The Impact of Teachers'Expectations on Academic Achievement for Students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties

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Abstract: This thesis investigates how teachers' expectations affect students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties' (SEBD) academic performance. Few studies have examined the viewpoints of SEBD students, who are frequently neglected in educational environments, despite the fact that a large body of research has demonstrated the considerable impact of teachers' expectations on student performance. This study investigates how teachers' perceptions and expectations are influenced by subjective criteria such social background, race, and economic position, and how this affects SEBD students' motivation, engagement, and academic success. This study explores how high and low teacher expectations affect SEBD students' experiences using theories like the "confidence, approach, relationships, and environment" (CARE) framework and Rosenthal and Jacobson's four-factor model. The results emphasize the necessity of customized teaching methods and advise educators to change unfavorable attitudes and behaviors in order to enhance learning outcomes for students with low expectations. In order to promote the academic and emotional growth of students with SEBD, this thesis also makes recommendations for future research areas, highlighting the significance of inclusive education and positive instructional techniques.

Keywords: SEBD, teacher expectations, academic achievement, CARE

1. Introduction

Extensive research has established that the expectations held by educators play a crucial role in shaping students' academic achievements across a range of subjects[16][19][22]. Notably, the perspectives of students, particularly those identified with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD), are often marginalized, especially in contexts where they are placed in specialized educational environments. Much of the existing literature has primarily centered on the viewpoints of adults and educators, thereby neglecting the critical voices of the students themselves[13][17]. Due to subjective factors that may influence their teaching behaviors, teachers may retain negative judgments of pupils who perform below expectations. According to research, instructors' opinions of their pupils may be influenced by social background, race, and economic level[10]. For this reason, in order to enhance their academic performance, SEBD kids need particular attention and instructional techniques.

Furthermore, a dearth of studies exists about the enduring consequences of educators' attitudes toward classroom management, encompassing their expectations and student perspectives [3]. This is a topic worth investigating since these variables can significantly affect the classroom experiences of both teachers and students. In the long run, these variables can also affect students' academic and social development as well as their emotional health [1].

This article explores the impact of teachers' expectations on the academic performance of students, particularly those with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD). It begins by defining "teachers' expectations" and discussing related theoretical frameworks. The study then introduces the participants, focusing on the unique characteristics of SEBD students and identifying common traits they exhibit in the classroom. It explains the mechanisms through which teachers' expectations can influence students' academic outcomes and examines why students often conform to these expectations. The article utilizes Rosenthal and Jacobson's four factors theory, along with the "confidence, approach, relationships, and environment" (CARE) model, to illustrate how teachers convey their expectations.

The subsequent section delves into the effects of high and low expectations on student engagement and motivation, highlighting how SEBD students, often perceived as a low-expectancy group, tend to internalize these lower expectations. It emphasizes the significance of this issue for students with special needs. The article concludes by discussing the limitations of existing research and proposing directions for future studies. Achieving the ideal outcomes suggested by the research would require teachers to shift their negative perceptions and adapt their teaching strategies to better support low-expectancy students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Expectancy

In recent years, substantial research in English has focused on the "teacher expectancy effect," particularly exploring the relationship between teachers' expectations and students' academic outcomes [10]. The findings suggest that these expectations significantly influence academic performance, with the degree of impact varying between 3% and 60%[16]. This phenomenon was first explored by Rosenthal and Jacobson through their study, "Pygmalion in the Classroom," which applied the concept of the "self-fulfilling prophecy theory" and generated considerable debate in 1968. According to this theory, if a student is pre-labeled or anticipated to behave in a specific manner, the teacher's subsequent interactions with the student are likely to lead to the fulfillment of those initial predictions, whether positive or negative [20][23]. Current literature mainly investigates the elements that shape teacher expectations, as well as the mechanisms through which these expectations influence student academic achievements and their eventual effects[7].

Teachers convey their expectations to students through various instructional methods, which can be perceived differently by each student. These methods aim to encourage students to align with the anticipated standards set by the teacher [4]. Rosenthal identified four primary ways in which teachers communicate their expectations: climate, feedback, input, and output [20]. "Climate" refers to the teacher's verbal and nonverbal interactions, such as smiling, making eye contact, and showing kindness to create a welcoming environment. "Feedback" involves providing positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviors. "Input" pertains to giving more challenging tasks and setting higher expectations for students perceived as capable, while "output" involves offering these students additional opportunities to participate, such as allowing more time to answer questions. Rosenthal's research demonstrated that teachers tend to behave differently towards students they expect less from compared to those they expect more from, in as many as 17 distinct ways. For instance, low-expectancy students often receive less time to respond, reduced eye contact, and fewer warm interactions. Some researchers have condensed these elements of expectation communication into the "confidence, approach, relationships, and environment" (CARE) model, which is easier for teachers to grasp and implement [15]. According to Johnston, Wildy, and Shand, when teachers express their expectations through these channels, students are likely to recognize and respond positively to high expectations from their instructors. This positive effect can enhance students' intrinsic motivation, engagement, and participation, ultimately boosting their academic performance. It is also important to recognize that classroom management strategies, including teaching methods and attitudes towards students, have a lasting impact, influencing not only academic outcomes but also students' social development, emotional well-being, and overall growth [1].

Teachers' expectations are shaped by their perceptions, which in turn influence their behavior and instructional strategies [10]. These expectations are often influenced by factors such as students' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and previous academic performance [10]. Biases may arise from stereotypes and implicit biases that teachers hold toward certain racial groups [18]. These preconceived notions and attitudes form the foundation of a teacher's mindset and inherent dispositions, which guide their specific teaching approaches [3]. While these attitudes might not be overtly visible, they can be inferred through a teacher's actions and choices in the classroom [11].

Students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD) often fall outside the "ideal student" model perceived by teachers. Many of these students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and tend to attract attention due to disruptive behaviors, such as challenging the teacher or disrupting class [7][12]. As a result, teachers may consciously or unconsciously overlook these students and refrain from setting high expectations for them, leading to their further marginalization. Research shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, and non-traditional genders are especially vulnerable to the effects of teacher expectations, as they frequently belong to stigmatized communities [16].

While students play an essential role in the dynamics of teacher expectations, much of the existing research has predominantly centered on the perspectives of educators and adults, often neglecting the insights of the students themselves [15]. Particularly marginalized groups, such as students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD), are among the least represented in educational research, especially within special education frameworks [13]. In terms of that, this study aims to investigate the effects of teacher expectations on these specific populations and to examine the processes through which such expectations are communicated from educators to students.

2.2 Students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD)

The Elton Report[9], in 1989commissioned by the Department of Education and Science along with the Welsh Office, highlighted that students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) exhibit a spectrum of behaviors, ranging from frequent but minor disruptions to more intense, inappropriate, or antisocial actions. It differentiates between typical misbehavior and that associated with SEBD, noting that these students often begin displaying problematic behaviors earlier in their schooling than their peers, and these behaviors are not limited to certain classes or specific teachers.

There are differing views on the underlying reasons of SEBD in students. Some educators believe it stems from inherent student traits, adverse family circumstances, or other domestic factors [5]. Conversely, some researchers argue that these behaviors are influenced by cultural differences, a lack of proper support from educational institutions, and teacher oversight [19]. Studies have consistently shown that students with SEBD frequently experience marginalization and exclusion within the school setting. They often feel isolated, whether due to teacher actions or bullying by peers, and struggle to connect with standard teaching approaches and curricula. As a result, they are often perceived as having "no voice and no choice" within the educational system [5]. Although teachers often express frustration over the disruptive nature of these behaviors, the Elton Report (1989) suggested that students may view these actions as justified responses to inadequate teaching practices, unfair treatment, or unmet needs in mainstream classrooms.

Despite increased attention on children's perspectives, research specifically exploring the views of students with SEBD remains limited [7]. A significant challenge in understanding these students' perspectives is the prevalent mistrust between them and their teachers. Often excluded from traditional educational settings, these students fail to conform to the behavioral standards expected by educational professionals and are seen as not fitting the "ideal student" image in the eyes of their teachers [13]. Educators frequently consider these students as the root of the problem rather than as "students experiencing problems". Research shows that teachers often respond to these students with negative emotions like frustration and indifference, and they frequently resort to punitive measures [19]. Such negative reactions can escalate tensions between students and teachers.

Conversely, cultivating a positive and supportive teacher-student relationship can significantly improve the educational experience for these students [21]. Establishing a strong, positive rapport with teachers has been shown to encourage students to demonstrate better behavior and to engage more actively in their learning process[7][21]. Positive experiences are closely linked to the support and expectations offered by teachers and school staff. According to Bernier, Gaudreau, and Massé, students greatly appreciate qualities in teachers such as "respectful attitudes, appropriate guidance, sufficient support, and the ability to adapt teaching methods" [3]. These attributes are considered fundamental elements of effective classroom management [21]. Moreover, these characteristics can play a crucial role in integrating students with special needs into mainstream classes by fostering acceptance among peers [1]. Therefore, the expectations and support provided by teachers can have a significant impact on a student's educational journey, shaping both their social interactions and academic success, irrespective of whether they have special needs or are part of a mainstream classroom.

Some research suggests that teachers should pay special attention to students with specific needs by offering tailored support and personalized instruction [3][11]. However, it has been observed that students with low self-efficacy do not necessarily show improved academic outcomes even when teachers provide average or higher levels of support and expectations [14]. This may be due to the constraints they feel from being labeled and treated differently. Additionally, receiving "sympathy" and special treatment can be counterproductive for students with SEBD, as such differential treatment may harm their self-esteem. This idea aligns with Graham and Weiner's (1984) attribution theory, which suggests that while anger is generally avoided by teachers because it can damage a child's self-awareness, it can also signal accountability and the capacity for self-regulation, thereby promoting intrinsic motivation [24].

3. Teacher Expectations and Students' Academic Performance

Several theories have been proposed to explain how teacher feedback influences students' academic achievements. This section adapts the predominant model of teacher expectations to explore its impact on students with SEBD, specifically through Cooper's explanation of how students internalize teachers' low expectations, which subsequently shapes their self-perception and leads to poor academic performance. This model builds upon Rosenthal's "Pygmalion effect"[20], suggesting that teachers treat students differently based on their expectations, which in turn affects the students' motivation and engagement.

In 1973, Rosenthal identified four essential elements—climate, feedback, input, and output—that serve to communicate teachers' expectations. Subsequently, in 1979, Cooper expanded on this concept by creating a detailed process model that illustrates how the academic performance of students deemed low-expectancy is influenced by these expectations. For instance, students labeled as low achievers often engage in disruptive behavior to seek attention. In an effort to maintain classroom discipline, teachers may intentionally limit the opportunities for these students to participate, thereby reducing their potential for disruption. Such teachers might chastise these students not only for their inappropriate actions but also attempt to manage their behavior through public reprimands. Over time, these students often receive minimal positive reinforcement, even in instances of appropriate behavior, while being consistently criticized for their negative actions. In contrast, students who are viewed as high achievers typically receive affirmative attention and reinforcement, regardless of their conduct. This unequal treatment leads low-expectancy students to develop a sense of "learned helplessness," wherein they attribute their failures to their perceived inadequacies rather than to a lack of support or ineffective teaching strategies [6].

When educators express low expectations, they inadvertently curtail the participation of low-achieving students in classroom activities, fostering feelings of helplessness and influencing their attributional thinking. As students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD) are often categorized as low-expectancy, this mindset may lead them to justify their misbehavior and continue engaging in detrimental actions.

What role do teachers' expectations play in shaping this mindset and affecting academic achievement? Students with SEBD generally experience lower self-esteem and self-efficacy, and they receive less encouragement compared to their classmates [3]. By conveying high expectations and exhibiting behaviors that express a sense of worth, teachers can help these students feel valued and cared for. This differential treatment, as opposed to that experienced by typical students, can activate what David Ausubel referred to as the "subsidiary internal driving composition," a motivational theory where external motivation is driven by the desire for approval from teachers or authority figures. This form of motivation can significantly impact at-risk students, particularly younger individuals with SEBD. Educators can harness this internal drive by displaying enthusiasm, offering encouragement, and maintaining high expectations for these students. Such an approach can foster a psychological tendency in students to seek validation from their teachers, prompting them to invest more effort in their academic pursuits. This strategy is particularly effective in areas such as reading and writing, which rely heavily on teacher support and guidance[23].

4. Teacher Expectations and Student Intrinsic Motivation

Teachers' expectations play a pivotal role in influencing students' intrinsic motivation, which is defined as their inherent desire to engage in activities for personal fulfillment [14]. What, then, is the relationship between these expectations and intrinsic motivation? Rosenthal's four-factor model provides valuable insights into how teachers' expectations can shape various elements such as classroom climate, feedback, instructional methods, and student performance [20]. These components significantly affect students' self-perceptions and their beliefs regarding the likelihood of their success. When students sense that their teacher maintains high expectations, they are more inclined to exert greater effort and pursue elevated academic goals. This tendency arises because their motivational drive is influenced by their assessment of the task's value and the potential rewards it offers. In essence, when students believe that their efforts are likely to yield positive results and that success has personal significance, they are more motivated to invest time and energy in their education. This perceived sense of agency can be analyzed through three main dimensions: self-concept, attribution, and self-efficacy [2].

To begin with, teachers' expectations significantly impact students' self-concept, which relates to their

beliefs and perceptions about their own abilities. When educators provide affirmative feedback and create opportunities for students they believe in, these students are more likely to perceive themselves as capable learners, thereby enhancing their motivation and participation. Secondly, attribution is another critical factor that can be shaped by teachers' interactions. Students who receive high expectations from their instructors are more prone to attribute their successes to their own efforts and capabilities rather than external factors like chance or task difficulty. This attribution style fosters a sense of control over their academic results, thereby boosting their motivation and perseverance. Lastly, self-efficacy—an essential aspect of intrinsic motivation—can also be influenced by teachers' expectations. When students feel that their teachers hold high expectations and provide avenues for success, they often develop increased confidence in their abilities. This heightened confidence can lead to improved motivation, engagement, and ultimately, academic achievement.

The expectations set by teachers not only affect students' academic performance but also significantly shape their self-identity, particularly their academic self-concept. Academic self-concept refers to how individuals view their own academic capabilities and effectiveness, influenced by their self-confidence, self-esteem, and overall self-image. Numerous studies indicate that teachers' expectations can profoundly shape students' self-concept, which has enduring implications for their academic and social development, as well as their emotional well-being. This academic self-concept—encompassing students' views of their own capabilities and prospects for future success—is closely linked to academic performance and overall school success. It also serves as a strong predictor of future academic achievements [8]. Academic self-concept reflects not only an individual's self-assessment but also their perceptions of how significant others, such as teachers, view them in an educational context. For example, a student's self-concept in the area of science can be heavily influenced by their teacher's evaluation of their scientific abilities. While the effect of self-perception on academic success may vary across subjects, positive teacher expectations generally lead to favorable outcomes by increasing students' interest in particular subjects, motivating them to invest additional time and effort in their studies.

This dynamic is also aligned with self-determination theory, which provides insights into the relationship between specific teacher behaviors and students' motivation and engagement. According to this theory, teachers can enhance students' motivation and engagement by addressing their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are integral to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and behavioral engagement. When teachers successfully meet these needs, students are more likely to believe in their ability to influence their academic outcomes, which in turn motivates them to dedicate more effort to their studies [14].

It is also essential to recognize that students are highly sensitive to their teachers' expectations, which can be conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal communication. While numerous factors can shape these expectations and the behaviors that communicate them, students are often quick to notice the signals. For instance, research indicates that elementary school students (grades 4-5) can discern whether a teacher has high or low expectations within a brief 10-second audio or video clip of the teacher interacting with a student [21]. Although all students are attuned to their teachers' expectations, those facing lower expectations are particularly sensitive to such cues [7]. Consequently, investigating interventions that foster need-supportive teaching could be particularly advantageous for low-expectancy students, including those with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD), who often come from marginalized backgrounds and are especially susceptible to the effects of teacher expectations [16]

5. Conclusion

Students with Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD) are frequently considered difficult to manage in classrooms and are often perceived by teachers as having limited academic potential. Research has shown that teachers' expectations can greatly influence students' academic performance, especially in areas like math and reading [18]. This study explores how teachers' preconceptions and attitudes toward students can shape their interactions, ultimately affecting the students' academic outcomes. When educators hold low expectations for these students, they may unintentionally restrict their engagement opportunities, which can foster a sense of learned helplessness and have enduring negative effects on their educational experience.

To prevent biases and stereotypes, teachers should strive to maintain objectivity and actively work against any preconceived notions they may have about their students. Teachers' beliefs about students significantly influence their teaching behavior. Although implicit attitudes may be automatic, research indicates that individuals can manage them through deliberate cognitive effort if they are motivated and

mindful [3]. Numerous studies have shown that teachers' instructional approaches are affected by their personal biases. Nevertheless, targeted interventions, such as training programs organized by schools, can assist teachers in identifying and overcoming biased thinking, thereby potentially reducing negative consequences for certain student groups.

Consequently, it is imperative to adopt strategies that elevate teachers' expectations. Schools should prioritize ongoing professional development focused on effective classroom management and pedagogical techniques. Research by Poulou and Norwich[19] indicates that educators demonstrate a robust commitment to supporting students with additional needs. This observation implies that teachers typically exhibit a high degree of tolerance and understanding toward students with special needs. Such confidence stems not only from their belief in their professional capabilities but is also reinforced through structured training that emphasizes regular communication with parents and collaboration with specialists. This underscores the necessity of offering training that fosters the establishment of high, unbiased expectations alongside effective classroom management strategies for those working with students exhibiting SEBD.

This paper investigates how teachers' expectations impact the academic advancement of students, particularly focusing on those with SEBD. It analyzes the various ways in which educators express their expectations and how these students perceive and internalize these messages. Given that SEBD students are frequently viewed as low-achievers, the discussion includes how educators may attempt to regulate their behavior in the classroom, potentially exacerbating their underachievement. Furthermore, it highlights that teachers' expectations can function as significant external motivators that profoundly influence students' academic performance. In conclusion, the paper advocates for the implementation of targeted interventions, such as professional development programs, to enhance teachers' expectations and refine their teaching practices.

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