

Four- and five-year-old children's views and perceptions related to their teachers' expectations

Maria Cooper, Lyn McDonald, and Christine Rubie-Davies

<https://doi.org/10.18296/cm.0050>

Abstract

Teacher expectations influence how children fare in education. However, we know little about how 4- and 5-year-old children in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive their curriculum experiences. This qualitative study utilised interviews to explore the perceptions of 12 children (attending kindergarten and school) regarding their teachers' expectations of ability/mixed ability grouping, the learning environment, and goal setting. Findings showed that the children held positive views of their learning environment, especially their teachers' support, care, and expectations, and were also cognisant of their curriculum experiences and what improvements could be made to support their learning. These findings suggest that a mana-enhancing education can occur when teachers promote high expectations of *all* children and ensure that children have opportunities to contribute to curriculum decisions.

Introduction

Teacher expectations play an important role in how children fare in their learning and can be defined as, “inferences that teachers make about the future behavior or academic achievement of their students based on what they know about these students now” (Good & Brophy, 1997, p. 79; Rubie-Davies, 2015). How well children (or students) progress, and how they view their own abilities, can be partly attributed to the beliefs that underpin teachers' practices and strategies (Rubie-Davies, 2010). Babad (2009) further argued it was likely that teacher expectations affected not just student learning but also student self-concept. Students may interpret and internalise these expectations and achieve in accordance with them (McKown et al., 2010). High-expectation teachers believe that *all* students can make substantial learning gains in their classes. This belief

translates into the practices of high-expectation teachers differing from those of other teachers in three main areas: flexible grouping of students; creating a positive socioemotional climate; and making a positive difference to students' learning experiences through goal setting, teacher feedback, and encouragement of student motivation and autonomy (e.g., Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2011).

Research (e.g., Weinstein, 2002) shows that older primary-school students are very astute at determining how they are treated differently in some classrooms versus others. However, 4- and 5-year-old children's perceptions of the teaching practices and strategies they experience in education are less well known. Given the young age of the participants in our study, this article makes a unique contribution to the teacher-expectation literature. Research with young children, such as the research reported in this article, is needed if we are to understand how children experience their learning environments and their teachers' practices. This article reports a small qualitative study of the experiences of 12 children (six at kindergarten and six in their first year of school) and their perceptions of their teachers' practices and expectations in relation to ability/mixed-ability grouping, the learning environment (class climate), and goal setting. The main question for the study was: What do young children perceive their teachers' expectations are in relation to three key high expectation principles: ability grouping, class climate, and goal setting?

Teacher expectations and young children's abilities

Teacher expectations are critical to know about because they influence young children's outcomes. For example, positive expectations can encourage children's construction of their academic identities which, in turn, can support their academic achievement (Sandilos et al., 2017). However, teachers are also "susceptible to developing and maintaining inaccurate impressions about their preschoolers based on salient information about the child ... or being influenced by their own background and beliefs" (Baker et al., 2015, p. 806). This issue suggests a need to investigate more broadly the role that teacher expectations play in children's perceptions of their own learning and abilities during the early childhood and first years of schooling.

Few scholars have focused on very young children in the teacher-expectation research field. One study conducted more than 20 years ago (Hadley et al., 1994) explored whether 145 preschool teachers in community-based settings

and kindergarten teachers in more formal education settings encouraged or restricted 3- to 5-year-old children's opportunities to talk with others in their respective learning environments. Little difference was found between preschool and kindergarten teachers' expectations of children's verbal talk when activities were child-centred and led. However, when activities were teacher-directed or led, kindergarten teachers restricted children's talk more than preschool teachers did. Hadley and colleagues argued that teachers' educational philosophies and goals likely contributed to the differences between their expectations of children's verbal capabilities. Specifically, kindergarten teachers tended to emphasise academic work, instruction-following, and independent work due to the pressures of school readiness. The study highlights there can be vast differences in expectations among teachers, however, the study focused only on surveying teachers' views about children's talk, not children's views of their own experiences.

Finnish scholars (Pesu et al., 2016) investigated the extent to which teachers' and parents' beliefs about their 6–8 year-old children's abilities predicted their academic self-concept. By the end of the first year of schooling, teachers' beliefs were found to play a more significant role than families' beliefs in some children's self-concept of ability. This influence was most evident for high-performing rather than low-performing children. For low-performing children, no association was found between teachers' beliefs and children's self-concept of ability. The study suggests that teachers can treat children differently according to their expected performance levels.

More recently, Canadian scholars explored factors influencing the formation of teacher expectations of 4- and 5-year-old children in a full-day kindergarten (Timmons, 2018). Reports were drawn from 15 teachers about their practices, roles, and interactions that support children to meet curriculum expectations. The study showed that differences in training and pedagogical approaches influenced teacher expectations of children in different ways. For example, although all teachers agreed that play offered multiple learning opportunities for children, teachers with a 2-year diploma believed small group size was the most helpful, whereas teachers with a 3-year degree believed whole-group interaction was most helpful.

While these studies shed some light on teacher expectations of young children's developing abilities and capabilities, research literature on young children's

unique views and perceptions of their teachers' practices and expectations is scarce. The early years provide an opportune time to explore children's perceptions of their experiences, especially as teacher expectations are revealed early on to children through the learning opportunities offered and teacher–child verbal and non-verbal interactions (Rubie-Davies, 2015). Children's perceptions provide a unique lens for understanding the quality of their educational experiences and teachers' ability to meet their needs (Sandilos et al., 2017), but are not often sought in qualitative research. Indeed, the scant literature on children's perceptions about their teachers' teaching practices and expectations of them implies that children's views are either too hard to access due to their young age or are not important.

In this article, we challenge these assumptions by exploring the perceptions of twelve 4- and 5-year-old children (six at kindergarten and six in their first year of school). We focus specifically on three areas of teacher expectations: ability/mixed ability grouping, the learning environment, and goal setting. These areas were the framework for a much larger intervention study in New Zealand in which the 84 teachers involved refined and changed their practices accordingly by creating flexible grouping, enhancing the class climate and supporting students' goal setting (McDonald et al., 2014). The researchers concluded that flexible grouping within the classroom enabled the teachers to give greater choices to all children and their learning; that the class climate and the connections that children made to that environment were important in their learning, for example the teachers' care and support; and that goal setting and feedback gave children greater ownership of their learning and enhanced their motivation.

Given the vastly different pedagogical views of teachers in early childhood education and primary school, our aim is not to compare the experiences of 4- and 5-year-olds, but to understand their unique views and perceptions related to teacher expectations and to identify insights that ECE and school teachers might reflect on to improve educational provision for all children.

Curriculum expectations

***Tē Whāriki*—the early childhood curriculum**

The national bicultural early childhood curriculum *Tē Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) outlines principle-based expectations of early childhood

provision for children in Aotearoa New Zealand. Through a play-based philosophy, teachers/kaiako are encouraged to enact mana-enhancing practices that empower children to learn and grow; provide children with opportunities to learn through relationships with “people, places, and things” (p. 12); take a holistic view of children’s learning and development; and ensure families are an integral part of children’s curriculum experiences. Realising these expectations acknowledges children’s intrinsic motivation to engage, participate, and learn, and respects children’s agency in choosing how, when, and what to participate in, and who to play with. Agency here refers to children’s capacity to act independently and to make their own choices.

The New Zealand Curriculum—the school curriculum

Within the *New Zealand Curriculum* document there are eight principles which embody beliefs about what is considered important in the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). One of the principles refers to *high expectations* and support for all children to learn and to achieve “personal excellence, regardless of their individual circumstances” (p. 9). Further to this principle, the curriculum discusses the actions teachers need to take to promote and encourage student learning. Relevant factors include creating a supportive learning environment, encouraging reflective thought and action, facilitating shared learning, and providing sufficient opportunities to learn (Ministry of Education, 2007). It is clearly stated in the curriculum document that “students learn best when they feel accepted” and “enjoy positive relationships” with other students and teachers (p. 34).

Context of the study

The participant kindergarten and school were located in the same suburb of Auckland, New Zealand. The kindergarten, a teacher-led ECE service, was governed by the Auckland Kindergarten Association and licensed for 40 children aged 2–5 years. At the time of the study, children attending represented five different ethnicities. The teaching staff included three teachers and one head teacher who were all qualified. ECE teaching qualifications commonly vary between a 2-year diploma or 3-year degree. They were supported by a teacher aide, a teaching assistant, and an office administrator. Teaching practices were influenced by the kindergarten’s philosophy of child-led learning

through play and *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). The physical space was open-plan and comprised several small rooms with an adjoining outdoor deck and a large outdoor playground.

The school was a low-decile contributing school that provided education for 489 students in Years 1 to 6. At the time of the study, students from 36 different ethnicities attended the school. This diversity was representative of the local community. The teaching staff consisted of the principal, two deputy principals, and 30 classroom teachers and specialist staff. Primary teaching qualifications also vary between a 2-year diploma or 3-year degree. The school was an enviroschool, with the vision Growing Great Learners where teachers aim to create a positive, nurturing learning environment enabling all students to thrive and learn through a rich range of experiences and curriculum areas and love of learning.

Method

Data were collected using individual, semistructured interviews. The six kindergarten children aged 4 years were interviewed, in the company of one of their parents, by the first author. The six school children aged 5 years (from two classrooms) were interviewed, in the company of one representative parent, by the second author. The 10-minute interviews were audio-recorded with children's written and verbal permission (parents explained the forms to them) and centred on children's perceptions of their abilities and teachers' expectations of them in relation to: ability/mixed ability grouping, classroom climate, and goal setting/autonomy. The interview questions for the 12 children were the same, but slightly modified for each group. For example, in relation to goal setting/autonomy, the ECE children were asked: "Does your teacher talk to you about what you want to learn? (like, write your own name, read a particular book)? Does your teacher help you set a goal for learning? How/when does she/he do this? while the school children were asked: "Does your teacher talk to you about what you have to learn? Do you know what a goal is?" The first author also had the opportunity to informally observe the kindergarten setting before the interviews took place, while meeting the participant children and their parents for familiarity.

After the interviews were transcribed and verified by parents, the data were organised under the three broad areas and then coded and analysed inductively

by hand using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two main themes were identified: 1) relationships and belonging, and 2) children's agency and responsibility for their own learning. Trustworthiness of the study (Shenton, 2004) was achieved through *credibility* by having a sound research design, an appropriate method for children (short interviews, parent support), and the authors' relevant experience in their respective contexts; *confirmability* by cross-checking one another's coding/analysis, with the support of the third author; and *dependability* by providing details about both settings, research procedures, and by foregrounding children's views. Given the narrow scope of the study, the findings are not intended to be directly *transferable* to other settings, however, readers are encouraged to consider their worth in light of their own contexts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical permission was granted by the University of Auckland (reference 021974). The ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and consideration for children's assent (Cullen et al., 2009) guided the study. The kindergarten head teacher, school principal, parents and children were fully informed about the study details, including their right to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Parents signed a consent form agreeing to their child's participation. All children were also invited to sign an assent form in plain language, with parental support. As children and their parents were known to the head teacher/school principal, pseudonyms are used.

Findings

The findings related to the kindergarten setting are reported using these pseudonyms for the children (Cameron, Fran, Randall, Zane, Ryanna, and Amanda) and for the teachers (Lysette, Cherie, Catherine, Mary, and Sheryl). The findings related to the school setting are reported using these pseudonyms for the children (Tobias, Emma, Matthew, Mary, John and Owen) and for the two Year 1 teachers (Lily and Melanie).

Ability/mixed ability grouping

The kindergarten children spent their day in a large, open environment where they could move freely within and between the indoor and outdoor areas, supported by their teachers. Grouping children by ability or age was

not practised in the kindergarten. The kindergarten did, however, provide opportunities for groups to attend special trips and excursions. For adult-to-child ratio manageability and fairness, teachers selected children whose “turn” it was to attend a trip with parental permission. This selection process did not seem to faze the children, as their responses to who gets to go on trips signalled a shared perception that all children and their families were included rather than excluded.

All six children expressed feeling good that they could choose to be part of special events/trips with other children. When probed for why, Cameron expressed: “Because you can then see all the things that are there”. Fran was aware that some children did not go on trips, adding it was because they were busy:

Fran: Some people don’t go on trips.

Interviewer: What are some reasons why children don’t go on those trips?

Fran: Because they might have something else to do.

Interviewer: So they can make a choice, is that right?

Fran: Yes, because their mummies say they can’t go because they have something else to do.

The children in the primary school setting all worked in mixed-ability groups for the curriculum areas of maths, writing and special topics, and were placed in ability groups for reading. All six school children were very aware of their groups and levels. For example, when asked if he knew his reading group, Tobias commented “I am in reading group 4 and level 17”. While all six children acknowledged they were happy in their particular groups, four said they would like more flexibility to do other reading activities, such as reading eggs, working on the iPad and memory games, and they wanted more variety of books to read. John shared he would prefer to play “Monopoly”, explaining why: “Because you get money and you get chance cards”, but then felt that this was not part of reading.

Evidently, the teachers in both school classrooms taught in instructional groups and provided distinct activities for children within those groups. Therefore, the range of activities was not available to all. Owen explained in his interview that some activities were fun and some were not. With some prompting, he expressed why:

Interviewer: So when you say some aren’t [fun] what don’t you like about those ones?

*Four- and five-year-old children's views and perceptions
related to their teachers' expectations*

Owen: It is just they take a long time and when people get free time

Interviewer: So you are still having to work on your activity?

Owen: Yeah.

Similarly, Mary liked some activities but felt they got boring sometimes. So, while the school children were aware of their reading groups and levels and appeared comfortable in those groups, there were four children who perceived that the other reading groups did more “exciting or interesting activities” (Owen) and would have liked the opportunity to participate in those activities.

Overall, the kindergarten children did not perceive that children were grouped by teachers for any reason other than for special trips and excursions. Rather, the children had free access to any play area and activities, with little restriction (mat time being an exception, as acknowledged in a later section). For the school children, their access to activities was somewhat restricted by the teacher’s decisions about subject grouping, and they were aware of this and the missed opportunities to access other activities they were interested in.

Classroom climate

All six kindergarten children enjoyed coming to kindergarten because of what they could do and play there. They also knew they could choose where/how to explore their environment. Many referred to the range of curriculum areas on offer, such as reading and writing, and enjoyed being able to freely engage in these activities. This ability to choose was supported by the first author’s informal observations of the kindergarten’s learning environment, and children’s views about the things they liked. For example, when asked what they like about coming to kindergarten, five children described aspects of the environment that they enjoyed the most and which offered them different opportunities for learning. Amanda enjoyed “the art area and doing sewing”, Cameron enjoyed “the slide... playground... monkey bars ... playdough”. Ryanna said “We have Lego and we play with that”, while Randall enjoyed “reading books”, and Zane enjoyed “climbing the tree”. Two children (Ryanna and Zane) also said that friendships and what they could do with their peers were the things they enjoyed the most:

Ryanna Playing with my friends ... We play sisters and babies

Children’s enjoyment was also evident in relation to their warm relationships with the teachers. All six kindergarten children mentioned having favourite

teachers, including why. A main reason related to teachers' personal qualities and willingness to interact with and support children. This perception of teachers having positive personal qualities and being supportive was expressed by one child. Ryanna explained how her teacher (Catherine) had cheered her up when she was upset during a trip, "I was crying at kindy and Catherine came with me on the bus and she cheered me up". Ryanna also expressed that two of the teachers were her favourites adding "I love them" although added she had not told them this. Randall mentioned three teachers as being his favourite, and then when asked why, stated "I don't know". Similarly, Zane suggested that all the teachers were his favourites because of what they did and how they played with him, "Sheryl does puppet shows, and Cherie she plays with me, and Mary does that too". Fran enjoyed how teachers made her feel:

I like how we like to see our stuff that we tell teachers, and I like how they watch what we are doing so they know what we are doing, and I like how we are making and they might take a picture of it.

Fran added that when teachers put her pictures on the wall for all the children to see, this makes her feel happy. When asked why, she responded "because I am so proud of myself because I made it".

There were, however, several aspects that the kindergarten children were not so positive about in relation to the environment. For example, Ryanna identified some children as being mean to her which she did not appreciate. Cameron identified areas of the playground that he did not like, "the swings, the cranes, the making area" and went on to recommend changes that would help him and other children such as, for example, "boards where you can write things down". Overall, all six children perceived their learning environment and relationships with teachers to be positive because of teachers' personal qualities and willingness to support and play with them. These qualities were about teachers being inclusive, caring, supportive, interactive, and playful.

All six children at the primary school commented that they enjoyed school in general and being in their classroom in particular. They mostly enjoyed the play-based type environment (similar to the kindergarten children) where there were elements of choice. For example, in the afternoon session, the children could go to the sandpit, the doll's house, and play with the blocks. As with the kindergarten, the children at the school thought their teachers clearly contributed to the friendly and happy atmosphere. For example, several of

*Four- and five-year-old children's views and perceptions
related to their teachers' expectations*

the children spoke favourably about their teachers and appeared to have a warm relationship with them. They liked being in their class and enjoyed the teacher's positive and caring manner, and the giving of feedback, stickers, and rewards. Emma commented:

I love Melanie because she is a good teacher and she helps us learn... She is kind to us and she also helps us do maths, reading and lets us choose activities.

Tobias commented that he loved his teacher because when he did something well his teacher said, "You are on fire".

Together, the ECE and school children's comments revealed strong consensus that they all perceived they had a friendly relationship with their teachers, and in some cases, even loved their teachers, although did not always articulate why. Some children alluded to their appreciation for what their teachers knew and could offer them, but as the next section shows, also stood firm in expressing their own independence.

Goal setting

Some of the kindergarten children articulated their ability and desire to do things independently and autonomously without needing help from a teacher. They were, however, confident to seek the teacher's support when needed (e.g., to tie a knot, to help with their sewing/threading). Children were aware they could bring things of interest from home, and that they were given time to share these with others (i.e., at mat time). They articulated "learning" as learning to do new things by themselves and making friends, and believed that they learnt things from their parents and teachers. For example, Amanda found a wētā (large insect) "*on the washing line*" at home and took it to kindergarten because she "*wanted to show*" the other children, they were learning about bugs, and the teachers encouraged them to share their learning. These ideas suggest that children in ECE do recognise and/or set their own learning goals.

Kindergarten children Amanda and Fran were confident to seek a teacher's support when needed, but also made it clear they could do some things independently of teachers. For example, Amanda spoke about sewing and commented she could do it by herself, but also liked the teachers' support, "Because I like them helping me". Fran was also confident she could achieve things by herself, except in one situation: "when I make a necklace we need

to tie a knot so the beads don't fall off and so our necklaces don't fall off". She added it was teachers who helped her with this. In contrast with seeking out teachers' help, two children were adamant that they learnt things on their own, despite teachers being available. Zane said: "I never need help". Similarly, Ryanna said she had learnt how to feed the worms in the worm farm by herself. Amanda explained that children set their own goals in play, and that teachers set goals for them during mat time:

- Amanda: We can do whatever we like to play, but they [teachers] tell us what to do when it's mat time.
Mum: What do you do when you sit on the mat?
Amanda: We sit on the mat, be quiet, no talking and no moving.

The six school children talked about goal setting, the purposes of goal setting, and who assisted them in the writing of goals. Emma stated:

A goal is when you have to keep practising something like a writing goal and a maths goal. My writing goal is to get better at 'wow' words.

While Matthew said: "My goal is to get better at finger spaces in writing".

The school children were also mindful they had to discuss their progress towards their goal with their teachers. This accountability was apparent in Tobias' response:

- Interviewer: So does your teacher talk to you about what you have to learn...?
Tobias: She says Tobias you won't go to the library if you don't do that activity.
Interviewer: So that is something she sets you as a goal, does she?
Tobias: Yes.

They then got teacher feedback. This enabled the school children to be aware of the next step in their learning. For example, Emma stated that they had two goal charts and Melanie [the teacher] moved their names if she thought they were good at one. Emma's goal in reading was to reach level 16 and one day be on level 17. Owen said his teacher talked to him about his goals and his goal was to write two or three sentences in a story.

Overall, the kindergarten children were aware they could learn things through interaction with their teachers, but also on their own. One child shared that at

times, they set their own goals, and at other times, teachers did this for more structured times of the day (mat time). The school children seemed more familiar with formal goal setting in relation to particular subjects, and believed it was necessary to work on their goals, including with the teacher.

Discussion

The current study provides evidence that for the 12 children (six at kindergarten and six in their first year of school), their unique perceptions focused on the importance of relationships with peers and teachers and having a sense of belonging, as well as teachers providing them with a safe learning environment. This enabled them to develop their agency and responsibility for their own learning.

Relationships and belonging

All 12 children perceived their learning environment as a place where they could explore, learn, and build relationships with other children and their teachers. For the kindergarten children, some perceived teachers to be supportive and interested in their experiences, work, and play. This made these children feel good about themselves as learners and peers. For the school children, they all expressed confident sentiments about their learning environment and the impact their teachers' positive attitudes had on them. Seminal research in the teacher-expectation field indicates how acutely students understand the implicit social structure of the classroom (Weinstein, 2002). Hence, both groups of children enjoyed coming to kindergarten or school because of their relationships with teachers. Both the kindergarten setting and two classrooms were, therefore, clearly secure and positive learning environments for the 12 children interviewed.

As Rubie-Davies (2015) stated, the climate within the classroom is partially dependent on how the teacher communicates their expectations of the ways children might cooperate with one another and the interpersonal relationships which develop. In our study, children's comments suggested their particular teachers were inclusive, caring, and supportive of them and their interests. This finding echoes Sandilos et al.'s (2017) view that children's perceptions offer important insights into the nature of their experiences. Children's views reveal they are aware of who controls the decisions in their setting and are

able to articulate how they feel about this. Further, Wilson (2004) found that an important component of the classroom climate was when students felt connected to what was happening, how close the students felt to their teachers, the sense of caring they experienced and “the degree to which a student experience[d] a sense of caring and closeness to teachers” (p. 294). Despite knowing that, at times children choose their activities, and at other times teachers make these decisions, the kindergarten and school children still felt positive about this, likely because of how inclusive, caring, and supportive their teachers were with them. The learning environment that high-expectation teachers create in their classrooms is likely to be more positive and caring than that of other teacher groups (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2011). In our study, the positive view of teachers shared by most children across both settings suggests that many of the teachers in this study potentially held *high expectations* of all children.

Research (e.g., McDonald et al., 2014) has emphasised that high-expectation teachers strive to build positive learning environments and hold overwhelmingly positive perceptions of student attitudes. This factor was evident with the 12 children interviewed, and the positive teaching practices that were inferred through children’s views and perceptions. As is stated in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), students learn best when they enjoy these positive relationships with other students and teachers in their class. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) also states that in a play-based context, children will have opportunities to learn through developing relationships with people. However, the school children highlighted that while they usually do what their teachers expect of them, they were not always interested in teacher-directed activities, taking more time to complete them or becoming bored. This tension endorses the value of exploring children’s views about their educational experiences and relationships, and then drawing on these views to modify provision in ways that maintain these relationships and enable children to see themselves as worthy contributors to their curriculum experiences.

Agency and responsibility for learning

Children in the current study were fully aware of the grouping structures established in their setting. School children were aware they had little choice to change their fixed ability groupings, sometimes preferring to be part of a different group. Kindergarten children seemed aware that they were one

big group, and knew they could make choices about their play activities and were able to go on trips or excursions when it was their turn, with parental permission. In these ways, the grouping structure of each setting signalled to children what level of agency they had to make decisions about their own learning.

Children in the study were also aware of how to set and achieve their goals. The kindergarten children did not use the term *goal* but talked about learning to do or play something that was of interest to them or others. They also knew they could seek out a teacher's help if needed, although many felt confident to be in control of their own learning. The school children used the language of "goals" and talked about academic goals, and the direct support they received from their teacher in relation to these goals. Hence, the learning goals of the kindergarten children were self-determined, possibly influenced in part by what their teachers expected of them within the play-based environment, while the learning goals of school children were teacher-guided and influenced by what teachers said to and expected of them.

Supporting children's agency and responsibility in learning concurs with *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Kindergarten children were free to make decisions about their own learning interests within the context of an open, play-based environment. This emphasis on agency and responsibility for learning also aligns with the vision of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) to support children as lifelong learners and informed decision makers. However, the school children's observation that other reading groups were more interesting than their own, and Owen's preference to join another group, suggested that these children were not able to make decisions about which group to be part of. Teachers, rather than children, made decisions about which groups children would be part of and therefore learn within.

Children across the kindergarten and school settings therefore viewed their decision-making experiences differently, which may be explained by the different ways teachers structured the learning environment. This finding resonates with Timmons' (2018) point that differences in training and pedagogical approaches could influence teacher expectations of children in different ways. Similarly, Hadley et al. (1994) found that teachers' educational philosophies and goals can also contribute to differences between teacher expectations. Despite some similarities between the curricula, teachers in kindergarten and schools in

Aotearoa New Zealand are often educated in sector-specific programmes so will naturally have different views about teaching and learning because of their education. Even so, this point warrants consideration for strengthening connections between the ECE and school sectors. Given the significant role that teachers' beliefs can play in children's academic self-concept (Pesu et al., 2016), and the impact that these identities have on their academic achievement (Sandilos et al., 2017), it also seems critical to reflect on how children might perceive learning and themselves as learners in response to who determines their learning goals and/or groups. If children are not actively involved in any of these decisions, then they may learn that only what is set by the teacher is valued and subsequently disengage from the learning process.

Limitations

The number of participants was limited to two small groups of children: six children in a kindergarten setting and six children in a school setting. Further, the focus was on interviewing children and their reports of teachers' practices and expectations. Future research could include more groups of children, interviews with and observations of teachers for additional perspectives.

Conclusion and implications

The findings provide important insights into what twelve 4- and 5-year-old children felt and perceived regarding their teachers' expectations in three areas: ability or flexible grouping; class climate; and goal setting and autonomy. Despite children's learning environments and activities being structured in different ways, both the kindergarten and the school children were very aware and cognisant of their own abilities and their teachers' practices. They also appreciated the warm relationships and friendships they had with others in their setting. Based on our findings, we argue that listening to children is important if the curriculum that they experience is to be meaningful. Giving all children a mana-enhancing platform from which to share their views would give teachers in both sectors an insight into what engages and sustains children's interest in the learning process. The teachers referred to in the study had already found ways to talk with and listen to children about their interests and educational experiences, and integrate what matters to children into the ECE or school curriculum. Yet some children highlighted areas of curriculum that could be improved, such as play areas in the kindergarten, and more freedom to

choose activities and groups in the school. We conclude that teachers ought to view education broadly as a mana-enhancing experience, and include dialogues with children about their own learning and teachers' expectations. Teachers also need to understand that promoting *high expectations* and viewing *all* children as competent learners and communicators can have positive effects for children's self-concept and educational outcomes. To promote anything other than this risks underplaying children's strengths, potential, and motivation to learn, risking their disengagement from the learning process.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks goes to the kindergarten and school children, their parents, teachers, and leaders who made this study possible.

Glossary

enviroschool: a school that supports children to plan, design, and implement sustainability practices

finger spaces: the space that needs to be left between words for reading purposes

low decile: low socioeconomic community

mana: spiritual prestige, power, influence and status (te reo Māori)

mat time: a group of children sitting together with a teacher for a shared activity

Reading Eggs: an online reading programme in New Zealand

wētā: a large wingless insect found only in New Zealand

References

- Babad, E. (2009). *The social psychology of the classroom*. Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203872475>
- Baker, C. N., Kupersmidt, J. B., Tichovolsky, M. H., Voegler-Lee, M. E., & Arnold, D. H. (2015). Teacher (mis)perceptions of preschoolers' academic skills: Predictors and associations with longitudinal outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 107(3), 805–820. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000008>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cullen, J., Hedges, H., & Bone, J. (2009). Planning, undertaking and disseminating research in early childhood settings: An ethical framework. *New Zealand Research in ECE Journal*, 12, 109–118.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). Introduction: Disciplining the practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1–19). Sage.

- Good, T., & Brophy, J. (1997). *Looking in classrooms* (7th ed.). Longman.
- Hadley, P. A., Wilcox, K. A., & Rice, M. L. (1994). Talking at school: Teacher expectations in preschool and kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9, 111–129. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006\(94\)90031-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(94)90031-0)
- McDonald, L., Flint, A., Rubie-Davies, C., Peterson, L., Watson, P., & Garrett, L. (2014). Teaching high expectation strategies to teachers through an intervention process. *Professional Development in Education*, 42(2), 290–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.980009>
- McKown, C., Gregory, A., & Weinstein, R. S. (2010). Expectations, stereotypes, and self-fulfilling prophecies in classroom and school life. In J. L. Meece & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Handbook of research on schools, schooling and human development* (pp. 256–274). Taylor and Francis
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *New Zealand curriculum*. Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Tē whāriki—he whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Author.
- Pesu, L., Viljaranta, J., & Aunola, K. (2016). The role of parents' and teachers' beliefs in children's self-concept development. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 44, 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2016.03.001>
- Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2010). Teacher expectations and perceptions of student characteristics: is there a relationship? *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(1), 121–135. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709909x466334>
- Rubie-Davies, C. M., & Peterson, E. R. (2011). Teacher expectations and beliefs: Influences on the socioemotional climate. In C. M. Rubie-Davies (Ed.), *Educational psychology: Concepts, research and challenges* (pp. 134–149). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203838884>
- Rubie-Davies, C. (2015). *Becoming a high expectation teacher: Raising the bar*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315761251>
- Sandilos, L. E., Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Cohen, J. J. (2017). Warmth and demand: The relation between students' perceptions of the classroom environment and achievement growth. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1321–1337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12685>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Timmons, K. (2018). Educator expectations in full-day kindergarten: Comparing the factors that contribute to the formation of early childhood educator and teacher expectations. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-018-0891-0>
- Weinstein, R. S. (2002). *Reaching higher: The power of expectations in schooling*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674045040>
- Wilson, D. (2004). The interface of school climate and school connectedness and relationships with aggression and victimization. *Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 293–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08286.x>

The authors

Maria Cooper, senior lecturer at the University of Auckland, researches and teaches in the area of early childhood education, with interests in early years curriculum, teacher leadership, infant–toddler pedagogies, and equity-driven practices.

Email: m.cooper@auckland.ac.nz

Lyn McDonald, senior lecturer at the University of Auckland, researches and teaches in ITE in the Graduate diploma in teaching (primary) and the honours programmes with interests in student teacher learning on practicum, the role of the mentor, learning theories, and teacher expectation research.

Christine Rubie-Davies, professor of education at the University of Auckland, is a social psychologist whose research interests relate to class-level teacher expectations and their influence on student outcomes, particularly those of Māori and Pasifika students.