

## Teacher expectations and student performance

One of the most researched topics across education literature is the relationship between teacher expectations and student performance. The results are conclusive: teacher expectations do affect student performance and the degree to which they affect performance varies according to other positive and negative learning factors. It seems that if you expect little from students then you can be sure that that is what you will get. Whereas, teachers with high expectations can lift the performance of the whole group. Many teachers know intuitively that this is true and they have seen classes, with whom they have developed good relationships, work hard and achieve excellent results. Similarly, the brightest of students can usually do well irrespective of the teachers, but not the other students. Hence teacher expectations play an important role in raising student performance.

As Christians, this matter is of considerable interest. Our view of students being created in the image of God destines us to work towards doing what is best for their learning in the hope that they will fully find God and put their trust in him. To do less, would be to diminish both the nature of God and of his creation.

### NSW

In NSW, there has long been interest in teacher expectation and much of the research has centred on the formally known disadvantaged schools. Since the 1970s, the effectiveness of funding has been the subject of much discussion and research. No one working in schools with disadvantaged school funding would deny the impact it had on the quality of education and school life of the students in these schools, but whether student performance always improved was much more open to questioning. Some influential research in the 1990s was done by Chris Ryan in the NSW Department of Education and Training. He studied the characteristics of those disadvantaged schools that were performing well in SC and HSC examinations and, much to the surprise of many, concluded that these schools had a conservative approach to curriculum, teaching and school organisation. In other words, good teaching that focused on the mainstream curriculum provided the best outcomes for these students and he identified high expectations as a factor for why these schools had maintained the curriculum and teaching that was appropriate for other high schools. His conclusions were that denying students access to the mainstream curriculum and high quality teaching on it was to provide a self-fulfilling prophecy about students from low socio-economic groups being unable to achieve as well as those from higher socio-economic groups.

The NSW DET *Quality teaching* research has further supported these findings listing *Teacher expectations* as a dimension within *the Quality teaching environment* domain. Whatever name is given, *Priority* schools remain the focus of attention as attempts are made to justify the funding based on student performance. In achieving this focus a reminder about previous research is timely as some schools look in the wrong places to bring about change through alternative/additional curriculum, different school organisation and holistic school reform without using quality teaching as a driver of change. Such reforms are often known as changing deckchairs on the Titanic - you are still going to go down, but just get a different view of it.

### India

In India, some of the issues being faced by schools are just the same as NSW and possibly more extreme. Teacher expectations are a problem as many teachers in

schools for Dalit children have to come to terms with the fact that poor little slum or village kids are not lacking intelligence and can learn and perform just as well as any other group of students. As this issue is addressed, more and more teachers are being surprised by the confidence and competence of students, especially girls when they have the same opportunities as the boys in these schools. Their command of English is growing and they often speak English more clearly than their teachers. As a more constructivist approach to teaching and learning is engaged, more students are showing themselves to be capable of competing with other English medium students across India and doing better than most. As more graduates pass from Year 10 to Junior College, the reputation of the schools is enhanced. The emphasis on understanding, not just knowing by rote, increases the capacity of the students to succeed in further education. At the bottom of this movement are teacher expectations about these students and their capacity to learn and compete with all other students. As these are challenged so the quality of the education of these schools increases. While there is much yet to be done, the signs are encouraging.

### **Kindergarten**

As a secondary trained teacher and ex-bureaucrat I have never claimed any great understanding of early childhood education but always admired these teachers for their ability to control and teach a bunch of very young students.

In India, the schools that I work with have Lower Kindergarten (LKG) (pre-school in Australia) and Upper Kindergarten (UKG). Recently I was at a school and wanted to know what these students could do. I went to the LKG class and they had the upper case letters on the blackboard and were reciting the alphabet from A to Z. Often such recitations do not indicate that the students actually recognise the letters, but just know how to recite the alphabet. So I pointed to some letters at random and was surprised that they all seemed to know them. So we tried lowercase with the same result. Then the numbers 1 to 20 - same result. Then I went to the sounds of the letters and found that they also knew them. By this time I was a bit overwhelmed and tried some two letter words - same result. On three letter words only about half the class could do them. Given that these students were four to four and a half this was a very high level of performance so I went to UKG. In this class they could read six letter words. To prove it, I went and borrowed a 1<sup>st</sup> Grade English reader and had the children read it. About half could do this. Remembering that the school year begins in June these two classes were exceptionally advanced. Why? Because a teacher had high expectations and confirmed them in student performance. The quality of their work has changed my perceptions and expectations about what LKG and UKG students can achieve.

### **Teachers make a difference**

With all the research and findings about these matters, why don't we have better performance in all schools? Obviously teacher expectations are not the only variable. Even the best teaching often can not overcome the problems some students face in abusive homes or amongst controlling peers. But the research does indicate that half the difference in scores between students in one learning environment and another, and greater than any other single factor, can be explained by the teacher they have. In this regard, teacher professional learning remains one of the most effective ways to improve student learning outcomes because the teacher is the main variable in explaining differences between classrooms and teachers' expectations are a key to explaining these differences.

As indicated above, teachers can make a difference and in the Indian situation in which I am working this is particularly true. For Dalit Indian students, studying in English is study in a foreign language. Almost all have no English before coming to school, then find that all instruction is in English and that they are even expected to speak English within the playground. If they do not learn to speak, read and comprehend written English within the first few years of schooling then all their subjects are at risk. This was evident in a 5<sup>th</sup> Class I recently visited. It was a mathematics lesson and students were using formula for perimeter of squares and rectangles. They could readily use formula, substitute the figures and get the right answers, but when faced with a problem about fencing and the cost per metre they could not understand the English to do the problem. English is the key to learning in an English medium school and every teacher needs to be a teacher of English so that students can reach a high level of English as soon as possible otherwise all subjects suffer.

One of the obstacles faced by Indian teachers is that they want to teach students to read by spelling and it doesn't work, except for the really bright students where anything works. They teach as they have been taught and students don't do any phonics, learn word attack skills or learn whole words. This severely slows down the learning of reading and children get behind in their English medium education. This problem is compounded by rote learning where teachers read, explain and write notes for students rather than the students practice reading, answer comprehension and write from their heads, not copy from the blackboard or textbook.

Moving teachers to a more constructivist approach is a major system priority and I guess that India might be well behind Australia in this matter, but that this agenda is the same in Australia - quality teaching with high expectations.

Christians need to embrace the research in these matters and ensure that they are doing what is best for students. It is never easy to change what we do, but change we must for the sake of the Kingdom if we are to be used by God in our calling as teachers.