

I think I can: Exploring expectations about education and achievement in secondary schools

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BELA (Beliefs and Expectations about Learning and Achievement) is a three-year project designed to explore student, teacher and parent conceptions and expectations of education and learning at secondary school level. The project has been funded by the Cognition Education Research Trust. The first phase explored student, parent and teacher beliefs about and expectations of schooling through focus groups. The focus groups were designed to inform the development of a national survey instrument which will be implemented in the second phase of the project. The survey will be administered across a nationwide representative sample of approximately 30 schools and will involve around 600 teachers, 2500 students and 2500 parents. It will further explore beliefs and expectations of the three groups. The final phase of the project will see the introduction of a target setting instrument to 30 schools. This instrument will allow teachers and students to set targets related to their expectations for achievement in the year of the intervention. Students will be able to track their own progress in English and mathematics, set targets and find what they need to do in order to reach their goals. It is hoped that the intervention will facilitate student self-directed learning and lead to both teachers and students setting realistic goals for student learning.

The project is important as it will address a number of gaps in the current literature related to teacher expectations and beliefs. The field of teacher expectations began with the seminal work of Robert Rosenthal (1968) commonly known as the Pygmalion Experiment. Despite some scathing criticisms of this experiment at the time (Snow 1969) Rosenthal's work spawned a fruitful area of psychological research. Much of the research that followed, however, concentrated on exploring teacher expectations at the primary school level. Evidence showed that the effects of teacher expectations on younger primary school students were more salient than those on older students (Kuklinski and Weinstein 2001) and hence secondary students tended to be ignored in exploring the teacher-student expectation dichotomy.

Further, much of the teacher expectation research has focused on student characteristics that result in teachers having high or low expectations for individual students. For example, aspects such as student ability, ethnicity, social class and diagnostic labels have been commonly explored to determine whether these student attributes affect teachers' expectations (Baron, Tom et al. 1985; Dusek and Joseph 1985; Good and Findley 1985; Jussim, Eccles et al. 1996; Stinnett, Crawford et al. 2001). Researchers have also investigated the differential behaviours that teachers display with students for whom they have correspondingly high or low expectations (Brophy and Good 1970; Cooper and Good 1983; Brophy and Good 1986). Expectation studies that explore student characteristics and teacher behaviours towards students, focus on students as having particular attributes that 'cause' teachers to act towards them in particular ways. While such research has served to

enlighten teachers about both verbal and non-verbal behaviours that students interpret nevertheless the focus has remained on students and the resultant behaviours of teachers rather than whether it may be that particular teachers demonstrate greater or lesser expectation effects on their students. In this scenario the focus is on the teacher and his/her characteristics rather than on the students as playing a causative role. Moreover, when teacher characteristics are explored the focus moves from teacher expectations of individual students to expectations teachers have for their classes. Only Weinstein (Weinstein and McKown 1998; Weinstein 2002) and Rubie-Davies (Rubie-Davies 2006; Rubie-Davies 2007; Rubie-Davies, Hattie et al. 2007; Rubie-Davies in press) have examined class-level expectation effects. This is an emerging area in the field of teacher expectation research.

Hence the BELA project will be exploring teacher expectations for secondary school students, an under-researched area. Furthermore the expectations and beliefs of teachers, parents and students will be explored. There is little research related to parent and student expectations and none that compares beliefs and expectations across the three groups. Another aim of this project is to focus on expectations at the class level. What is it about teachers that mean they have particular expectations for their students? Finally, the teacher expectation and beliefs literature has not yet made links with the target-setting literature (a very new area of psychological research). The intervention that will be used in the final phase of this project is designed to enable teachers and students to set targets for learning based on their expectations for achievement and to then monitor progress towards their targets. The intervention will enable students and teachers to readily adjust their expectations in line with student achievement. Students and teachers will also be able to access information about the learning required to meet specific goals.

This paper reports on Phase One of the project which involved focus groups with students, teachers and parents. Using the teacher expectation and beliefs literature, a large number of prompts were developed for each group. These were then discussed with the research team and refined. The resulting prompts were trialled for clarity and response and further altered in line with suggestions obtained during trialling.

Method

Three Auckland secondary schools were purposively selected to take part in the focus groups, one from each of a high, middle and low socioeconomic area. A liaison person in each school organised teacher, student and parent focus groups within each school. There were 6-10 participants in each focus group. Two focus groups of Year 9 and/or Year 10 students were arranged in each school; boys and girls participated in separate groups. The school liaison person was asked to ensure that a range of ethnicities and abilities were represented in the student focus groups. One group of teachers and parents participated from each school except that two teacher groups from the low decile school took part.

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. One researcher was responsible for asking questions while the other audio-taped the sessions and completed a running record. Transcriptions were then completed. The transcriptions were then read through several times before being coded into themes. In total 1089 ideas were coded.

Examples of prompts used included:

What is the purpose of schooling?

Who is responsible for a child's schooling?

What influences a child's achievement?

What is the importance of ability and effort to achievement?

What expectations do you have of your students?

Results

Five main themes emerged from the data: purpose of schooling, responsibility for schooling and importance of support, the role of effort and ability, influences on learning and achievement, and expectations for achievement and future prospects.

Purpose of schooling:

Findings:

All groups viewed schooling as having a very broad function that related to enhancing student's life skills, in particular their social and communication skills. School was considered by parents and teachers as a place where students learnt how to organise themselves and their equipment, to be disciplined and to be respectful of others.

The purpose of school is so a child can learn to respect, to respect elders, to learn a regime of organisation so that they can organise themselves in adulthood. (parent)

All three groups viewed schooling as providing opportunities that could lead to a successful future. Interestingly both teachers and students felt that schooling had an employment function but this was not mentioned by parents.

If we don't [come to school] we are not going to manage to get a job, you'd be a bum. (student)

Responsibility for schooling and importance of support:

All groups viewed students, parents and teachers in partnership with all having a role to play in children's education. Student attitudes and motivation were considered important to their success while teachers and parents were considered necessary in supporting and guiding students. Parents and students had strong views that the relationships that children formed with their teachers also contributed to their success:

It depends on the teacher as well, cause if the teacher's personality doesn't suit you then it sometimes doesn't help...Some teachers are biased; they'll mark you down if they don't actually like you. (student)

The role of effort and ability:

Effort and ability were seen as critical variables in student success at school. Students endorsed the idea that ability was malleable.

If you don't have ability, you just need to study more and you will probably make your way up after a while. (student)

Parents, too, felt that effort was more important than ability. Teachers, on the other hand, believed that ability played a crucial role:

A kid who is making effort but without ability, I can try and direct them and I do my best to direct them, but it's going to be a long haul...I know where the virtue sits, but sometimes it's not about the virtue, it's about results. (teacher)

Influences on learning and achievement:

Students, teachers and parents also discussed factors that could influence learning. Prior success was indicated by teachers and students as playing a contributing role.

Like foundation of learning, you've got to know the basics before you can move onto like algebra in maths or something like that. You have to know the lower levels first... because if you don't know that information then it's hard to learn new stuff because that's all about things you've already learnt. (student)

Students and parents thought that prior success could also impact on motivation.

Positive experiences help them, really fire them up. (parent)

Teachers and parents viewed students' own attitudes as influencing their success.

...you can give them every single gem, every single arrow, every single bit of support but at the end of the day it's them that holds the pen, it's them that have their thoughts, it's them that have their desires, and their attitude determines their altitude. (teacher)

Parents were also seen as having a significant role to play in students' education and success. Their support and encouragement could influence their children.

...as a parent we can influence outcome because if you have open communication with your child and supply the resources and the tools and if they're struggling with something and we provide tutoring for them... we can influence the outcome, I think. (parent)

Teacher effectiveness was thought by all groups to be critical to student learning. Some teachers were viewed as being more effective than others; some were viewed as covering the curriculum adequately and fostering students learning; others were not. Both students and parents shared stories of effective and ineffective teachers. Teachers, too, were aware that some were more professional in their attitudes than others:

I guess teachers need to take a lot of responsibility for the grades their classes achieve and if they are not achieving to the level that perhaps they want to achieve then perhaps they need to look at themselves and perhaps reassess how they are teaching. That is something most teachers probably do without thinking about it...I think there probably are quite a few teachers out there that don't. (teacher)

Teachers and parents felt that peer pressure could negatively impact on student learning. This view was not so openly shared by students, however. They believed that peers should be there to support them and help them to succeed. They did recognise the existence of negative peer influences but seemed to think they were equipped to handle such pressure.

Expectations for achievement and future prospects:

The final theme identified as a result of the focus groups was expectations. Student teacher and parent expectations were explored. A consistent idea expressed by both students and teachers throughout their focus groups was that education provided an opportunity for children to do better in life than their parents. This belief was also expressed by a student in relation to her expectations of schooling:

Yeah probably (to go to) university so I can get a good job and my main priority is getting a good house cause I don't want to be living in some poor place, cause like I've had a bad childhood kind of, and I just want to be better. (student)

Students were aware that teachers' expectations could impact on how well they were catered for and on their success:

...if they've got a low expectation for you, um, they don't try and push you to get higher than that... it would affect your learning cause people think that you can't do things so therefore you feel that you are being held back and you don't feel good about it so you just keep quiet. (student)

While parents and teachers viewed parent expectations as being important for student success at school and later in life, students sometimes felt pressured by what they viewed as unrealistic expectations from parents:

It's like I had a friend... and her parents were very, very strict and very pushy on her homework... and they basically told her what she was going to be when she got older, a doctor... and the pressure became so much for her that she literally began to hate them and she would just be crying on the phone to me all the time... So sometimes that's not a good thing when parents are too controlling over you. (student)

Interestingly several students commented about applying pressure on themselves because they wanted their parents to be proud of them:

I personally don't feel that my parents put pressure on me, but it's pressure I put on myself to want to please my parents. My parents are always like, that's okay, just do your best...(student)

The groups also discussed barriers perceived to influence students reaching their expectations. A primary barrier was considered to be streaming. Because it was so consistently mentioned by teachers and students it should be emphasised separately from the general discussion on barriers to achieving expectations. Perceptions of streaming were almost universally negative, particularly those of teachers:

... when you do end up in streaming situations as you are going down... the kids get browner and browner. You know in the lower streams, that's just what happens...(teacher)

And:

...there does seem to be an expectation within the culture of the school that even just miniscule, small changes between one class to another that there will be large differences perhaps in the ability or work ethic and effort of the students. There's an expectation of lower streams... they tend to get a reputation as being not hard working or may cause a bit of trouble or be more difficult because they are lower stream...(teacher)

Even students in upper streams saw disadvantages to streaming:

If you're in the upper band here, then one of our teachers said, we are going to be doing this and I expect you all to get A's... Otherwise you don't deserve to be in upper band.... And they move you down. (student)

Students also spoke about further barriers to them achieving their expectations. These included: the influence of family background on teacher perceptions, whether or not families had the finances available to pay for tertiary education and could provide the necessary resources such as a computer and study area, the negative effects of disruptive students on learning, poor teaching, student self-efficacy and workload pressures when students had part-time jobs.

Because of my brothers, they're like all gangster and that... and because we have the same last name people think that I'm going to be the same as them and because people think that... I want to prove them wrong. I want to be different... it just goes back to you wanting to be the best and you trying your best to get there. (student)

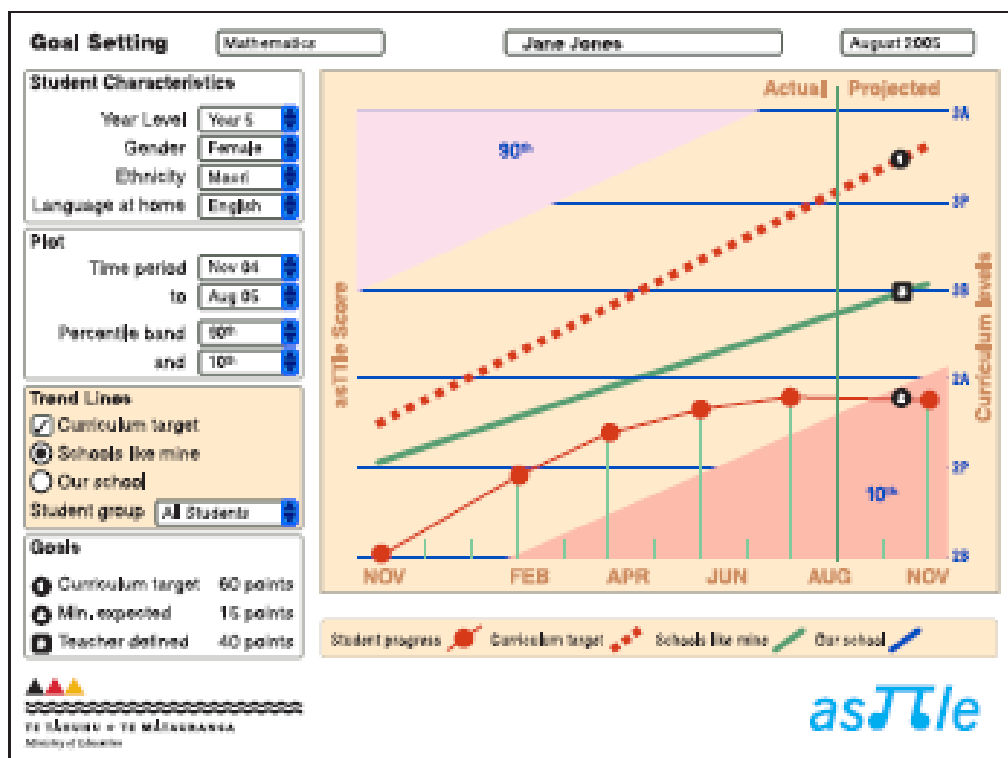
In summary students, parents and teachers had similar perceptions related to the function of schooling and the idea that education was a partnership between teachers, students and parents. However there were some interesting differences in views also found. Students and parents viewed effort as having more impact on achievement than ability while teachers held the opposing view. Teacher quality and relationships with students were strongly emphasised by parents and students as contributing to schooling success. Both students and teachers held strong and negative views of streaming. This was a particularly interesting finding given that it was not included in the prompts and yet was mentioned in almost all teacher and most student focus groups.

Next steps

The results of the focus groups have been used to inform the development of a national survey that will be completed this year in around 30 schools by students, teachers and parents. The questionnaire has been piloted and some changes made in the wording of some items.

Once the data from the survey have been analysed interesting findings will be further explored through more intensive individual interviews with teachers, students and parents.

The final phase of the project will involve an intervention, involving target setting, which has been developed within asTTle (assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) by the lead author. Using this feature within asTTle teachers and students will be able to set targets for learning based on their expectations. The targets can be set in relation to curriculum levels or increases in asTTle points. Students and teachers will be able to view where students will end up if they continue at current rates of progress. By clicking on various links students and teachers can determine what students would need to learn in order to meet or exceed their targets. An example of a mock screen may be found below:



Summary

The BELA project is an extensive and comprehensive exploration of student, teacher and parent beliefs and expectations about schooling at secondary level. Such a wide-ranging investigation has not been completed in previous research and it is anticipated that many exciting findings will result. The intervention is perceived as a real opportunity for teachers and students to raise their expectations. It provides a means for students to monitor their own progress and to play a significant role in directing and taking responsibility for their own learning.

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