

AARE CONFERENCE PAPER, 2008

Paper code: ALI 08820

Author: Rizwana Amjad Ali

Institution: Monash University Melbourne, Australia

Topic: Motivation and learning

Abstract

Teacher expectation is a powerful tool (Good & Brophy, 2000, p.109) in the hands of teachers, which they can use effectively to shape their students' future achievements. High teachers' expectations produce high students' achievements and low expectations produce low achievements (Capel, Leask & Turner, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1988; Brookover et al., 1982). This issue is important because the future of young children is in the hands of teachers and many of the teachers may be unaware of the importance of their expectations. This is particularly true for small children who are more susceptible to teacher expectations (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Raudenbush, 1984.). Previous research suggests that teachers' teaching styles are affected by the kind of expectations they hold for their students (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1969), thus determining their students' motivational level and success rate in future life. Velez (2006) believes, 'In order for student to be motivated they must have an inward belief in their ability to succeed' (p.15).

The purpose of this paper is to explore and describe how teachers in independent school settings in Melbourne attempt to communicate their expectations to students to help them develop positive self concepts. It seeks to identify whether they believe these expectations affect student achievement, and what motivational strategies these teachers use to enhance their students' learning.

This is a qualitative study theoretically informed by phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured open-ended interviews and results were critically analyzed and interpreted hermeneutically.

Four themes were identified from the data collected. Theme one is related to motivation and learning. The focus of this paper however is only on the first theme, that is, that teachers believe they can enhance their students' achievements by boosting their self esteem. Teachers lived experiences regarding this issue are discussed at length in this paper.

Introduction

Motivation is typically defined as an internal state that activates, guides, and maintains behaviour (Skunk, 1990, cited in Green, S.K., 2002, p.989). Research has found that teachers influence students' motivation through provision of experiences and communication of beliefs and expectancies (Green.S.K, 2002, p.). Student teacher interaction is also important in this regard. Teachers can motivate their students by boosting their self perception, which is imperative to perform better (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2000). Sense of achievements increase students' self esteem. Researchers (e.g.Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 1998) have attempted to find some link between self-concept and motivation. They state that realization of self is a key factor in motivational behaviour. Students' motivation to engage in a task is also influenced by the conception they hold of themselves (Jennings, 1993). Positive self conception to sustain motivation is important for the students to expend effort to complete a task.

Researchers found that younger children are more susceptible to teachers' expectancy effects (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Raudenbush, 1984) than students in higher grades, as they see themselves in the eyes of others (teachers, parents and other adults) and form self images. With high expectations they are more likely to form positive self-images and with low expectations their self-image is lowered. This will remain with them for the rest of their lives affecting their future achievement (Velez, 2006). Velez (2006) argues that the inward belief to succeed is central to motivation and is essential for lifelong success. Velez (2006) also strongly believes that educators can cultivate this self worth in themselves, their classrooms and their students through their intrinsic belief in them. Without that students can not be motivated in a real sense. Teachers' instructional practices are important in this regard, since they are largely dependent on their expectations for their students. Fraine et al. (2002) found that teachers tailor their instructional practices to match the academic level of their students. They refer to this as 'didactic fit', that is making adjustments in curriculum, resources, methods of instruction, quality learning time, assessment, etc., to fit the ability level of the class.

This suggests a close correlation between teachers' expectations, motivation and their students' achievements. Researchers have discovered a cyclical pattern between teachers' expectations and students' achievements (e.g. Atwell, 2001; Brookover et al., 1982; Good &

Brophy, 2000; Jussim, 1986; Jussim et al., 2005; Jussim & Harber, 2005). They believe teachers' expectations determine students' achievements. From the past 35 years, after the publication of 'Pygmalion in the classrooms' by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), researchers have been trying to explore how teachers communicate their expectations to their students and how they impact on their students' achievements. However, this paper will provide some fresh insights related to teachers' expectations, motivation and learning. It also provides a framework for teachers to organize and develop appropriate motivational strategies to enhance their students' self perception in order to increase their achievements.

Research project

This study is concerned with teachers' expectations about students' achievement. Previous research suggests that teacher's teaching styles are affected by the kind of expectations they hold for their students (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1969). Most of this research has been conducted in state school settings, and very little of this research compares teacher expectations in private school settings with teacher expectations in state school settings.

Thus, the purpose of my study is to explore and describe how teachers in independent school settings in Melbourne form expectations of their students, whether they believe these expectations affect student achievement, and how these teachers attempt to communicate their expectations to students.

Research aims

This study intends to address the following questions to understand in depth the phenomena of teacher expectations.

- 1) What do teachers understand by the notion of 'expectations'?
- 2) What expectations do they have of their students?
- 3) How do teachers form these expectations?
- 4) What factors affect their expectations?
- 5) How do teachers communicate their expectations?

6) What do they understand to be the relationship between teacher expectations and student achievement?

7) How do teachers believe they enact their expectations?

Methodology

Qualitative research methods have been seen as particularly useful in helping to unravel the factors affecting teachers' expectations of their students' achievements, which is the focus of this study.

Hermeneutic inquiry involves using a theoretical framework to focus the inquiry and to make decisions about the samples, subjects and research questions to be addressed. The theoretical framework of this study suggests that there is a strong correlation between teacher expectations and student achievements (Broke over et al., 1982; Good & Brophy; 1997, 2000; Jussim, 1986; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Students' achievements may confirm teacher expectations because these expectations create self-fulfilling prophecies. (Jussim, 1986; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Teachers adjust their teaching pedagogy and instruction to their expectations for their students and thereby treat their students differently (Cooper, 1986; Diamond, Randolph & Spillane, 2004; Good & Brophy, 2000; Sadker & Sadker, 1988), thus setting the stage for self-fulfilling prophecies to come true. Students, upon recognizing their teacher expectations, behave in a way that confirms to their teacher's expectations (Atwell, 2001; Brookover et al., 1982; Good and Brophy, 2000; Jussim, 1986; Jussim et al., 2005; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Thus, teacher expectations cause students' achievements. This theoretical framework informs the formulation of research questions and the selection of participants and clearly defines how the data are interpreted and findings are generated. Although there are many qualitative research methods to understand the contextual features of experience that affect teachers' practices, case study method was used for this study to achieve as full an understanding of the phenomenon as possible (Merriam,1988). Data were analysed by identifying themes and meanings interpreted in collaboration with the respondents following the principle of co-constitutionality.

Participants

The study involves five primary school teachers from two elite schools of South East Melbourne. In-depth semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted to get maximum response and deep understanding of the lived experiences of the respondents.

Findings

Four themes were identified from the data collected. Theme one is related to motivation and learning via self esteem. All the teachers across the interviews believe in boosting their students' self esteem to enhance their achievements. They believe teachers need to plan work to match their students' ability and they need to use different strategies to motivate them. Theme two refers to the type of expectations parents have for their children. Teachers claim that they are better judges of their students' achievements compared to parents, who have unrealistic expectations of their children and push them too hard to achieve the goals which they had been unable to achieve. Theme three highlights the importance of support teachers get from their students' parents. Teachers claim that they form expectations of their students on the basis of the support they get from their parents, unlike many teachers who form expectations on the basis of their students' behaviour, race, ethnicity and social class. Teachers' knowledge about the curriculum, chronological age and criteria for assessment at each level are factors which also help teachers in forming expectations. Theme four is the last but not the least theme. It is related to the factors that affect teachers' expectations. Teachers claim that time management is a factor that hinders them from achieving their expectations. Other factors such as students' nutrition, water, ESL background, are some of the factors that also affect in meeting teachers' expectations.

The focus of this paper however is only on the first theme, namely that teachers believe in enhancing their students' achievements by boosting their students' self esteem. Teachers' lived experiences regarding this issue are discussed in detail in this paper.

Teachers believe that they can affect students' achievements by promoting self esteem.

All the teachers across the interviews believe that they motivate their students by boosting their self esteem in order to enhance their achievements. They believe teachers need to plan work to match their students' ability and they need to use different strategies to motivate them.

Motivation and self esteem

These teachers believe that with high self esteem, students' self perception improves. This is directly related to motivation. With each success in school, their self perception will improve and they will feel motivated and will have the courage to learn in a better way, while with each failure their self esteem lowers and they will have low self perceptions. They will lose their self confidence further. As a result they would not learn much. They believe that at this point it becomes imperative for teachers to use different strategies to make the school work easier or to bring it at their level so that learners can do it and feel motivated. When asked what strategies these teachers use to boost their students' self esteem, one teacher, Leanne, commented:

A lot of children that we work with learning difficulties are very prone to low self-esteem ...they see on a daily basis within the classroom a whole range of things that they're really stuck with or they find challenging ... a lot of children ... at times become anxious about coming to school 'coz everything is just too hard and too challenging ... so the children have low expectations from themselves because if they keep their expectation low so then they are ... or to be in dangerous waters....so their opinion is they don't expect anything from themselves therefore they can't fail too much ... so again as we work with them, we work with them as I said break things down into little chunks to provide things that they can succeed in to give them feedback on that ... to develop their resilience and their persistence

Leanne believes that it is important to have realistic expectations from these students and convey that you have full trust in them to finish the given task successfully. This will help in promoting self esteem in students.

I try to show them that I believe in them ... ummm ... not in a false way ... ummm ... that my belief and my expectation of them is based on reality ... in relation of what their skill ... what they can succeed at ... and if a child is resistant to have a goal something ... their perception is the task is to beat ... and they're too worried about failing ... so all you need to do is then make it smaller ... it's negotiated in a different way or come from a different angle.

Rena's ideas are consistent with Leanne's. Rena believes:

The ones that might demotivate them 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 want to do ... because they can't do it ... just at their level ... that's why I said ones who are challenging, 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.

Thus, these teachers use these strategies to motivate their students to achieve as much as possible for them.

Mixed ability groupings and challenges

I found out through teachers' interviews that in the two schools I went to there were not only mixed ability students in their grades but also children with learning difficulties. These teachers have to cater for the specific needs of such children as well. Their expectations are dependent on their individual students. They can not have the same expectations from all their students. Thus, they face a lot of challenges while teaching them in order to motivate them to learn. Mary, who takes grade two, told about her experience with the mixed ability students in her grade.

In 2006, I have two children with severe learning problems. Severe meaning I was photocopying prep work for these two girls. One of them also had vision problem. Meaning what I was printing or photocopying, it has to be in larger print. That means extra work for me because once you set up your work during holiday that's it. and if you are getting work from grade ones or preps and parents, and sort of try to fix it up with your own activity for that day that means you are spending a lot of extra time for one or two or two four students.

Mary spoke further about another student with learning difficulty for whom she has to plan totally different work to match his ability level.

I had one child last year with me, who was a boy and he's left this year. Who had dyslexia problem. That was a huge problem ... He was in my grade for term 3 to 4, but I managed. The problem was that I had to have a different curriculum just for him. Because whatever I was teaching, it was not appropriate for him. Not at all. He was not even able to read alphabets, no clock phonics, numbers nothing ... and we knew in the end ... I actually asked for assessment by the psychologist. When they finished the assessment they found that it was a child who has a problem of learning difficulty ... it was not intellectual. He was quite intelligent ... But it was mainly with the vision ... Whatever he read from the print he could not interpret it

into his brain and work out ... that was the main problem ... so I always get mixed ability students in my grade.

Teachers believe they have to repeat the taught concept a number of times to help students learn the concept. Mary for example stated:, "I have to repeat myself ... sometimes it happens I have explained one thing five times to the same child but I have to if I want a result or an outcome I have to do it". However Mary firmly commented that teachers can help these students as much as they can but not beyond that. She said,

I mean I can stay at school until 4:30 to help a child but I can't go beyond that. I can stay during my lunch break. That I have done and do it but I can't go beyond that.

Bob, like Mary, has mixed ability groups in his grade. He told:

I have a range of children in ability in terms of a year. Ability from my lowest kids, I have one Autistic child in my classroom. He is operating at grade one or two standard. And I have got a couple of girls who would be from literacy point of view, probably of year nine standard. So it's a very wide width in a classroom.

However, Bob is quite comfortable with mixed ability groups as he has no behaviour issues with this class. However, he makes some alterations in the designed curriculum according to his students' ability level

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 time table and some simple word mathematics questions. So in that manner I can drop activities for him that he does not have to complete .

When asked Bob what kind of work he plans for his less able and high ability students, he explained that essentially the curriculum is the same, "We have the philosophy instead of taking children vertically all the time; we take them laterally as well". So they get a question in future which is challenging, giving them another strategy still to approach it. He explained how he conducted such activities as a part of curriculum that he plans for his high and low achievers

At the moment for example I am doing an activity on economy, so my lesser able children just to get them to understand market trends in supply and demand. They may be looking at how much a Thai one dollar is compared to one Australian dollar for example. That might be their challenge. The children who are more gifted I am asking them still looking at finance and economy to look at whether or not it's better for me to have my back garden paved in concrete, to have a garden... one of the cost of both ... you do a model and present your model back to me. So their mathematical skills are in real life and immediate, where other kids are struggling to understand the simple concepts.

Leanne like Bob told me that the class teachers are expected to create the curriculum for all students in the class. So for the ones who have greater difficulties they might have an essential task, but they might differentiate it to break it into smaller steps because of childhood difficulties. The amount of work might be reduced and might be put it into slightly different format if that is appropriate for the child who is very able they would tend to open and then have it open ended.

Flexible approach and expectations

Most of these teachers believe just like Bob and Leanne in making adjustments and having flexibility in handling the curriculum and having expectations to meet their students' individual needs. Mary and Malinda argued that they need to make alterations in their expectations on the basis of their individual students. They believe we can not have the same expectations from all our students.

Mary for example said:

I can't stick to my expectations very strictly because I can't do that...I mean...at least in our school... it won't happen... because you have to be flexible and you have to be able to cater for each individual child in your classroom .

Teachers believe in conveying their expectations at the beginning of the lesson and telling students clearly how they want that work to be done. Sometimes teachers show examples of the best work even. They believe there are kids who know their teachers' expectations and they are sort of their best ability group who pick up their expectations and remember what

they are expected to do – and they do it. Sometimes they even go beyond their expectations. That these teachers can see automatically. But these teachers believe they need to remain flexible for those who can not achieve the goal for whatever reason. Mary expressed this point as follows:

I have to be flexible in my expectations and sort of slow down a little bit for them and tell them okay, I expect you to do this half page by the end of this lesson and you should be fine. So they still know that I still give my expectations for my weaker children because otherwise they will be lost. They have to know what I have to do and when do I have to finish it off. Because if you don't give them a limit sort of time or expectations they probably keep on going on and on...and on....

Thus, these mixed ability groups in the classroom are a real challenge for these teachers in terms of planning, conducting and monitoring activities.

Role of teachers' comments/ remarks in motivating students.

All the teachers across interviews claim that they motivate their students by giving positive comments. Rena, for example, reports saying things like “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”. Rena believes that these comments boost up their self esteem “They want to show they can do it ... they try hard for me ... and I can see it”

Mary however is very specific in her comments to weak students. She felt that,

For the weaker children I always be very positive with my comments and I really mean it and I have to encourage them. Because with a lot of positive comments and remarks. For instance if you go through with their portfolio for my weaker children For instance I have got someone who has got 12 out of 40 for their maths test. I will not write too bad ... or ... I will try to put it in a nice positive way still. When this child he or she reads my comments, won't feel that Mrs. J is upset with me because I have not even passed my test. So I am trying to be positive with them. I am always positive with all my children but those who are like able to do things I don't say much to them because they know what to do. I explain it once, maybe twice and they will do it. So for them it's just like say for instance well done will be enough for that type of children.

Bob however believes his comments are not just general flowery comments. He is very selective and tries to pin point things he is looking at.

To me it's very much related to what I am expecting. So if I was expecting a child to paste in a photo, to have a clear voice in their writing, and to have a graph they have done in Excel and import in a Word document ... these are the things I will focus on. I will say ... well done you have achieved all those three goals and I particularly like the way you have expanded on and I will select one factor and sort of discuss with the child.

Bob sometimes writes entries in students' school diaries on traffic day ... 'I love the way you did your writing last week, well done'. And he strongly believes that his positive comments motivate his students.

Impact of positive feedback

The participating teachers believe it is important to give positive feedback to motivate their students. They think children who have negative self perceptions of themselves lack confidence and are usually scared of making mistakes. These teachers always try to boost their students' self esteem by telling them that we are human beings and we all make mistakes. Mary for example tells her students "you make mistakes, you learn from your mistakes. Don't feel bad about it. It's perfectly okay if you make mistake and you will only learn by doing mistakes". She always gives them this positive encouragement to her students. Leanne and Malinda motivate their students in similar manner. Malinda expects her students to try their hardest, to put in their best effort that they can.....and I always say to them that... no matter ..and make it clear to them right from the start of the year and all the way through that as long as they try their best., it does not matter If they get things wrong ...because that's always something they can improve on ...the main thing is they try their hardest...

Sometimes Mary deliberately makes spelling mistakes and asks her students about the correct spellings and makes them realize that she is a teacher and she can make mistakes, so they can also make mistakes. She believes this helps students to build up their confidence.

Bob and Mary both believe that we all like positive feed back and we all work hard if we know somebody is watching closely and we have a good positive feed back loop from that.

Bob says

I think these children are very much the same. We are doing work at the moment on different countries and today I work with four kids whose physical hand skills on mapping are very poor and very low so I showed them some little tricks today and they were working here with me on this table, and constantly I am saying ... 'Do you know that I like the way you did that? Can you show us how you do that again? Oh that's fantastic see that, that's great!' so they are learning by me giving him the feedback loop on my expectations.

Bob expressed his satisfaction at seeing these students 'puff up their chests' with a little smile on their lips.

Discussion

This issue of promoting self esteem in students to enhance their academic achievements is clearly an important factor for these teachers. If teachers are able to build a high self perception for these students they will be motivated to achieve better throughout their lives as this high self image will stay with them forever (Velez,2006). These teachers do not expect too little or too much from their children but just that they work optimally at their level. When this level is determined they clearly know what to expect from whom. This helps them to plan activities for them or to drop some activities according to the child's capability. They adjust their instructional practices according to the ability level of the students (Fraine, et al., 2002). These teachers want to feel satisfied by the end of the day.

The participating teachers made three main claims in this regard.

- Teachers face a lot of challenges with mixed ability groups particularly children with learning difficulties.

- Teachers can improve their students' self perception by adopting a flexible approach in their expectations.
- Teacher's positive remarks and feedback have a motivating impact on their students.

Their first claim refers to mixed ability grouping and the challenges faced by these teachers. This mixed ability grouping is an issue for these teachers, as they may have a wide gap ability-wise ranging from children operating at grade one or two level to grade nine level within the same class. So most of the time they are running activities in a number of groups in order to cater for differentiation, which is difficult. These teachers feel they can not give personal or one to one attention to their less able students in a class of on average 22 students. They can just give their lunch breaks and can sit with them after school. Teachers say they have to repeat themselves many times to help these students learn as they tend to forget things easily. They need a lot of reinforcement to reproduce what has been taught.

Teachers face even more challenges in motivating their students with learning difficulties who have developed negative self perceptions for themselves (Lindsay and Dockrell, 2000). So teachers have to put extra effort in boosting up their self esteem. They have to devise a special curriculum for them, photocopying work sheets (sometimes in larger font size), sometimes consulting work from other grades to match the tasks with students' ability levels. That means they have to put extra effort, time and energy to provide them with such tasks. They also feel it's hard to manage these activities alongside other class activities. So it is an extra burden on them if they have to plan a totally different curriculum for these students. They believe if teachers are restless or fatigued they may not work as effectively as they should. This may become a hindrance in achieving their expectations.

The second claim is that teachers believe by using a flexible approach in their expectations for their students they can motivate them to perform better. They can improve their self perception

and thus improve their performance. They do not expect the same from all their students and thus have different expectations from all their students. These teachers believe they have realistic expectations of their students. If they expect too much and their students' can not achieve it, this will demotivate them. Once the students feel they can do a task and feel happy about it, this will automatically affect their self esteem in a positive manner which will help in forming a positive self image and enhancing their achievements (Lindsay and Dockrell, 2000). These teachers ideas match those of Velez (2006, p.17) who believes teachers need to have "S.M.A.R.T." (Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time sensitive) objectives for their students which they can easily achieve.

These teachers tailor their instructional practices to the academic levels of their students, breaking tasks in little chunks or giving simpler tasks in the beginning and later introducing more difficult or challenging tasks (Fraine, et al., 2002), or dropping some activities which are beyond their level of understanding and doing in small steps. Their motive is to motivate their students by giving them tasks which they can easily accomplish without getting frustrated (Brophy,1987 p.42). Teachers' perspectives also align with Diamond, Randolph and Spillane (2004) findings that in some schools teachers who had a strong sense of responsibility for students' performance adjusted their instructional practices to meet students' needs and they did not look only at their students' deficits. Their views are also consistent with researchers (e.g. Atwell, 2001; Ross & Gray, 2006; Wertheim & Leyser, 2002) who believe that high efficacy teachers try harder, use management strategies that stimulate student autonomy, attend more closely to low ability student needs, and modify students' ability perceptions. They believe with each success at school they feel motivated and feel encouraged to learn (Lindsay and Dockrell,2000).These teachers are trying to provide them opportunities and make sure their students succeed and show their trust and belief in their students' ability to succeed.

Like Velez (2006), they believe "instructors demonstrate belief in student's abilities and validate self-worth' (p.16).

These teachers' believe that positive comments and remarks have a powerful effect on students. The third claim these teachers made is that their positive comments or remarks motivate their students. They feel highly motivated and try to please their teacher further and put all their effort into their work to listen to these comments again. Their self perception improves which will improve their performance. These teachers say they deliberately choose certain comments and remarks to motivate their students. Some teachers reserve specific comments for their less able students and they really mean them to improve. Some select particular comments which will be largely dependent on the objective of the activity. Their comments are more meaningful and based on reality, just not flowery comments to please students. But they are chosen carefully to bring improvements in the required skills. They believe that positive feed back motivate and negative feed back demotivate students ((Brophy 1987; Velez, 2006). Their ideas are inline with Lindsay & Dockrell(2000) ideas who believe negative feed back and failure at school will cause frustration and establish a lower self image .These teachers' make all the effort to show high expectations for their students through their comments and feedback to motivate them. These teachers' ideas are consistent with researchers' (e.g. Parsons, Kaczala and Meece, 1982) ideas who found that expressions of high expectations raised students' confidence.

These responsible teachers want to gain the satisfaction of seeing their students learning and never give up. They keep on trying different strategies to help their students. They put all their effort in order to motivate their students to achieve their best. Ross et al. (2008, p.143) expressed their views about responsible teachers, which seem apt for my participant teachers as well

They insist that children try hard, encourage others to try hard, and give their best effort every day. Most important they work tirelessly and consistently to ensure that children's efforts are successful. Just as they insist that children never give up on themselves, these teachers never give up on children.

Thus this study reveals a strong correlation between motivation and self perception. And through the interplay of teachers' expectations, teachers can motivate their students to learn by boosting their self esteem.

This paper confirms the validity of the concept of the interconnectivity of motivation, self perception and learning. In order to motivate children, teachers need to enhance their self perception. Low self perception leads to lower level of motivation, which in turn results in low academic achievements or vice versa. Thus they together have a profound impact on students' achievements. The study, in unison with others (eg Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), clearly reveals the fact that a lot more learning is taking place in classrooms where children are motivated to learn.

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