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# Teacher Expectations as a Political Issue in Rural Alaska Schools[1]

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To measure teacher expectations for academic achievement in rural Alaska schools, we surveyed 304 randomly selected teachers. Teachers in predominantly Native schools held significantly different views about students' potential educational attainment and achievement than teachers in predominantly Caucasian schools. Fewer teachers in Native communities thought students would attend or graduate from college or could achieve at or above national norms. The debate these findings stimulated indicates the way teacher expectations research has been politicized in rural Alaska. Many rural educators see these beliefs as nothing more than a realistic assessment of present educational conditions and emphasize that these beliefs should *not* count as "low expectations." Many Native leaders, in contrast, see these attitudes as evidence of what they have always suspected—the prejudiced attitudes that, in their view, create school failure among Native children. This article discusses the educational problems created by politicized debate on teacher expectations.

The research literature on effective schooling consistently identifies a positive academic climate and high teacher expectations as variables strongly linked to high achievement test scores [1; 4; 7]. Most research on teacher expectations and school climate, however, has been done in inner-city urban schools with Black, Hispanic, and Caucasian populations. We have been able to locate only two studies that empirically examined teacher expectations in rural schools with Indian and Eskimo populations. Rampaul [10] found a significant association between teacher expectations and academic achievement among 41 third and fourth grade Native students in one northern Manitoba school. Larson [6] found that 52 student teachers in predominantly Indian or mixed ethnicity schools believed that Indian students are more likely to be seen as poor performers and that teachers treat poor performers less favorably. Both these studies, however, used small samples and offer little generalizable information on teacher expectations in rural schools with Indian and Eskimo populations.

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher expectations for educational attainment and academic achievement in a large rural area with a majority Eskimo and Indian population—rural Alaska schools. These schools enroll two major populations groups: (1) Eskimo and Indian students from remote, isolated villages, and (2) Caucasian students from small highway or fishing towns.

## BACKGROUND

Most of the Indian and Eskimo communities in rural Alaska have had western schools for less than fifty years. While elementary age students may have parents who are high school graduates, many high school students have parents who completed only a few years of formal schooling. Only within the last few years—since the construction of local high schools—has graduation from high school become the norm in Eskimo and Indian communities [5]. Few students, however, go on to college, and rates of college success remain quite low. Achievement test scores in most of these Indian and Eskimo communities are well below national norms.

The rural schools with predominantly Caucasian populations are located in highway communities, coastal fishing villages, or service centers for a regional network of villages. Standard English is the everyday language. Achievement test schools and college success rates tend to be considerably higher than in Native communities.

## METHOD

The authors mailed a survey to a randomly selected teacher at each of Alaska's 316 rural schools. A "rural" school was defined as a school in a community of 7000 or fewer residents. Most schools were located in remote isolated villages with a few hundred residents. As a result

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of vigorous follow-up efforts, our response rate (96 percent) was unusually high. Thus our sample of teachers is unusually large and representative of rural Alaska schools.

The authors drew most of the survey items concerning teacher expectations from the widely used "Teacher Climate" measure developed by Brookover and his colleagues [1]. In a study of achievement in Michigan schools, Brookover found that the school climate variables measured by this instrument increased the amount of variance in mean school achievement explained, even after the socioeconomic composition of the school was controlled.

The Brookover Teacher Climate Measure asks teachers how many students in their school they expect to complete high school and to attend and complete college. Other questions ask teachers for their perceptions of student ability, such as whether students in their school can be expected to achieve at or above national norms.

We pre-tested the Brookover Teacher Climate questions with rural Alaska teachers. The teachers in our pretest sample suggested minor changes in the wording of some items and the elimination of Brookover's parallel questions concerning expectations for the teacher's own class versus the entire school. In small rural schools, teachers did not view this "class" versus "school" distinction as important.

In addition, teachers recommended the addition of a few items to make the measure more appropriate to the rural Alaska context. Specifically, they suggested that we add items concerning attendance and completion of any postsecondary program. Many rural students, they pointed out, prefer to attend postsecondary training programs rather than a four-year college program. They also recommended that we ask teachers, as an indication of academic expectations, what proportion of students they expected to be able to read standard English proficiently by the end of high school.

The data were coded and analyzed using SPSS. We report responses to individual items separately rather than combining the items into a "Rural Teacher Expectations Scale" because of our concern about the construct validity of the items as a measure of the commonly accepted meaning of "teacher expectations." We discuss this problem at great length later in this article because the meaning of "teacher expectations" became a central research issue.

Each expectation item was cross-tabulated with school ethnicity, size of school, type of governance, and other variables. We used different break-points on each independent variable to test our different theoretical conceptualizations of ethnicity, governance, and size. No pattern of relationship occurred between the expectation items and size of school, school governance, or other variables when the ethnicity of the school was controlled. Controls were introduced through cross-tabulations of expectation items by other variables for majority Eskimo schools only, majority Caucasian schools only, and mixed ethnicity schools only.

Since ethnicity of the school appeared to be the key variable associated with teacher expectation levels, we analyze the expectation items by school ethnicity in this paper. A school was coded as predominantly Native if 80 percent or more of the students were Eskimo or Indian and predominantly White if 80 percent or more students were Caucasians. Schools with a 21 percent to 79 percent Eskimo or Indian population were coded as schools of mixed ethnicity. Other coding systems for ethnicity of school produced similar results.

## RESULTS

A large majority of teachers in all rural schools expect their students to graduate from high school (Table 1). On the other hand, most rural Alaska teachers do not expect the majority of their students to attend or complete college or indeed any type of postsecondary program. Teachers in predominantly Native schools have significantly lower expectations for college attendance and for completion of a college or postsecondary program than do teachers in other schools.

Rural teachers in predominantly Caucasian schools typically think that the ability of their students is as high as students nationally, that most of their students are capable of getting good grades, that most of their students can be expected to read proficiently by the end of high school, and that most students can be expected to achieve at or above national norms (Table 2).

In rural Native schools, teacher expectations are significantly lower. Only about 40 percent of the teachers in these schools think that their students' ability is as high or higher than students' nationally or that their students can achieve at or above national norms. Many teachers are pessimistic about whether students are capable of reading proficiently by the end of high school and are doubtful that their students are capable of getting good grades. Most teachers believe their school can at least be average or above, but it is not clear whether teachers are refering to achievement or to more general measures of school quality.

## DISCUSSION

When we reported these findings, Alaska educators and Native leaders offered two very different interpretations. Many teachers argued that these results do not represent "low teacher expectations" in rural Native schools. Rather, they contend that teachers' responses are, in fact, realistic evaluations of the current educational situation in rural schools. Teachers in predominantly Native schools know that most of their students score below national norms on achievement tests, that most of their students do not attend or complete college, and that their schools are below average when compared to schools nationally. A few teachers even wrote in the margins of their surveys that we should be careful *not* to interpret their responses as "low expectations" in the commonly-used, pejorative sense.

Many Native leaders interpreted the results in a quite different fashion. Many are distressed by Native chil-

TABLE 1

Rural Alaska Teachers' Expectations for Educational Attainment by School Ethnicity

| Teacher Attitudes | Predominantly Native Schools | Predominantly Caucasian Schools | Mixed Ethnicity Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| Expect 70% or more students to graduate from high school | 82% | 96% | 74% |
| Expect half or more students to attend college** | 10 | 43 | 12 |
| Expect half or more students to complete college** | 4 | 18 | 9 |
| Expect half or more students to attend some postsecondary program | 24 | 29 | 24 |
| Expect half or more students to complete some postsecondary program* | 13 | 18 | 16 |

$N = 304$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

TABLE 2

Rural Alaska Teachers' Expectations Concerning Student Ability and Achievement by School Ethnicity

| Teacher Attitudes | Predominantly Native Schools | Predominantly Caucasian Schools | Mixed Ethnicity Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| Student ability same or higher than students nationally** | 41% | 81% | 66% |
| Majority of students capable of getting good grades* | 62 | 83 | 80 |
| Students can achieve at or above national norms** | 40 | 88 | 72 |
| Half or more students capable of reading English proficiently by end of high school** | 74 | 93 | 93 |
| This school is average or above compared to schools nationally** | 40 | 86 | 77 |
| This school can be average or above average** | 91 | 100 | 100 |

$N = 304$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

dren's low test scores and low rates of college attendance and completion. Many are aware of the national research that demonstrates the importance of high teacher expectations. Many see these findings as empirical confirmation for long-held convictions that non-Native teachers expect too little of Native students and underestimate their abilities. "I always knew the teachers thought that," one prominent Inupiaq leader said to us. "I was just surprised that they would come out and admit it."

These contrasting interpretations indicate a critical problem discussed in the research literature on teacher expectations [8]. Dusek and Joseph [3], in their meta-analysis of the literature on the bases of teacher expectations, draw a critical distinction between expectancies that represent biasing effects based on social class, race, gender, and attractiveness and those expectancies based on accurate, real world information. "Expectations may be based on reasonable and appropriate information, and may lead to teacher behaviors that will benefit the student. Or, expectancies may be founded on inappropriate or extraneous information, leading to a biased (positive or negative) education . . ." [3, p. 245].

Of questionable benefit to a student is a teacher who sees reading comprehension scores in the first percentile, comments from the student's previous teacher detailing poor reading skills, and thinks: "I don't believe any of this stuff. I'm *not* going to insult Native students by giving them texts below their grade level."

A rural Native teacher recently addressed this issue squarely in an article about the politicized teacher expectation issue in rural Alaska [9]. Ongtooguk describes the behavior of rural teachers who have taken "the gospel of 'high expectations' to heart:"

> They march into their classrooms with firmly set jaws and an armload of 'on-level' material. Their lesson plans are filled with full-length term papers and comprehensive final exams. They have visions of covering their made-for-Texas textbook by the end of the year.

How do the students react to this firebrand? Ongtooguk continues:

> Students drift in from the parking lot of education—their previous class—and are met with a bitter surprise: high expectations. The believing teacher assaults them with worksheets, interrogates them with quizzes, and lashes them with tests . . . The students respond to the attack with instinctive self-preservation. They turn to mass non-violent (for the most part) protest—collective inaction.

At this point, some teachers give up and others redouble their efforts, taking the battle to the students' parents. Parents are confused and angered because their children, who previously had received average if not good grades, are suddenly failing. They, in turn, approach the principal who, in a small community, risks alienating the school board and parents unless he or she "counsels" the teacher.

> In the small world of a rural village, the believer may find consolation in seeing himself as the lone, self-proclaimed martyr to high expectations. He may continue and, perhaps, redouble his efforts to force learning upon the students. With bitterness, the believer resigns in the spring to search for the school where excellence is appreciated. He is listed as another casuality of "burn-out."

Ongtooguk recommends that teachers interested in raising achievement in rural Native schools temper their zealousness. Specifically, he suggests that teachers take a long-term perspective on raising achievement; develop support among parents, colleagues, and administrators for a plan to increase achievement; express high expectations as a personal concern for students rather than as an abstract quest for disembodied standards; and, finally, not take themselves too seriously—"many saviors have come and gone."

We have quoted Ongtooguk at considerable length because he has locked horns with the fundamental issue. Rural Native students do, on the average, score below their urban white counterparts on standardized tests. Shaming teachers into suspending their knowledge of this fact by accusations of low expectations does nothing to increase rural Native students' acquisition of literacy and communications skills nor to cultivate their analytical and critical thinking abilities. An accurate, unbiased knowledge of their students' present level of skills and knowledge and what can be realistically accomplished is essential for teachers to plan the kind of incremental, cooperative, and personalized program to improve achievement that Ongtooguk outlines.

Measures such as Brookover's School Climate questions do not identify the *bases* of teacher expectations. To conclude on the basis of such items that rural non-Native teachers hold "low expectations" for their students which reflect teacher biases and that these "low expectations," in turn, are at least partially responsible for rural Native students' below average performance on standardized tests is unwarranted.

If we are to understand rural teachers' expectations of Native students, we need to carry out intensive case studies of teachers in their classrooms. We need to understand the *bases* for teacher expectations and the *processes* by which expectations are formed and expressed. We also need to examine *how* Native students form beliefs about what rural teachers expect from them. We suspect that certain teacher behaviors—assigning textbooks far below students' grade levels, allowing students to assign themselves grades, praising marginal classroom performances effusively—symbolize low expectations for Native students. We need to interview students to identify the specific teacher behaviors that students see as symbolic markers of low expectations.

In short, both sides in the debate over the meaning of rural teachers' low expectations have drawn conclusions that are defensive rather than constructive. On the one hand, Native leaders, seizing on the evidence of low expectations as an explanation for low achievement among rural Native students, may slight other sources of low achievement and demand from educators pedagogically unsound demonstrations of high expectations. On the other hand, rural teachers, maintaining that they are merely reporting on the actual educational situation, may be ignoring actual social class or racial bias in their beliefs.

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