

An Investigation into the Impact of Teacher Expectations on Student Achievement in the Irish Post-Primary Classroom with Special Reference to the Impact it has on Irish Travellers Students: Teacher and Irish Traveller Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the impact of teacher expectations on student achievement in the Irish post-primary classroom with special reference to the impact it has on Irish Traveller students. While the impact of teacher expectations on student achievement has been well documented in the past, there is a gap in literature addressing it from an Irish context. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, this study interviewed three post-primary teachers, two final year student teachers and two adult members from the Travelling Community. It explored teacher's perspectives on the impact of teacher expectations in the post-primary classroom. In addition to this, it also explored the impact of teacher expectations on the achievement of Irish Travellers in the post-primary classroom from the perspective of both teachers and Irish Travellers. The data collected from participants of this study was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study show that teacher's expectations play an influential role in the achievement of students in the post-primary classroom. It was also found that Irish Travellers are generally categorised as low expectancy students by their post-primary teachers. Additionally, it was also found that this categorisation could play an influential role in the low achievement rates of Irish Travellers at post-primary level.

INTRODUCTION

The significance of teacher expectations in facilitating student learning has long been recognized in the educational world (e.g., Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Jussim and Harber 1986; Oakes 1985). Research shows that it is important for teachers to have expectations for all their students to allow for both the teacher and student to set academic goals for the school year (De Boer et al. 2018). The general claim made about the impact of teacher expectations is that high expectations will lead to higher student achievement (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). According to Good and Brophy (1974) when teachers set goals for students and support them, they will achieve the goals prophesied. However, the majority of research conducted on the impact of teacher expectations on student achievement comes from a primarily American context. Therefore, this study sought to gain an insight into the impact of teacher expectations on student achievement in the Irish post-primary classroom.

It is also shown through research that expectations teachers have for students are related to various attributes. These various attributes are teacher's behaviours, teacher's beliefs, and student's characteristics (Rosenthal 1968; Bennett et al. 1993; Weinstein 2002). The findings of many studies conducted on teacher expectations also indicate that ascribed student characteristics such as race, ethnicity and gender often play a role in the formation of a teacher's expectations (e.g., Brophy and Good 1974; Deusk and Joseph 1983). Furthermore, ethnic minority membership is often considered to be a key detriment in the formation of low teacher expectations for students from ethnic minorities (e.g., Owaja 2007; Brophy 1987). However, the majority of this research has been conducted on ethnic minority groups associated with the United States of America (USA) and New World Countries. Therefore, this study sought to gain an insight into the impact of teacher expectations on the education of one of Ireland's biggest minority groups, Irish Travellers (Central Statistics Office 2016).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

As the purpose of this study was to gain insight into individuals' experiences and perceptions of the phenomena of interest, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method of data collection (McNamara 1999). According to Jackson et al (2007) a quantitative researcher relies on a series of finite questions to provoke categorised responses from participants on their experience with a given phenomenon. However, the authors describe a qualitative researcher as someone who relies on general questions to provoke detailed autonomous responses from participants about their experience with the phenomenon. Therefore, based on the research approach adopted for this study, a semi – structured approach was applied during interviews to enable the researcher and participants a more autonomous approach (Gillham 2002). The researcher had originally scheduled for interviews to take place face to face, but due to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions this was not possible. Therefore, interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. This study made use of a mixed sampling method. The majority of participants in this study were identified and selected by the researcher using a purposive sampling method. This method was adopted by the researcher to allow for the identification and selection of individuals on the basis of their relevance to the phenomena of interest (Eitan 2016). However, one participant in this study was referred to the researcher by another participant using a snowball sampling method (Naderifar et al 2017). The participants of this study include three teachers with a minimum of ten years teaching experience, two final year student teachers and two adult members of the Travelling Community. The data collected for this study was analysed by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a commonly used method for systemically identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2012). The researcher coded interview transcripts to identify common themes amongst participant responses, which then allowed for a comparison with existing literature.



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FINDINGS/ RESULTS

Teacher's Views on the Influence of Teacher Expectations

The teachers in this study endorsed a unified belief that teacher expectations play an important role in facilitating student learning, progression, and achievement in the post-primary classroom. Furthermore, there was a coherence amongst most teachers that teacher expectations often create prophesied learning outcomes for students in the post-primary classroom.

A Variance in Teacher's Behaviour Towards Low and High Expectancy Students

A strong theme that emerged amongst teachers in this study was the view that a teacher's behaviour differed greatly depending on their expectations for students. The majority of teachers felt that students who are categorised as low expectancy students are often considered to be academically less able by their teachers, which results in their teachers creating a less challenging learning environment for them. Furthermore, teachers in this study expressed a view that teachers demonstrate low expectations for students by presenting them with low-level instructional practices in the classroom. Whereas the majority of teachers in this study expressed that students who are considered high expectancy students by their teachers are often perceived as well capable in the classroom which constitutes to their teachers presenting them with high- level and challenging instructional practices in the classroom.

Negative Impacts of Low Expectations

The teachers in this study were of agreeance that the effect of low expectations on a student's learning and progression was detrimental to their overall achievement in the post -primary classroom. Some of the teachers also expressed a view that when teachers form low expectations for students it leads to students forming low self- expectations. This according to the teachers in this study could result in students feeling less motivated to succeed in the post-primary classroom.

Low Expectations for Irish Travellers

Teachers in this study felt Irish Traveller students in general are categorised as low expectancy students by their teachers in the post-primary classroom. This according to the majority of teachers in this study is grounded on a presumption that Irish Travellers are often perceived as academically less able, disruptive, and disengaged in the post-primary classroom.

Teacher's Views on the Impact of Low Expectations on Irish Travellers

There was a coherence amongst all teachers in this study that low expectations for Irish Travellers in the post-primary classroom negatively impacts their achievement rates at post-primary level. This echoes the findings of Strand (2013) which found that low expectations for ethnic minority students often contributes to their low achievement rates in education. In addition to this, the majority of teachers in this study felt that Irish Travellers are not offered a learning environment where they are challenged to progress further than their current expectations.

Irish Travellers Viewed their Experiences with Teacher Expectations Negatively

Both of the Irish Traveller participants in this study felt their teachers had low expectations for them in post-primary school. *"They expected nothing from me in school I was never going to do anything, never going to have anything"* (Irish Traveller Male 2021). This according to both participants made them feel unsure of whether they were good enough to progress through post-primary education. *"You know as a young teenager I wasn't sure if I should even stay in school or if I even wanted to because of the way I was treated by them [teachers]"* (Irish Traveller Female 2021). Furthermore, the female Irish Traveller participant felt her teachers had a stereotypical view of her aspirations in life. This according to the participant resulted in her teachers showing little concern for her progression in post-primary school, despite a belief that she showed potential.

Resentment Towards Teachers

Both of the Irish Traveller participants in this study expressed a level of resentment towards their teachers for the way they were treated in school. The male Irish Traveller participant in particular struggled to contain his anger when reflecting on an experience, he had with one of his teachers in post-primary school. Furthermore, there was a sense amongst both Irish Travellers participants that this resentment has left them sceptical of the quality of care their own children are receiving in school.

A Need for Equal Treatment

The Irish Traveller participants in this study both felt they were not granted the same opportunities as other students in their schools, which left them both feeling dissatisfied. Therefore, both Irish Traveller participants highlighted a need for equal treatment for Irish Travellers in post-primary school. This according to both participants would create a more positive outlook on education within the Travelling Community.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study offered insight into the perspectives of both post-primary teachers and adults from the Travelling Community. It was evident from the data collected that teachers were of the opinion that teacher expectations play an important role in the classroom particularly when it comes to student achievement. Furthermore, the teachers in this study felt that a teacher's expectations for their students became apparent through the type of instructional practices applied within their classroom. The teachers in this study also expressed a common belief that Irish Traveller students are often categorized as low expectancy students by their teachers with some of the teachers in this study stating they themselves have low expectations for Irish Travellers students. Additionally, the teachers in this study felt that low expectations for Irish Traveller students negatively impacts their achievement rates at post- primary level. The experiences of Irish Traveller participants in this study with regard to their teacher's expectations also link up with the teachers' views in this study as they both expressed that their teachers had low expectations for them in post-primary school. It was evident that the Irish Traveller participants in this study felt they were treated unfairly by their teachers in school on account of their membership of the Travelling Community. On account of their bad experiences with teachers in post-primary school both Irish Traveller participants called on teachers in Ireland to treat Irish Travellers equally.

In light of the findings of this study the following recommendations were derived with regard, to practice, policy, and further research:

- It is apparent from existing literature and the findings of this study that teacher expectations play an influential role on the achievement of students in the post-primary classroom. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers in Ireland should ensure that they have high expectations for all their students including Irish Travellers.
- An awareness of the effect of teacher expectations on student achievement should be incorporated into Initial Trainee Education modules.
- Schools in Ireland should ensure that Irish Travellers are offered equal opportunities in education.
- Schools in Ireland should ensure that teachers have high expectations of all learners and employ teaching methodologies and strategies that create an enhanced and progressive learning environment.
- The Department of Education and Skills should impose sanctions to schools who fail to offer Irish Travellers equal opportunities in education.
- The Department of Education and Skills should create a booklet with methodologies and techniques teachers can use to show high expectations for all learners in their classrooms.
- To develop a full-scale picture of the role teacher expectations, play in facilitating student learning and achievement in the Irish post-primary classroom more research will need to be conducted. Therefore, it is recommended that a wide scale research project needs to take place.
- To develop a full picture of the impact of teacher expectations on the achievement of Irish Travellers in the post-primary classroom, a wide scale research project will need to be conducted with a more generalizable representation of the Travelling Community.
- It would also be beneficial to research the impact of teacher expectations on the academic achievement of other ethnic minority groups in Ireland.

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