

Teacher's Differential Behaviour towards High and Low-Achieving Children: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

This study is part of a larger project that examined the perceptions of children with learning difficulties (LD) and high-achieving (HA) children regarding their teacher's treatment towards high and low-achieving children. The results reported in this study are based on the interviews of 18 children of ages between 7 to 14 years old from Grade 3, 4 and 5 in two Primary schools in Brunei. The children were interviewed twice during the year, at the beginning and towards the end of the year. The results show that equal numbers of LD and HA children perceived that teachers treated the high and low-achieving children differently at both times and their perceptions did not change with time. The high achievers were recipients of the kind treatment and good teaching whilst the low-achievers were recipients of negative treatment such as being ignored and scolded. The children also offered several suggestions as to the kind of help that teachers could do to help children with learning difficulties. This study is the first of its kind in Brunei that examined the perceptions of the two groups in students, namely LD and HA children, longitudinally regarding their perceptions of teacher's differential behaviour.

Introduction

Teachers interact with children according to their expectations of the children's performance (Brattesani, Weinstein, & Marshall, 1984; Brophy, 1983; Kuklinksi & Weinstein, 2001; Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp, & Botkin, 1987). Brophy & Good (2000) identified several types of teacher behaviours that were theorized to mediate the teacher-expectancy effects such as a) criticizing low-expectancy students more often and praising them less frequently, b) failing to give feedback to low-expectancy students, c) asking more stimulating questions to high-expectancy students, d) giving low-expectancy students answers readily rather than challenging their thinking, and e) teaching less to low-expectancy students as well as giving excessive help to them.

However, Brophy (1983) cautioned that not all teachers treat low-expectation students differently and that teachers treat students equally regardless of their achievement levels. While it is justifiable for teachers to give some forms of differential treatment particularly

for students with learning difficulties (LD) however, their good intentions at times could cause problems when their treatment is influenced by false assumptions concerning the students' potential for learning. Westwood (1995) argued that as a result of some teachers' differential treatment, students with LD will get less input and feedback from the teachers and will make less progress than higher achievers. Consequently, the teachers' good intentions widen the gap in achievement between the LD and HA children over the course of the year. This study thus aims to find out the perceptions of the LD and HA children in Brunei regarding teachers' differential behaviour towards the high and low-achieving children. The other aim is to find out whether the Bruneian children's perceptions on teachers' differential behavior differ from their western counterparts.

Method

Participants

A total of 18 children of ages between 7 to 14 years old from Grades 3, 4 and 5 took part in the interviews. Three LD and three HA children were selected from each level to be participants in this study.

Measures

The interview questions on teacher's differential treatment were adapted from Weinstein and Middlestadt (1979). The words 'clever' and the 'not-so-clever' pupils were more appropriate than the 'high-achiever' and 'low-achiever' to enable the children in the lower levels as well as the LD children to better understand the interview questions. Examples of questions given were: a) Do you think that teachers treat clever and the not-so-clever pupils differently?, b) If so, how do teachers treat clever pupils?, c) How do teachers treat the not-so-clever pupils?, d) How would you feel if teachers treat you differently from peers? and e) How should teachers help children who have trouble learning?

Procedures

The children were interviewed twice during the year, at the beginning and towards the end of the year. The children were withdrawn from their classrooms in a small group of three children at one time and each child was interviewed separately. Interviews were tape recorded.

Results and Discussion

A 2 x 2 contingency table chi-square analysis was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the two groups of children's perceptions at both times. No significant differences were found between LD and HA groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 18) = .00, p = 1.0$ at Time 1 and Time 2, $\chi^2(1, N = 18) = .00, p = 1.0$ suggesting that there were equal numbers of the LD and HA children perceiving that teacher's differential treatment towards the clever and the not-so-clever pupils. The effect sizes were .11 and .00, respectively indicating medium and trivial effect sizes. Chi-squared tests were also used to evaluate the observed versus predicted proportions of participants for each group at both times. There were no statistically significant differences between the observed and expected frequencies for the LD group, $\chi^2(1, n = 9) = 1.0, p = .317$, and the HA group, $\chi^2(1, n = 9) = .111, p = .739$ at Time 1 and the LD group, $\chi^2(1, n = 9) = 1.0, p = .317$, and the HA group, $\chi^2(1, n = 9) = 1.0, p = .317$ at Time 2. The results indicate that there were no significant differences in the LD groups as well as in the HA groups between those children agreeing and disagreeing regarding the differential treatment. Further, these results suggest that the LD and HA children's perceptions regarding teacher treatment remained unchanged over time. The equal number of children perceiving and not perceiving the differential treatment could be due to the fact that not all teachers exhibited differential treatment to high and low achievers as evidenced by the empirical findings (Brattesani et al., 1984; Brophy, 1983; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; Weinstein et al., 1987). Some teachers in this study might have given equal treatment to all students in their classes regardless of their achievement status and hence this could explain why some participants in this study did not report any differential treatment by the teachers between the clever and the not-so-clever pupils.

Generally at both Time I and Time II, most children regardless of achievement level, talked about the kind treatment received by the clever pupils such as being taught well, were always praised and were seldom scolded unless they misbehaved in the classrooms. Further, the clever pupils were often asked questions in class and were asked to teach the not-so-clever pupils. This shows that the clever pupils were well treated by

the teachers and they sometimes acted as teachers' helpers to teach the slow learners. In contrast, both LD and HA children in this study reported that the not-so-clever pupils were the recipients of the negative treatment such as being ignored, scolded and lacking praise. Similar findings were also documented in previous studies on teacher treatment of the high and low-achieving students (Brattesani et al., 1984; Weinstein et al., 1984).

On the LD and HA children's feelings to the question if the teacher treated them differently from their peers, almost all of them at both times mentioned that they would be happy if teachers treated them kindly. This is in contrast to their feelings if the teachers were angry with them or scolded them. At Time 1, 12 children (67%) appeared tough by saying that they did not feel anything if teachers was angry with them or scolded them against 6 (33%) of them who said so at Time 2. At Time 2, most of them expressed their sadness and unhappiness if the teachers scolded them. A possible explanation is that they wanted to look tough to me at Time 1 as I was quite new to them at that time. The children in the study might also be immune to the teacher's anger at Time 1. Another explanation is that the children might be more honest to me at Time 2 as they saw me several times during the year and they could have developed a closer relationship with me. This was evidenced by the way they greeted me whenever I saw them and thus their admission of the feeling of sadness and unhappiness when the teachers scolded them. Interestingly, they also admitted that the feeling of sadness or frustration did not last long.

Regarding their views on the things that teachers should help children who had learning difficulties, many HA children suggested that teachers should a) teach them well especially to read, write and count, b) ask peers to help them, c) explain the lesson again and d) withdraw them to resource room. In contrast, only a few LD children in Grade 5 offered suggestions. The few that did suggested that the teachers should a) give advice and motivate them, b) help them with their work everyday and c) teach them. However, most of the LD children could not elaborate on what they meant by 'teaching' due to their cognitive disabilities and limited experience.

The results of this study show that both types of children particularly the HA children, were able to perceive and report the different kinds of treatment given to high and low achievers by the teachers and their responses were no different from their western counterparts. Further the HA children, by virtue of their intellectual capability were able to describe the different types of teaching strategies in order to help the children with learning problems. The LD children in contrast, were more concerned about the kind of the emotional support that teachers could give to this type of children. This shows that besides teaching the children with learning difficulties using the appropriate teaching methods, these children also needed to be

cared, supported and motivated by the teachers in their quest for learning.

Conclusion

The findings in this study indicate that both LD and HA children were divided in their perceptions of whether the teachers treated the high and low achievers differently and thus give direct evidence that not all teachers gave differential treatment to high and low-achieving children. Further, the LD and HA children in this study reported that the high achievers were recipients of positive treatment whilst the low achievers were recipients of negative treatment. Given the academic orientation of the Bruneian education system, it was surprising to find that the children in this study did not differ from their western counterparts in their descriptions of teacher differential treatment of the high and low-achieving children. The LD children in particular mentioned about the emotional needs of the children with learning problems that is, the need to be praised, motivated and to be taken care of by the teachers. This indicates that the emotional needs of the children are universal regardless of the cultural differences and thus this study adds to the wealth of previous studies on teachers' differential behaviour, particularly in the context of the cultural differences that are present. It is worth mentioning that these findings are also being investigated in a larger quantitative study.

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