit lower, naturally, you expect that. (Malinda, Gr. 3)

Rena (a Grade 2 teacher) argued that students' ESL (English as a Second Language) status was a stronger variable than social class or ethnicity, and stated that language barriers are the most important factor affecting her students' achievements and, therefore, her expectations.

> Because English is not their first language, that is one factor that is affecting them…but I am hoping it won't…We have low expectations from the students with ESL background as a whole staff and often discuss how to overcome some hurdles that we face from the problems that arise, [such as] children playing up because there is a language barrier. (Rena, Gr. 2)

Malinda's ideas were partly consistent with Rena's:

> Most of the challenges come from their language background, and also their different cultural backgrounds. Sometimes…their language can be a bit of a barrier too. (Malinda, Gr. 3)

Rena also reported how the teachers in her school often thought of ways to help ESL students overcome language barriers, *but* based on low expectations.

Again, these teachers' perspectives are consistent with earlier research, which has shown that teachers rate students differently based on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Diamond et al., 2004). Paradoxically, the participating teachers also reported high expectations of Asian and Indian students because they believe these cultural groups have a strong work ethic, meaning they are subject to *higher* expectations based on teachers' beliefs about their cultural backgrounds. Mary reported that she believes Asian students are very hard working.

> I think last year the Asian students that I had have high percentile [scores] anyway. I was expecting them to be performing above the level my class is at. (Bob, Gr. 6)

How do teachers communicate their expectations to their students?

So far, this paper has reported the participating teachers' descriptions of *how* they form expectations of their students. The discussion will now turn to how they *communicate* these expectations through their day-to-day teaching. The teachers reported that they are aware that they project onto their students the kind of expectations they have for them, in direct or indirect ways; furthermore, they consciously do this according to what they believe will be best for their students.

A key concern for these teachers was children's own perception of their likely achievement. The teachers reported that they convey to their students, through their teaching behaviour, what they see as each student's strengths and weaknesses. These teachers believe that the students then formulate self-images and expectations of themselves, based on what has been conveyed to them, and that this will consequently influence the students' achievement. This idea is consistent with the work of Deans (1996), who argued that small children form self images by seeing themselves in the eyes of others (teachers, parents and other adults). Thus, by experiencing high expectations, students are more likely to form high self-images; with low expectations, students' self-image is lowered. For the teachers in this study, the act of conveying expectations to students was not simply one of direct reinforcement. Instead, the teachers reported a range of complex pedagogical strategies, such as tailoring their instruction and adapting the curriculum to enable their students to experience success. The teachers believed this was a key strategy in promoting self-image. The teachers all reported the attempts they engaged in, based on their expectations of their students, to raise the self-image of low-achieving students. These strategies include adapting tasks to suit each student's present achievement, so they can succeed in the work and feel motivated.

> A lot of children that we work with [who have] learning difficulties are very prone to low self-esteem…[There are] a whole range of things that they're really stuck with or they really find challenging, [this makes]…a lot of children… become anxious about coming to school because everything is too hard and challenging…so the children have low expectations from themselves… So, again, if we work with them then we break things down into little chunks to provide things that they can succeed in and to give them feedback on that…to develop feelings and showing a bit high expectations for the students. (Leanne, Gr. 1)

Bob also explained in detail how he adapts the curriculum to match his expectations of his students' achievements. For example, Bob omits some

> ***"Teachers rate students differently based on students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds"***

activities for children who have learning difficulties because he does not want to lessen their motivation for learning.

> Asking children to complete various activities at various times, with a sense of priority for certain students, is very important, so for my autistic child it's far less relevant to be doing decimals to three places. It's more relevant to him to be working at his bus timetable and some simple word mathematics questions. So in that manner, I can drop activities for him that he does not have to complete. (Bob, Gr. 6)

If teachers communicate low expectations to their students over a long period, it is more likely that negative self-fulfilling effects will occur

The teachers' ideas reflect Blatchman's (1992) argument that, with each success at school, children develop enhanced motivation and self-perception. By contrast, with each failure at school, children feel de-motivated and develop low self-perceptions (Chapman, 1988). Montgomery (1994) also found that children with learning difficulties generally have lower academic self-perceptions. The teachers reported that they believed that it is important to convey realistic expectations to low-achieving students.

> I try to show them that I believe in them…not in a false way…that my belief and my expectation of them is based on reality…what they can succeed at…and if a child is resistant to have a goal…and they're too worried about failing…all you need to do is then make it smaller…it's negotiated in a different way or from a different angle. (Leanne, Gr. 1)

Mary put this more pragmatically.

> I won't be expecting much…only at their own level. I have expectations, if you can't finish two pages of writing then at least one page would be enough for you…because I know this child can't go beyond one page. (Mary, Gr. 6)

Rena's ideas are consistent with Mary's.

> The ones that [you] might de-motivate, you need to watch yourselves with them then work at their level. I don't push them too much…if you push them so much…they can't do it…just at their level…That's why I said ones who want to do more…I challenge them…the ones who can't…whatever they do I am fine…I am happy with them…so they can achieve as much as they can. (Rena, Gr. 2)

These statements portray how the participating teachers communicate their expectations to high and low achievers differently, by challenging their high achievers and giving lower level tasks to low achievers. At one level, it is understandable that these teachers do not give challenging tasks to students with low ability because they fear that, if their students fail, the students will be de-motivated and develop poor self-images. However, as Good and Brophy (2000) indicate, if teachers communicate low expectations to their students over a long period, it is more likely that *negative* self-fulfilling effects will occur.

Despite this (or perhaps because of it), all the teachers described how they motivated their students by giving positive comments.

> 'Well done', or 'I can see you counting on your fingers, that is fantastic', 'I can see you working really hard, that's great'…All of them, not just the low or high…all of them get that…They want to show they can do it…they try hard for me…and I can see it. (Rena, Gr. 2)

Rena believes that these comments boost students' self-esteem. However, Babad (1990) argues that even though teachers try to provide emotional support and show more concern and vigilance in teaching low-expectancy students, the fact remains that these low achievers are the victims of more negative teacher effects.

Conclusion

This paper argues that teachers' expectations of their students' achievements are subject to a number of variables, including student gender and cultural background. As Australia is a highly multicultural country, with many schools having a large number of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, teachers need to ask themselves whether they consciously or unconsciously hold low expectations of non-Anglo-Australian students or students for whom English is not a first language. Likewise, these teachers admit they treat girls and boys differently, which may suggest teachers are not fostering the learning of boys adequately, due to lower expectations.

Second, this paper has argued that the strategies teachers use in order to motivate students for whom they hold lower expectations may instead reinforce those expectations and lower students' academic self-perceptions. The challenge for teachers is to provide appropriate levels of challenge without telegraphing to students expectations of low achievement. The teachers participating in this study believe in having realistic expectations and working just at their students' level. Moreover, they do not believe in pushing their students too hard in order to achieve more, fearing that students might feel de-motivated if they fail to accomplish the task. A concern raised by this finding is that, if teachers only provide low-achieving students with a combination of easy tasks and positive feedback, students may become accustomed to these kinds of expectations in the longer term, and will not strive to do difficult tasks, always achieving just at the level expected by their teachers. Students, upon recognising their

teacher expectations, behave in a way that conforms to those expectations (Atwell, 2001; Good & Brophy, 2000; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Thus, teacher expectations may cause students' achievements and vice versa. Furthermore, students may come to depend on teachers' positive comments to develop positive self-concept and motivation to enhance their achievements. Perhaps by displaying high expectations both for their students and for themselves, teachers may indeed break down barriers between students' present and future achievements. TEACH

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