

## Explore the Dynamic Interplay Between Teachers' Expectations and the Academic Performance of Students with Disabilities

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### Abstract

*A large body of research has investigated the relationship between teachers' expectations and attitudes and students' academic performance in general education settings. However, only a number of studies address the ways in which teachers' expectations are associated with the learning and performances of students with special needs. This literature review aims to explore how teachers' expectations and attitudes are associated with the academic achievement of students with special needs. The articles collected range in date from 2000-2021. The findings from this literature review suggested that teachers' low expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about students with special needs directly influence their teaching behavior and, ultimately, the students' academic outcomes.*

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### Introduction

Many factors such as race, ethnicity, social class, and gender influence teachers' expectations of students' academic achievement (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012). These factors may also affect the provision of favorable educational interventions to students with special needs (Fish, 2016) and their inclusion in general settings (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Kozub & Lienert, 2003). Considering students' race or color, teachers are more likely to inaccurately and incorrectly refer students with academic challenges to special education programs (Fish, 2016). These traits are given significant weight in deciding attitudes towards students and power relationships between students as a result of specific societal factors. Conversely, numerous studies have investigated the impact of teachers' expectations, attitudes, knowledge, preparation, and beliefs on student performance, leading to the conclusion that negative attitudes contribute to students' poor academic performance (Klehm, 2014; Tyler & Boelter, 2008; Wang, Rubie-Davies, & Meissel, 2018). Klehm (2014) argued that few studies have examined the relationship between teachers' attitudes and expectations and the performance of students with special needs. The main purpose of this literature review is to explore some of the factors that play a role in the effectiveness of students' performance. Specifically, this paper focuses on four themes: (1) teachers' expectations, (2) teachers' attitudes, (3) feedback, and (4) teachers' preparation. The established research clearly shows that teacher perceptions are associated with a negative or positive change in student performance. Teachers' opinions and beliefs predict both the amount of time they spend with students and their expectations for academic success. A better understanding of this phenomenon can help future educators manage their biases and presumptions to avoid influencing student success through their predispositions.

### Review of Literature

The following section reviews the primary four factors that play a critical role in the effectiveness of students' performance, namely teachers' expectations, teachers' attitudes, feedback, and teachers' preparation.

#### *Teachers' Expectations (Attribution Theory-Pygmalion Effect)*

Empirical investigations have established various understandings of teacher expectation effects in the first 20 years after Pygmalion. Students' ability and performance were mostly predicted by teachers based on students' previous academic achievements. However, several studies have shown that other factors such as students' demographic information, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, and disabilities (Hurwitz, Elliott, & Braden, 2007; Jenkins & Demaray, 2016; Montague & Rinaldi, 2001; Overby, Carrell, & Bernthal 2007; Whitley, 2010; Woodcock & Vialle, 2011) could be associated with teachers' expectations. Many psychologists believe that teachers convey their expectations to their students. In fact, there is a dearth of research that has examined the ways in which students' characteristics (disabilities) are related to teachers' expectations.

A systematic review by Wang, Rubie-Davies, and Meissel (2018) revealed that different factors may influence the formation of teacher expectations, including student-related factors such as ethnicity, gender biases, and other personal characteristics. Some of the examined studies (Jenkins & Demarays, 2016; Montague & Rinaldi, 2001; Overby, Carrell & Bernthal 2007; Whitley, 2010; Woodcock & Vialle, 2011) demonstrated that students who were identified as at risk for learning or as having learning disabilities (LD) perceived negative expectations from their teachers compared with students without LD.

Moreover, teachers' knowledge and beliefs about the ability of their students with disabilities is a primary and essential step in ensuring that students' educational needs are met. When a teacher has low expectations and beliefs about the ability of students with disabilities, they are likely to pay less attention to them than their normal peers (Elliott, 2008; Goe & Cogges, 2007). Woodcock & Vialle (2010) examined the perceptions of 444 pre-service teachers toward students with learning disabilities. One case study concerned a student with a greater aptitude than his friend, but who did not participate in class. This student rarely completed his assignments. The findings indicated that pre-service teachers held a negative attribution style towards that student. They considered the student's learning disability to be uncontrollable. This study demonstrates and confirms the notion that teachers hold low expectations of students with LD, which this contributes to their negative student performance.

In a recent longitudinal study, Szumskia and Karwowski (2019) examined teacher expectancy effect (TEE) (Pygmalion effect) on a large sample (N = 1488) of Polish middle-school students and their teachers. Results indicated that teachers' higher expectations were positively related to students' math achievement three semesters later. Teachers' higher expectations of the entire class led to the improvement of students' performance in mathematics in classes with a higher average socioeconomic status and those with or without students with disabilities. This validates that the Pygmalion effect is related to student achievement and can help students achieve their goals (Wang, & Cai, 2016).

Furthermore, in a quantitative study, Klehm (2014) developed a survey to investigate 218 teachers' attitudes and practices and their relationship with their students with disabilities. The findings suggest that most teachers have positive expectations for students without disabilities but have lower expectations for students with disabilities. A total of 53.9% of teachers reported that they do not expect students with disabilities to reach proficiency on High Stakes Testing (HST). Additionally, lowered teacher expectations of students with specific learning disorders (SLD) may also contribute to decreased performance or achievement among students with disabilities (Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh & Voeten, 2010; Shifrer, 2016; Whitley, 2010; Woodcock & Hitches, 2017). In her doctoral dissertation, Boynton (2021) concluded that a lack of teacher efficacy in teaching students with moderate disabilities at Galaxy High School, as well as lower teacher expectations regarding the ability to learn or perform at high levels for students with disabilities has resulted in lower achievement and lower self-efficacy for this group of students. Tyler & Boelter (2008) argued that teachers who held low expectations and beliefs toward the abilities of students with disabilities tended to offer less to those students. Similarly, Hornstra et al. (2010) suggest that stigmatization must be avoided in these circumstances, and for this purpose, it is recommended that teachers evaluate their own biases to avoid passing this judgment onto their students.

Teachers' knowledge of the previous academic attainments of students with learning disabilities can also play a critical factor in influencing their instructional practices and accordingly, students' achievement levels. In a recent study, Núñez, Rodríguez, Tuero, Fernández & Cerezo (2020) analyzed the mediating role of teachers' expectations and perceptions of parents' expectations between previous academic achievement and variables in students with specific learning disorders that are significant for school learning (i.e., causal attributions, self-concept, and learning motivation). The study recruited 230 students from Spain with SLD aged between 10 and 14 years. The findings demonstrated that teachers' expectations based on students' previous academic performance influenced the students' intrinsic variables more than the students' own experiences of academic success or failure. Furthermore, teachers' expectations affected their instruction, as well as the students' motivation, involvement, and persistence in learning, implying that teachers' expectations can positively or negatively influence the academic performance of students with specific learning disorders.

Moreover, teachers' expectations and attributions are related to students' performance and accomplishments as students internalize cues from their teachers that are then used to establish their own attributions for success and failure (Woodcock & Vialle, 2011) causing what is known as the "golem effect". The "golem effect" posits that if a teacher considers a student likely to fail in the future, the teacher will act toward the student in ways that will undoubtedly result in future failure. As a result, students' expectations of themselves may be lowered. If students with LD have low self-confidence in their abilities to succeed in school, their future prospects can be dire (Woodcock, 2014).

In summary, the literature suggests that student achievement is directly related to teacher expectations. Negative attitudes have greater consequences for students, and students with learning disabilities tend to have more negative qualities attributed to them than do students without disabilities. This leads to more negative academic achievements than those realized by students without disabilities who are given higher expectations.

### ***Teachers' Attitudes (Self-Fulfilling Prophecy; Practices)***

Self-fulfilling prophecy (SFP), as coined by Merton (1948) occurs when an inaccurate definition of a situation elicits new behaviors which, in turn, make the originally inaccurate conception a reality (as cited in McGrew & Evans 2004). Spitz (1999) stated that if an individual expects or prophesizes that something will happen, that individual will unconsciously behave in a manner that will make it happen. Simply put, we will do what we can to realize our prophecy. Santini (2014) noted that teachers expected students with disabilities (deaf) to perform poorly on a self-selected reading program compared to their peers without disabilities, and thus acted in ways that contributed to said result.

Past research has argued that teachers' SFP and attitudes can impact their decision regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in general education settings, while also affecting their instructional practices. This notion bears in mind that inclusion benefits students with and without special educational needs (SEN) in terms of improved academic achievement, such as social skills, school performance, and personal development (Cara, 2013).

Elliott (2008) investigated teachers' attitudes about including students with mild to moderate mental disabilities in their physical education classes. The participants of this study were 20 elementary education teachers. Elliott used a questionnaire to measure teachers' attitudes towards teaching in an inclusive classroom. He also observed the teachers and the students with disabilities during their physical education class. This study found a strong relationship between teachers' attitudes toward inclusion in the classroom and how this relationship influenced decisions regarding the number of practice attempts provided to students with disabilities. Teachers with negative attitudes expected lower performances from the students with special needs than did teachers with positive attitudes. Consequently, teachers who had negative attitudes about the inclusion of students with special needs in their physical education class provided those students with fewer practice attempts. Conversely, teachers who had positive attitudes about the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms provided additional practice attempts for their students with special needs.

Teachers' attitudes toward and acceptance of certain disabilities on behalf of other types of disabilities may also have an impact on their interactions and acceptance of students with special needs in their classes. Cook (2001) examined whether teachers' attitudes toward their included students with disabilities differed based on the severity of the disability. Results indicated that teachers develop different attitudes and expectations for their included students with disabilities depending on the severity and obviousness of the students' disability. Evidently, some teachers hold more positive attitudes toward including students with physical or visual disabilities or learning difficulties, and hold more negative opinions toward including children with intellectual disabilities or behavioral problems (De Boer et al, 2012).

Researchers found that teachers' attitudes have a substantial impact on differential teachers' positive or negative expectations for school achievement, and as a result, on the educational accomplishment of students with disabilities (Chimhenga 2016; Kraska and Boyle 2014). Chimhenga (2016) investigated how teachers' attitudes can influence the academic performance of students with disabilities in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The results showed that several factors can significantly impact the academic attainment of students with disabilities, namely teachers' favorable and unfavorable feelings towards their students with disabilities, teachers' frustration and negative attitudes, labeling or classification of students, teachers' definition of students, and low expectations.

In a literature review, Sherman, Rasmussen, and Baydala (2008) found that teachers' factors, including attitudes and beliefs about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and treatment options can influence students' behavioral and learning outcomes. Avramidis & Norwich (2002) concluded that the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in a regular classroom depended on teachers' perception of the students with disabilities and their beliefs about the students' abilities. The researchers confirmed that teachers' perceptions were strongly influenced by the nature and severity of the disabled students' conditions.

The type of information provided in the students' profiles of children with disabilities can positively impact teachers' attitudes towards the students when the descriptions focus on their strengths. Ginevra, Maggio, Valbusa, Santilli, & Nota (2021) cited that recording positive information in students' profiles associated with the strengths of the students with disabilities positively impacted teachers' attitudes toward students' school performance and social acceptability.

Prior research concluded that the decision to include students with disabilities in special education is associated with the attitudes that teachers form based on students' previous academic attainments and teachers' knowledge of the student's disability. Through examining the findings of some studies (i.e., Al-Abduljabber, 1994; Al-Faiz, 2006; Kozub & Lienert, 2003; Cook, 2004; Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi & Shelton, 2004), Alquraini (2010) found that teachers' supportive and positive perception regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities plays a role in promoting successful inclusion for students with severe disabilities. However, their negative attitudes could be the main factor impeding the process of inclusion in regular education programs (Al-Ahmadi, 2009; Al-Harhi & Evans, 2017; Cook, 2001; Kozub & Lienert, 2003). That

being said, some studies situated in Saudi Arabia have examined teachers' perspectives regarding the inclusion of students with special needs in Saudi general education. A quantitative study by Al-Harathi and Evans (2017) examined special education teachers' attitudes towards teaching students with learning disabilities in Saudi public middle schools. The findings showed that special education teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education were positive, as some participants believed that the LD had previously been addressed at the primary school level. However, the majority of participants assumed that the student would succeed if their school had a tailored program for students with LD. This positive response suggested that the participants' perceptions impacted their decision regarding including students with learning difficulties in general education settings.

Furthermore, Al-Faiz (2006) explored the attitudes of 240 teachers working in elementary schools in Saudi Arabia toward inclusive education for students with autism based on 11 independent variables (i.e., gender, level of education, teaching experience, training program, family/relative with autism, and exposure to students with disabilities). He found that most teachers had positive attitudes toward inclusive education and that teaching experience and a family/relative with disabilities affected the attitudes of these teachers the most. These findings support the results of previous Saudi studies (i.e., Al-Abduljabber, 1994; Dubis, 1987).

Additionally, Woodcock and Hitches (2017) examined British in-service secondary teachers' attributional responses to students with and without specific learning difficulties. The study comprised 122 British secondary school teachers who were surveyed in response to vignettes of hypothetical male students who had failed a class test. Findings revealed that teachers demonstrated more negative causes towards students with SLD. Teachers' causal attributional conclusions of students' level of attainment can influence the students' attributions, self-efficacy, and motivation. However, the attitudes of students, teachers, parents, and the community determine the success or failure of the process of integration and socio-educational inclusion. Negative attitudes, rejection, isolation, and nonacceptance lead to a decrease in the student's ability to integrate into school and society, as they are all emotionally destabilizing (Tonita, 2021).

In summary, the literature suggests the self-fulfilling prophecy theory plays a strong role depending on the positive or negative ways that teachers' predictions influence their decision about the number of practices they provide to students with disabilities. When a teacher gives students more opportunities to participate and practice, the student is more likely to learn better than they are when provided fewer opportunities to participate.

### **Feedback**

Teachers' expectations are reflected in their feedback to their students. Teachers' praise and positive feedback give students clear evidence that they are capable of achieving their expectations (Good & Lavigne, 2017; Mayer, 2000). When a teacher gives students positive feedback that emphasizes their abilities, they can learn better than others, whereas teachers' poor feedback can directly influence students' academic outcomes. Mayer (2000) confirms that children with special needs require more frequent feedback than do their peers. Hornstra, et al. (2010) investigated the attitudes of 30 regular education teachers toward students with dyslexia compared to their peers without learning disabilities. Spelling achievement scores of the 307 students were obtained. The findings suggest that when teachers held more negative views, the difference in spelling achievement scores of students with and students without disabilities increased. The study verifies that students who learn under teachers with more negative views of dyslexia score lower than students whose teachers do not hold this belief. The authors compared the low achievement of students with dyslexia to the lower effort, amount of time, and feedback provided to students with dyslexia compared to their peers. Good & Lavigne (2017) revealed that the higher achievers obtained more reinforcement regarding quality performances, while lower achievers were given less attention. They also mentioned that teachers adopt implicit expectations for certain groups based on gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, appearance, kind of disability, and whether the student is an English language learner.

Klehm's study (2014) explored how students with hidden and obvious disabilities are rejected and ignored by teachers. Cook (2001) examined 70 teachers' attitudes toward their students with disabilities. He suggests that 31.8% of students with disabilities are rejected by their teachers, confirming that when students are rejected, they achieve less than students who are provided with feedback and academic instruction.

Students' self-perception may also be related to teachers' judgment—either positively or negatively. Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer & Theokas (2004) explored the relationship between teachers' judgments and the self-perceptions of students with disabilities. The study found that individuals with learning difficulties who had unfavorable academic self-perceptions were judged as making insufficient attempts in comparison to their classmates. Conversely, students with learning difficulties who had favorable academic self-perceptions received positive feedback that motivated them to study harder than their peers with the same disabilities. Thus, teachers can positively or negatively affect the student's academic outcome. Elliott (2008) attributed poor achievement and success of students with disabilities to the negative reinforcements and lack of opportunities that students with disabilities receive by some teachers who held negative attitudes toward said students.

In brief, the literature suggests that the type of feedback teachers provide to students with disabilities heavily influences their academic outcomes and achievements. It is clear that to adequately address these issues with

students with disabilities, educators must acknowledge the detrimental effects of teacher attitudes, perspectives, and feedback.

### ***Lack of general education teachers' preparation to deal with students with disabilities***

Teachers are critical components in ensuring that inclusion programs are executed successfully, with equitable opportunity for all children (Anderson, 2007). Since general education teachers interact with a more diverse population, they may find it challenging to work effectively with different learning styles and disabilities due to a lack of information, training, preparation (Sutton, 2013; Sze, 2009), unrealistic expectations, material resources, class time, and class size (Blackie, 2010). As a result, general education teachers may develop negative attitudes and ideas about the inclusion program (Blackie, 2010; Dumitru, 2019; Tonita, 2021).

In fact, teachers who exhibit patience and knowledge of intervention strategies, while also being able to collaborate with an interdisciplinary team, possessing pedagogical knowledge (Kunter et al., 2013), and having a positive attitude toward children with special needs can positively impact student success (Sherman et al., 2008). Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker (2000) concluded that teachers with higher levels of experience in teaching special education students or with proper training in special education needs hold more positive attitudes. Burke (2020) concluded that when teachers acquire appropriate preparation, training, and clear expectations, they are more likely to properly implement accommodations to support students with an individualized education program (Cate et al., 2018). Dumitru (2019) and Istiarsyah & Ahmad (2019) confirmed that developing more positive attitudes towards inclusion is a direct result of training programs in the field of special education. Some research (Dumitru, 2019; Muffih et al., 2011; Zachary et al., 2018) showed that most teachers who prefer separate special education institutions to inclusive ones are usually teachers without sufficient training to teach students with special educational needs, while more experienced and well-trained teachers are more inclined to support inclusive education.

However, various studies have demonstrated that most special education classrooms lack qualified teachers who are aware of the unique needs of students with special needs, as well as knowledge and sufficient training in dealing with diverse disabilities. Using secondary data on 121,173 teachers from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of 2013, Cooc (2019) concluded that teachers in classrooms with a high percentage of students with special needs are likely to have the least qualifications and greatest professional development need. Cooc summarized the current special education professional development needs of teachers by country. As the study reported, 23% of all teachers from Belgium, Brazil, Italy, Korea, Japan, Mexico, England, the Czech Republic, and Australia reported a high need for special education professional development. Across the 14 TALIS professional development need areas, special education was the highest among teachers across countries. Payne (2005) revealed that it is very difficult to fill positions that require special education endorsements in many school districts, thus posing a problem across the nation. As a result, in most states, special education classrooms contain the largest number of unqualified teachers. Moreover, Lambe & Bones (2006) added that even though teachers generally supported inclusive practice, they felt concerned about their ability to manage a heterogeneous student population due to their level of preparation, resources, and support.

Furthermore, Klehm (2014) indicated that teachers who work in a special education setting must hold a bachelor's degree or higher in special education. The low quality of teachers' preparation presents another issue in this regard. Goe and Coggs (2007) criticized the shortage of studies that prove that University X produces better mathematics special education teachers than University Y. On the other hand, few studies demonstrate that taking courses in educational psychology makes teachers more competent in producing higher learning achievements. Goe & Coggs emphasize that both special education teachers and general education teachers require high-quality preparation in teaching students with special needs provided this preparation be built upon an existing knowledge base and demonstrated competence in classroom practice (Brownell, 2010). However, teachers' knowledge reflects teachers' instruction and practices, which in turn negatively influences their students' outcomes (Al-Harthi & Evans, 2017; Goe & Cogges, 2007). In fact, Dyson & Squires (2016) revealed that some children with disabilities abandon any rigid education system if it is not prepared to adapt to their educational needs, thus emphasizing the importance of teachers' preparation in this regard.

In brief, the literature suggests that the low quality of teachers' preparation can negatively influence students' learning (Al-Harthi & Evans, 2017; Cooc, 2019; Goe & Cogges, 2007; Sutton, 2013; Sze, 2009) and may sometimes lead to dropping out of school (Dyson & Squires, 2016). Studies that looked at teachers' perspectives on professional development and training found that some general education teachers who worked with special education students in their classrooms said they did not have sufficient knowledge on how to teach students with special needs and admitted to needing more special education training (Al-Harthi & Evans, 2017; Cooc, 2019; Goe & Cogges, 2007; Klehm, 2014; Sutton, 2013; Sze, 2009). Although in some studies teachers exhibited high levels of knowledge related to disability and inclusion, they reported the need for additional training to be adequately prepared to support students with disabilities in both the special and general education settings.

## Conclusion

This literature review sought to provide a general overview of research that has been conducted from 2000 to 2021 in the impact of teacher expectation, attitudes, knowledge, preparation, and experiences on the academic attainment of students with special needs. Thus, making significant efforts to enact laws and regulations to create an inclusive education system in which students with special needs can continue their education in a positive space requires understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of inclusive education. Previous research has shown that teachers, as a key factor in the success of the inclusion process, may also play a role in impeding inclusion through the biases they hold.

Evidence from the reviewed studies indicated that teachers' high or low expectations are associated with the academic performance of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the information teachers have about students' previous academic achievement and the type of their disability impacts their decisions regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in a general education class, their instructional practices, and the relationship between both teachers and students with disabilities in these classes. This implies that students with disabilities may lose the opportunity to acquire proper education compared to their normal peers. Additionally, another concept emerged from reviewing the results of these studies in which a large number of special education teachers lack training and qualifications to teach this category of students, which poses as an obstacle to improving the performance of students with learning difficulties. The findings of this review may serve as a resource for educators, stakeholders, academics, and policymakers alike in developing an educational system that considers both the needs of students with special needs and the professional needs of teachers. Empowering teachers to adequately teach students with special needs improves their self-efficacy and elevates the academic performance and self-efficacy of students with special needs.

## Further Research Recommendations

This review suggests that researchers investigate other variables, such as the impact of emotional relationships on students' outcomes, and how teachers' reinforcement is associated with students' self-efficacy and their academic performance. The results indicate the need for providing constant training for pre-service and in-service teachers on the inclusion of students with disabilities, characteristics of disabilities, and strategic knowledge of evidence-based practices to implement when working with different disability populations. Education regarding teaching students with disabilities should be a top priority for both universities and colleges that offer teacher training programs and school districts that educate students with disabilities. Using evidence-based practices to educate all students is a good teaching practice that should be prioritized by all institutions—both higher education and school districts.

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