

Section 4

What Teachers Think and Believe About Their Pupils

Key issues

- 'There is considerable evidence that teachers' beliefs and expectations have a crucial effect on the learning outcomes of their pupils' (Hallam & Ireson 1999). This is no different for gifted and talented pupils.
- In some inner city schools, low expectations of pupils' achievement have been linked to what teachers believe to be the capabilities of the pupils. How teachers view the capacity of certain groups of pupils may have contributed to their underachievement.

Background

What teachers think influences what teachers do. Teachers' beliefs and expectations therefore have a significant influence on the quality of their pupils' learning. Their assumptions, which indeed they may not be conscious they hold, relate not only to how children behave and learn but also to the nature and potential of certain groups of pupils. Teachers' self-awareness thus becomes a matter of crucial importance in getting the best possible achievement from all pupils, and this includes those who are talented and gifted. It is particularly relevant where teachers' expectations may unwittingly put an artificial ceiling on pupils' learning or, in some cases, result in their underachieving.

Beliefs about gifted and talented learners

We have already considered a range of definitions of the gifted and talented which may influence teachers' attitudes and strategies. Research has shown that 'teachers have been found to judge the highly able consistently (but)...There can be wide variation between teacher judgements and objective measures. Individually, teachers' attitudes towards the able vary greatly; some feel resentment while others overestimate their all-round abilities...' (Freeman, 1999)

It is interesting to note, as Freeman does, that there are significant cross-cultural variations in how teachers perceive and identify the gifted, and that giftedness can manifest itself differently in different cultures. Misplaced expectations on the part of teachers may put considerable pressure on youngsters to perform consistently highly, or over an excessive range of activities. Teachers may also assume that gifted and talented pupils need little time for rest or leisure, or that they are all self-motivated and independent learners. In the extreme, they may hold the view that some school populations do not contain any gifted and talented pupils or that, in selective systems, provision for such pupils is not a problem. Whilst the

Issues for schools in disadvantaged areas

reasons for the underachievement of pupils are complex and varied, the effect of teachers' beliefs and expectations can be powerful.

Teachers' views about individual differences in motivation, behaviour, and personal attributes inform their day-to-day practices to a large degree. These may, of course, lead to good classroom management and a congenial working environment, but conversely they may have serious disadvantages for pupils' learning opportunities. Research has shown that teachers may underestimate up to 40% of potentially high achievers.

The importance of teachers' expectations, based on their beliefs about pupils' potential, has been an integral part of educational research since the study by Rosenthal and Jackson (1968).

Creemer (1995) cites research which documents both the negative and the positive effects of teachers' expectations on their pupils' achievement. Hallam and Ireson (1999) suggest that 'While it is easy to criticise teachers for their tendency to stereotype pupils, a generalised typing of ability or academic knowledge plays an important part in the decisions they make about their teaching approaches...'. It should also be remembered, however, that in some contexts the 'generalising' may result in pupils being underestimated and their potential thereby unrecognised and unfulfilled.

In 1996 the National Commission on Education carried out a study of 11 successful schools in disadvantaged, inner city areas, and listed the factors associated with that success. For example, the schools placed great importance on defining their priorities. They evolved shared aims and common approaches to all aspects of school practice, and this culminated in a shared vision of what is possible. Underlying this was a 'can do' philosophy which recognised a potential for growth and learning in every child. Since that study there has been a substantial body of research into school improvement and effectiveness. Its emphasis has been on the fundamental role of high expectations of *all* pupils, with teaching and learning at the heart of it. For example, Brighthouse and Woods, in their study of high achieving inner-city schools (1999), identified teachers' values and beliefs about learners as critical factors in successful learning. The Ofsted (2000) publication *Improving City Schools* presents case studies of schools achieving in challenging circumstances, echoing in their success many of the factors cited above.

These values and beliefs are no less critical elements in the achievement of gifted and talented pupils in schools serving socially, culturally and economically diverse communities, or in schools in areas of social or economic

Under-achievement

deprivation. Where underachievement exists, it may result from a variety of factors, including: low aspirations, peer pressure, lack of support, home values, material deprivation, or low expectations on the part of parents and school. You can find the characteristics of underachievement listed in Unit 1 Section 3, and in the Launchpad on Underachievement.

The work of Butler-Por, Rim and others suggests how schools may tackle the underachievement of gifted and talented pupils through:

- careful attention to attitudes, eg avoiding stereotyping, accepting 'difference', and setting high expectations
- appropriate and challenging curriculum and teaching methods
- home-school collaboration.

We may also add:

- providing good role models
- recognising achievements
- regular monitoring and review
- involving the pupil in target setting
- using pupils' gifts and talents in a productive way
- giving study support, and tutoring in study skills
- providing enrichment opportunities

Cox (2000) showed that teachers' expectations of children defined as 'at risk' may create formidable barriers to learning. There are certain significant factors which produce the best possible learning opportunities for all, irrespective of gender, cultural, or individual needs. These are teaching styles and curricula which are inclusive of all groups of pupils, a practice which has been defined as 'culturally responsive teaching'.

English as an Additional Language

Gifted and talented pupils who are learning English as an additional language (EAL) may be at particular risk of having their ability underestimated. Such pupils will share the same diverse range of skills, abilities, and personality traits as other gifted and talented pupils, but this may not be obvious to all teachers who come into contact with them. The fact that the children may have a limited command of English could well overshadow all else. It follows from this that in the case of such pupils there is a particular need for an acute awareness of ways in which their ability may reveal itself. Certainly, they should be no more the subject of stereotyping than any other gifted and talented pupils.

Special Needs

Some highly able pupils may have an accompanying disability which could influence a teacher's perception of them. The disability may be in the pupil's capacity to learn

or may be of a physical or emotional nature. In any of these cases there is always the possibility that 'in some schools the disability is given more attention than the ability, and expectations of what the child will achieve are reduced' (Eyre and Fitzpatrick). For example, able dyslexic pupils are sometimes assigned to sets which underestimate their cognitive ability. They may even go through their education without their real ability ever being recognised, since they may be performing at a level which the school considers acceptable, given their disability. Similarly, able pupils with visual or hearing impairment will sometimes find it practically more difficult to access the work, but if they receive the right kind of help, high academic achievement is not only possible but should be expected. Able pupils with challenging behaviour are equally at risk of being underestimated, and they can be found among those excluded from school. They are perhaps the most difficult to provide for, not least because such conditions as physical disability may attract more sympathy, compassion, and ultimately support than emotional and behavioural difficulties, which conversely may be viewed with scepticism or prejudice.

Gender

So much is now known about differential levels of achievement between boys and girls that there is a risk of gender stereotyping unless one is constantly alert to it. For example, we know that over the period of the last decade boys made only slight improvements in their GCSE A*-C performance in various subjects, as compared with girls, while girls made substantial improvements in science and mathematics. Arnold (1996) cited Ofsted inspections which suggested that boys and girls have different approaches to planning and organising their work. Other evidence has shown that among older primary pupils girls spend more than an average time on homework projects, while differences between boys and girls in commitment to homework are particularly marked in secondary schools. Arnold concluded: 'It is not unnatural that teachers should respond more warmly to pupils who are co-operative in furthering their own learning and take some responsibility for it. The important thing is for teachers to be explicitly aware of the nature of their responses and how far these are likely to lead to a solution or get in the way of one.' Expectations associated with gender, however, do not always work in girls' favour. Works such as Kerr's *Smart Girls* (1997) show how their very compliance can lead to expectations of mediocrity, and that the desire to please can lead to a lack of attention and lowered academic self-esteem. It is also true that while slightly more girls are taking up university places than boys (UCAS 2004), young women's ambitions and self-perceptions are still too often defined by their gender rather than by their ability. (Taylor 2005). All this has relevance for gifted and able pupils, since gender differences are a factor which can interact with others to generate the wrong kind of expectations.

Ethnicity

Cultural differences are many and diverse, and simple generalisations do them no service. The differences may take such forms as language, religion, history, customs, food, and clothing. They may involve distinctive value systems, or approaches to socialising children within the family. They may entail different expectations of the child according to gender or tradition. In some groups, such characteristics as morality, conscientiousness, or interpersonal skills may be more highly esteemed than cognitive ability. All cultural groups tend to have preconceptions about the abilities of their own and other cultural groups, and these can create barriers for pupils capable of high achievement. Gaine and George (1999) outlined a body of research which showed stereotypical assumptions on the part of teachers, for example about the respective intelligence levels of Afro-Caribbean pupils and Asian pupils. Schools need to be aware of the expectations that might arise from such beliefs, and guard against them. The DfES publication, *Ensuring the attainment of Black Caribbean boys* (2004), offers research and case studies showing some factors in underachievement, and some successful strategies for overcoming barriers, such as academic tutorials

Activity 1.4

From the information on underachievement in this section, select one area that you consider to be a particular issue for your school.

Reflection

What data do you possess to indicate that the issue chosen is significant for your school? What further evidence might you seek? Consider what strategies you could use to address the problem.

Learning outcomes

- To understand the effect of teachers' values, beliefs and expectations on the process of teaching and learning
- To recognise that teachers must submit to critical evaluation their beliefs and perceptions of what pupils can achieve.

References

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- Taylor, M, (2005)** 'University gender gap widens as women increase their lead' Interview with National Union of Students' women's officer, Jo Salmon in *Education Guardian*, Thursday January 27

Additional reading

- DfES (2004)** *Ensuring the attainment of Black Caribbean boys*
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- Montgomery, D. (2000)** *Able Underachievers* London: Whurr Press
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