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Teacher Expectations and the Black-White Scholastic Achievement Gap

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Abstract

Decades after the desegregation of schools, a Black-White achievement gap remains in the American school system. Researchers have given many possible explanations, including socioeconomic factors and teachers' expectations of their students. In this paper, I summarize some of the literature on racial prejudice in teacher expectations and its impact on students' academic and personal lives. I also analyze the role of stereotypes and other factors in teacher expectations and the communication of explicit and implicit expectations through teaching practices and nonverbal behavior. Finally, I discuss the use of teacher workshops as a possible means for narrowing the ethnic achievement gap.

Keywords: teacher expectations; academic achievement; African American students; self-fulfilling prophecy; ethnic achievement gap

Teacher Expectations and the Black-White Scholastic Achievement Gap

After the historic case of *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education* (1954), the desegregation of schools led to a more equal distribution of financial and other resources, and the academic achievement gap between Blacks (African Americans) and Whites (Caucasians) began to narrow. This trend continued until the 1990s, when the gap began to widen again (American Psychological Association, 2012; Lee, 2002). Data from the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that African Americans scored an average of 8.33% lower than Caucasians in the basic subjects of reading, mathematics, and science. The most common explanation for these results involves students' socioeconomic status (SES) and how it affects lifestyles and access to resources. However, though SES is a contributing factor in student achievement, there are others (Lee, 2002; Steele, 1997). Differences in scholastic achievement exist even when African-American and Caucasian students come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006; Steele, 1997). Fryer and Levitt (2004) pointed out that children in both ethnic categories enter kindergarten with similar cognitive capabilities, but, within two years of schooling, a gap appears in their test scores on standardized achievement tests. This phenomenon suggests that in-school factors need to be examined in order to explain the achievement gap.

In 1968, Rosenthal and Jacobson published a now-famous study titled "Pygmalion in the Classroom." In this study, the authors told teachers before the school year began that certain students were expected to experience a year of substantial intellectual growth compared to the other students. At the end of the study, the researchers found these students were, in fact, performing significantly better than their peers were. Given that the students had been selected randomly at the outset, the only difference that existed between these students and the others is that the teachers *believed* they would perform better. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) called the effect a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, a term that Merton (1948) had coined 20 years earlier and defined as "a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true" (p. 195). The school-based finding, now known as the Pygmalion effect,

was quickly replicated in dozens of other studies (see Raudenbush, 1984). Babad, Inbar, and Rosenthal (1982) also found what they called the *Golem effect*, a corollary to the Pygmalion effect used to describe the detrimental influences of negative expectations on student performance. That is, teachers' expectations could impact students' achievement in either a positive or a negative direction.

Expectations can form in many ways, but ethnicity affects expectations during first encounters (Devine, 1989). This happens because most people default to familiar stereotypes when making judgments about others because it is cognitively easier to do so (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). In the United States, there is a history of labeling African Americans as intellectually inferior, and this stereotype persists explicitly and implicitly today. Furthermore, many teachers observe the achievement gap in their own classes or in policies addressing the gap. The frequent mental pairing of minority students with lower scores supplies the stereotype (Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Osborne, & Sibley, 2016), which may remain largely intact despite teachers' inclusion in conferences, workshops, and in-service training that addresses multicultural appreciation and diversity (Parks & Kennedy, 2007).

Teachers' prejudices, even if only implicit, can lower their expectations of students' performance, resulting in lower academic achievement as the students conform to the expectations they perceive in their teachers. In this literature review, I will analyze the impact of teachers' expectations on students, factors that promote ethnic prejudices in teacher's expectations, and how these expectations are communicated to the students. I will also address possible mediating factors, such as students' self-concept, SES, and teacher ethnicity. Finally, I will propose possible means for reducing the effects of teacher expectations on the achievement gap.

The Impact of Teacher Expectations on Student Achievement

Because teacher expectations impact student performance positively and negatively, those expectations can predict differences in students' academic achievement at the end of the school year, even when the students begin the year with similar academic records and performance (Friedrich, Flunger, Nagengast, Jonkmann, & Trautwein, 2015; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Given that ethnicity is one of the

most significant factors influencing teacher expectations, the gap between African-American students' achievement and that of their Caucasian peers is understandable (Pigott & Cowen, 2000). Teachers consistently rate the former lower than the latter when evaluating student presentations, even when the only difference presented in the students' responses is ethnicity (Glock, 2016; Shepherd, 2011). When cumulated across the school year, the difference can result in lower grades and lower standardized test scores for African-American students (Friedrich et al., 2015).

It may also be the case that African-American students are more likely to conform to their teachers' underestimations of academic ability and less likely to benefit from overestimations (McKown & Weinstein, 2002). Americans have a long history of dictating African Americans' behavior (e.g., slavery, segregation, and redlining). As a result, it is possible that, over time, African Americans internalized these ideas of inferiority (Anderson-Clark, Green, & Henley, 2008). McKown and Weinstein (2008) proposed that others' expectations can lead to ethnic differences through internalization, as occurs when students perceive what their teachers expect of them and adjust their behaviors and beliefs accordingly. This internalization may also affect students' self-perceptions and their performance at school and elsewhere (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Although children can form their own conceptions of self based on what they have previously accomplished, oftentimes their self-concepts are heavily influenced by teacher evaluations of their performance, especially when they are younger (Marsh, Craven, & Debus, 1998). Rubie-Davies (2006) tracked the effects of teacher expectations on students' self-perceptions and found that high expectations were correlated with slight improvement in self-perception over the school year, but low expectations were correlated with lower self-perception, sometimes dramatically lower.

The Development of Expectations in Teachers and Students

Understanding how expectations are formed is vital to recognizing prejudices and preventing them. The process can also be useful in developing and implementing means to diminish the achievement gap. Stereotyping and school factors play some of the largest roles in the formation of expectations in teachers and students.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are a form of generalized knowledge about the attributes of the members of a specific group. It often occurs unconsciously in order to expedite the processing information about an individual (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Classroom teachers have been shown to rely on stereotypes when evaluating a student's potential for success in the classroom and beyond (Parks & Kennedy, 2007). When a person observes someone who does not confirm the stereotype of the group she or he is perceived to belong to, a more effortful processing of information is required, which may result in the observer's reevaluation of the stereotype and an analysis of the person as an individual (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Glock (2016) examined stereotypical expectations in teachers' judgments of students, with the stereotype being that African Americans perform less well than their Caucasian peers do. She found that teachers rated African-American students lower than their Caucasian peers in language proficiency, but, when presented with an above-average African-American student who disconfirmed the stereotype, teachers actually rated that student higher than her or his Caucasian peers. The author proposed that teachers rated the exceptional student higher in this case because she or he exceeded the teachers' expectations relative to their Caucasian peers.

Ethnicity of teachers. It seems reasonable that teachers would be more capable of identifying with students of their same ethnicity and that their expectations would not be influenced as much by ethnic stereotypes, but researchers have shown that this is not the case (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008; Pigott & Cowen, 2000). African-American teachers tend to have higher expectations and to rate their African-American students higher than their Caucasian counterparts, but they still consistently rate their Black students lower than their White students, indicating that teachers of congruent ethnicity do not act as buffers against racial stereotypes (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008; Pigott & Cowen, 2008).

Student self-concept and stereotype threat. As already mentioned, students' self-concept can be heavily influenced by the expectations of others due to internalization (Marsh et al., 1998). Stereotypes can also affect students in a way known as stereotype threat. According to Steele and Aronson (1995), "Stereotype threat is being at risk of

confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (p. 797). The fear of confirming the negative stereotype may produce stress and thereby impede one's abilities to perform, thus potentially confirming the stereotype. Steele and Aronson found that this fear impaired African-American college students' performance on a test of diagnostic ability. However, when told in advance that the same test was not representative of intellectual ability, African-American students performed no differently than Caucasians did.

SES as a mediating factor. SES can also be influential in stereotypes, as African Americans are more likely to belong to a lower socioeconomic class (Speybroeck et al., 2012). However, even when students come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic differences in expectations and academic achievement still exist (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Nevertheless, SES can play a major role in determining the quality of schooling available for students, which also can influence teacher expectations and lead to greater disparities in ethnic achievement.

School Factors

Schools often have reputations, and enrollment at a particular school can influence how its students are perceived. Private schools are usually more prestigious than public schools, which may lead to higher expectations by parents and teachers of the private-school student's academic achievement. By contrast, inner-city schools are often associated with a lack of resources, a poor quality of education, and unmotivated students, thus lowering the expectations of their achievement. Teachers may form their expectations of new students who attend a particular school based on their previous associations with other students there. They view the students collectively rather than individually (McKown & Weinstein, 2008).

Student body diversity. Researchers have reported that the student-body composition and the academic reputation of a school also affect expectations (Brault, Janosz, & Archambault, 2014). Teachers may judge schools based on encounters with its students just as many people base their judgments of an organization on its members. Schools with a preponderance of African-American students tend to have lower teacher expectations (Brault et al., 2014; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). In classrooms with only one or two African-American students, teachers generally are more inclined to form

expectations of these students based on their individual performance, whereas, in classrooms with more African-American students, teachers may judge students as a whole instead of as individuals.

Academic reputation. The achievements of individual students and of student bodies in general appear to have the most influence on teacher expectations, completely removing the differences found in the socioeconomic compositions of schools (Brault et al., 2014). For example, teachers may talk to colleagues who teach students at lower grade levels to learn if any of their incoming students are likely to be problematic during the upcoming school year. Other teachers may volunteer who they believe the brightest students are. As the new teacher listens to these reports, they will already be forming their own expectations of the child without ever meeting him or her, making it more difficult for the student to change. Another factor, already mentioned, is that teachers may form expectations on the basis of a school's overall academic performance. Schools with a history of problems may be associated with lower teacher expectations for students at or from that school, in turn leading to lower achievement and perpetuating the self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Communication of Expectations

Each classroom teacher communicates his or her expectations differently. Some provide explicit, individualized instructions for their students to follow, such as using a reading chart with daily assignments. Others may not be as clear but still convey to their students an impression of what they expect.

Explicit Expectations

Explicit expectations are those that teachers intentionally and overtly share with their students (Peterson et al., 2016). Stereotypes and prejudices do not always influence explicit expectations (Devine, 1989), making them more accurately reflective of actual student performance while remaining unreflective of what teachers may actually believe.

Teachers typically prefer students who perform above average (Glock, 2016) and treat them differently from other students in the classroom. This differential treatment contributes to the accelerated performance of such students (Brophy, 1983; Peterson et al., 2016; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006; Rubie-Davies,

Peterson, Sibley, & Rosenthal, 2015). For example, teachers provide more learning opportunities to students for whom they have high expectations (Peterson et al., 2016). Brophy (1983) provided a list of seventeen ways in which teachers respond differently to students of whom they have low expectations than to students of whom they have high expectations, including giving the former less time to answer questions, criticizing them more, paying less attention to their comments, demanding less of them, and even treating them differently in personal interactions, such as being less likely to start a conversation with them or being less likely to produce good feedback to them. Teachers have reported that students who fall into the two categories of expectation need to be taught differently in order to learn (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015).

Implicit Expectations

In recent years, researchers have begun to use implicit measures to more accurately identify teachers' prejudices (Peterson et al., 2016; Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). Implicit measures may be more accurate because explicit measures are often distorted by social desirability (Van den Bergh et al., 2010). Implicit expectations are often influenced by biases. Though teachers may avoid explicitly expressing their biases, they nevertheless communicate them to their students unconsciously and spontaneously as nonverbal behavior (Asendorpf, Banse, & Mücke, 2002).

Many nonverbal cues are universal, and most people are capable of interpreting them from a young age. Babad and Taylor (1992) found that 10-year-old students in New Zealand could identify the high or low expectations of an Israeli teacher for his or her students after only 10 seconds of video, despite being unable to understand what the teacher was saying. If teachers are not clear with their explicit expectations, students may turn to nonverbal cues in order to understand what teachers expect of them (Peterson et al., 2016). When teachers have internalized stereotypes or implicit prejudices that lead to lower expectations of African American students, those students may readily identify and adopt these expectations, even if the teacher tries to suppress them.

Recommendations

Teacher workshops can draw attention to the ways in which teachers interact differently with students of whom they have low or high expectations. This may prompt teachers to consciously adjust their teaching methods and body language in order to express consistently positive expectations of all students (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). Researchers have found that, when teachers complete such workshops, their students' scores on academic achievement tests may increase by an amount equivalent to three additional months of schooling (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015). These findings suggest that one possible way to narrow the achievement gap would be for teachers to express high expectations for all their students. When teachers are explicit about what they envision their students being capable of, their students may become less attentive to the teacher's nonverbal cues, thereby diminishing the influence of implicit prejudices or biases and possibly reducing the Black-White scholastic achievement gap (Peterson et al., 2016).

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