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The Influence of Rural vs. Non-Rural Background and Setting Variables on Psychoeducational Expectations

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This study investigated the effects of rural vs. non-rural background and setting variables upon 383 school psychologists' expectations for a case study child. The results indicated that school psychologists' expectations were not influenced by the child's background or school setting. However, school psychologists who worked in rural school settings had higher future academic and vocational expectancies for the case study child in general than urban school psychologists.

Nonbiased assessment has become an increasingly important issue among educators and related professionals [15]. Although the original concerns focused on bias in standardized tests, a recent concern has been for the decision-making process that precedes and follows the administration of tests. For example, Bailey and Harbin [2] have delineated five steps in the assessment process during which bias can operate, including the development of prognostic expectations, which occurs after the administration of tests. Such expectations are especially important as they have been related to student achievement [14; 17] and teacher behavior [4]. Furthermore, expectations have been shown to function to confirm various social stereotypes under certain conditions [5].

Research has subsequently been conducted in an effort to determine whether educational expectations are biased as a result of inappropriate student characteristic variables, e.g., sex [1; 8], race [11; 7], and socio-economic status [1; 3; 11; 12]. One variable that has been neglected is the student's background, (i.e., rural vs. urban vs. suburban). To date, there have been no studies addressing the effects of a child's rural vs. non-rural background on psychoeducational expectations.

The potential for bias as a consequence of this characteristic should be evident as rural students display various problems that may relate to bias. For example, the educational level of rural persons falls below the national average, rural students fail to enroll or drop out of schools significantly more often than non-rural students, and rural students score below urban students on a variety of cognitive and academic measures [16]. Major problems also face handicapped students in rural areas. That rural children are being adequately evaluated and referred to the most appropriate educational programs is not supported by the large number of unserved and underserved handicapped children in rural areas [9].

Information concerning the expectations of educators from different sociocultural backgrounds is thus badly needed. Although stereotypes abound [13], researchers have paid little attention to systematically investigating the educationally relevant expectations of educators regarding rural children. Such factors may obviously affect teacher-student interactions as well as decisions to refer for special education services.

The present study thus explored the influence of a child's background (i.e., rural vs. urban vs. suburban) on educational expectations. The setting of the child's school (i.e., rural vs. urban vs. suburban) was also addressed because the influence of a child's background may be differently related to a specific school setting, e.g., expectations for a rural child in an urban setting may vary from those for a rural child in a rural setting. The related factor of the educator's current work setting (i.e., rural vs. urban vs. suburban) was also investigated.

METHOD

Subjects

A total of 630 school psychologists were randomly selected from the 1983 National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Membership Directory. Each subject was mailed a packet of materials, including the fictitious case study, decision-making questionnaire, and demographic information form. A second request was mailed to subjects who failed to respond to the first.

A total of 383 usable responses (60%) were received. The mean age of the school psychologists was 37.8 years (*S.D.* = 9.8) and the mean number of years of experience was 7.9 years (*S.D.* = 5.8). Females represented 57% of the sample. Based upon their own definitions, the sample included school psychologists who worked in the following settings: rural (43%), urban (21%), and suburban (36%). Their primary childhood backgrounds were described as follows: rural (25%), urban (30%), and suburban (45%). The sample also included Masters (42%), Specialist (36%), and Doctoral (22%) level respondents from all five major regions of the country:

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Northeast (27%), Southeast (22%), North Central (26%), West Central (12%), and West (12%).

Procedure

A brief, fictitious case study was prepared describing a well-behaved, second grade Caucasian boy experiencing academic difficulties, who had recently moved to a new school system. Equivocal test data were presented indicating "Borderline" performance on intelligence, achievement, perceptual-motor, and adaptive behavior measures (e.g., WISC-R, FSIQ = 70, Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children T-Score = 33). The experimental conditions were created by varying the description of the student's background (rural vs. suburban vs. urban, innercity) and the description of the setting of the school (rural vs. suburban vs. urban, innercity). In all other respects, the case studies were identical.

After reviewing the case study materials, each subject completed a decision-making questionnaire composed of items prepared in Likert scale format. The Likert scales ranged from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 4 – Strongly Agree. Questions involved future academic, adaptive behavior, peer relations, and vocational expectations (e.g., This child will continue to show serious problems in basic academic areas. This child will show future difficulties relating to peers.). The school psychologists were also asked to rate the extent to which the case study child's test scores reflected his true capacity.

RESULTS

The influence of a student's background, school setting, and school psychologist's work setting was investigated by a 3 × 3 × 3 MANOVA (student background × school setting × school psychologist work setting). The results yeilded a significant main effect of school psychologist work setting (Wilks' Lambda = .94; $df = 8,356$; $p < .05$, see Table 1). In order to determine which dependent variables contributed to the significant main effect univariate effects were explored (see Table 1). Both the academic expectations ($F = 3.34$, $df = 2, 326$, $p < .05$) and the vocational expectation effects ($F = 4.74$, $df = 2, 326$, $p < .05$) were significant. Subsequent Scheffé tests of school psychologists' work setting means indicated that rural school psychologists rated the case study pupils in general as less likely to experience future academic ($F = 4.90$, $df = 2, 326$, $p < 10$) and vocational ($F = 7.01$, $df = 2, 326$, $p < .05$) difficulties compared to urban school psychologists (see Tables 2 and 3).

The impact of the student's background and setting on the school psychologists' judgments of the validity of the assessment results (i.e., the extent to which the test results reflected the child's true capacity) was tested by a 3 × 3 × 3 ANOVA (student background × school setting × school psychologist work setting). There were no significant main or interaction effects.

DISCUSSION

The major conclusion from this study is that school psychologists' expectations and assessment validity judgments were not influenced by the student's background or school setting. However, school psychologists' expectations were influenced by their current work setting. Holding the evaluation data constant, school psychologists who were employed in rural settings had higher future academic and vocational expectations for the case study students in general than their urban counterparts. This may be related to the fact that rural students typically perform lower than students in urban schools [15]. Hence, it is possible that rural practitioners form their expectations on the basis of a different normative framework than urban practitioners. That is, school psychologists who work in rural settings may develop lower "clinical norms" than urban school psychologists, thus creating higher expectations for the borderline mentally handicapped students, as well as others. It should be noted that these expectations apparently may not appropriately generalize to non-rural settings.

TABLE 1

MANOVA Summary for Expectations by Student Background, Setting of the School, and School Psychologist Work Setting and Subsequent ANOVA Analyses

		Univariate Expectation Outcomes[a]			
Source	Wilks Lambda	Academic	Adaptive	Peer	Vocational
Student Background (A)	.98	1.10	1.25	.33	.93
School Setting (B)	.99	1.23	.08	.24	.29
Psychologist Work Setting (C)	.94**	3.43*	.81	1.60	4.74**
AB	.95	.84	1.49	1.86	.37
AC	.96	.75	.24	1.54	.16
BC	.95	.03	1.16	.93	.73
ABC	.90	.90	2.05	.95	.88

[a]Univariate outcomes are F statistics.
*$p < .10$
**$p < .05$

TABLE 2

Scheffé Mean Comparisons
for Academic Performance Expectation
According to School Psychologist Work Setting

Work Setting	Urban (1)	Suburban (2)	Rural (3)
Mean	3.35	3.27	3.14
1	–	1.88	4.90*
2		–	.71

*$p<.10$

TABLE 3

Scheffé Mean Comparisons
for Vocational Expectations According
to School Psychologist Work Setting

Work Setting	Urban (1)	Suburban (2)	Rural (3)
Mean	2.58	2.44	2.29
1	–	1.88	7.01*
2		–	1.63

*$p<.05$

Further research is needed to investigate the possibility of differential expectations among teachers and other school personnel. Rural teachers may have different expectations for children compared to urban teachers, which affect their students' behavior and classroom performance. Furthermore, future research should address the impact of school psychologists' expectations upon consumers of their services. School psychologists' expectations and interpretations of referred children's behavior may markedly influence parents' and teachers' subsequent expectations, programmatic decisions, and behavior toward a given child.

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