



## Effects of school composition and school climate on teacher expectations of students: A multilevel analysis



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- School environment is associated with teacher expectations of students.
- School composition has an independent effect on teacher expectations of students.
- School educational climate has an independent effect on teacher expectations.
- School composition has an indirect effect on teacher expectations via school climate.

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### ABSTRACT

Low teacher expectations negatively affect student outcomes and school effectiveness. The present study investigated the effect of educational climate and school socioeconomic, ethnic and academic composition on teacher expectations of student success. Multilevel analysis of teachers ( $N = 2666$ ) nested within high schools ( $N = 71$ ) demonstrated that school composition and school educational climate have an independent (a net) effect on teacher expectations. While academic composition had the greatest influence and suppressed the association between socioeconomic composition and the outcome, educational climate was also of importance. Additional mediation analyses revealed an indirect path of academic composition on teacher expectations via school educational climate.

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### 1. Introduction

Low teacher expectations are problematic for student outcomes and school effectiveness. They are associated with lower levels of student academic achievement, school engagement, learning opportunities in the classroom, and self-expectation (Agirdag, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2013; Archambault, Janosz, & Chouinard, 2012; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Teachers who do not believe in their students' ability to succeed are also more likely to have less effective self-reported educational practices, and are

less likely to create an effective instructional environment and high-quality socio-emotional climate in their classrooms (Proctor, 1984; Rubie-Davies, 2007). They also tend to provide lower quantity and quality of instructional input, feedback, and personal communication (Proctor, 1984; Rubie-Davies, 2007). Although teacher expectations should be as accurate as possible (Brophy, 1983; Jussim, 1986), helping teachers create more positive expectations of students is recommended (Archambault et al., 2012; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Proctor, 1984; Weinstein, 2002). High teacher expectations figure among the key components of effective schooling, as these are positively associated with student achievement and effective teaching practices (Proctor, 1984; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000b). Teacher expectations can be raised only through a better understanding of the factors influencing them. At the contextual level, those factors are especially relevant, as institutional and

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societal arrangements orient and reinforce certain types of expectations and may even influence the occurrence of self-fulfilling prophecy (Weinstein, 2002). While school environment factors were suggested to be of importance (Finn, 1972; Proctor, 1984; Stevens, 2007; Trouilloud & Sarrazin, 2003), there is limited current empirical knowledge on the nature of relationship between school structure, school processes, and teacher expectations. Most studies on teacher expectations have focused on either one or the other elements that make up the school environment (Agirdag et al., 2013; Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Solomon, Battistich, & Hom, 1996). This was, however, identified as leading to bias in the attribution of the effect, as the exclusion of school structure can boost the effect of school process and vice-versa (Dumay, 2004; Dumay & Dupriez, 2007; Dumay, Dupriez, & Maroy, 2010; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2001; Thrupp, Lauder, & Robinson, 2002). The few studies that have jointly investigated these elements (Newman et al.; Diamond et al.) suffer from a methodological limitation because they did not use multilevel modeling. By sharing the same environment, teachers in the same school may have similar expectations. Multilevel analysis is thus essential when observations are dependent on another, since it distinguishes contextual influences from individual influences (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Finally, existing empirical studies have overlooked how these contextual factors contribute to teacher expectations of groups of students in high school settings (Agirdag et al., 2013; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Rubie-Davies, 2007, 2010; Rubie-Davies et al., 2012). Using a multilevel analysis, this study investigated the role of school processes as a mediator of the relationship between school composition and the expectations teachers develop for their high school students' capacity to succeed.

### 1.1. Teacher expectations

Though many conceptualizations and operational measures of teacher expectations exist, all imply an anticipation of behavior and an evaluation of the judged person's prior characteristics (Finn, 1972; Hoge, 1984). As Finn stated (1972, p. 390), expectations refer to "a conscious or unconscious evaluation which one person forms of another, or of himself, which leads the evaluator to treat the person evaluated in such a manner as though the assessment were correct." While this definition includes self-expectations, others have focused exclusively on the interpersonal nature of expectations, as they relate to teachers evaluating students. More specifically, expectations can be thus defined as the teacher's naturally occurring cognitive perceptions of students' future ability to succeed. Most common measures of expectations relate to students' academic and cognitive outcomes (school achievement, IQ, expected progress in the future) or discrepancy between teacher assessment and student score (Cooper, 1985). They may also include social and personality outcomes, such as social skills, self-esteem, attitude, behavior, motivation, and anxiety (Dusek & Joseph, 1983).

Teacher expectations take shape at the individual and group level. At the individual level, teacher expectations are the traditional view (Rubie-Davies et al., 2012; Van Houtte, 2011), and are based on the study of dyadic teacher-student interaction, where teachers express their expectations of a specific student (see Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Expectations are also found at the group level when teachers form expectations for many students, usually a class (see Rubie-Davies, 2007) or school population (see Agirdag et al., 2013). Although these group-level teacher expectations have been investigated mostly in elementary school settings (Agirdag et al., 2013; Diamond et al., 2004; Rubie-Davies, 2007, 2010; Rubie-Davies et al., 2012), they may be even more pronounced in high schools and other higher-educational contexts

where teacher-student dyadic interactions are less frequent (Brophy, 1985). Group-level teacher expectations may have at least as great — if not a greater — impact than individual-level expectations (Brophy, 1983). First, group-level expectations serve as a comparative benchmark for teacher expectations of a specific student because these expectations set the norm or ideal characteristics of teachable students (Kornblau, 1982). Expectations for an individual student are therefore a deviation from this norm (Bressoux & Pansu, 2003; Brophy, 1983; Finn, 1972). Second, in comparison to expectations of an individual, those set for a group are communicated more directly, notably "through their influence on how much is taught by teachers and how much active student participation is permitted" (Cooper, 1985, p. 153). Such differential group treatment rooted in teacher expectations affects the climate and processes in the classroom which, in turn, not only impacts a few students but also impacts the entire group (Brophy, 1983; Brown & Medway, 2007; Rubie-Davies, 2007).

Whether students are over- or under-estimated, erroneous teacher expectations modestly but significantly influence their outcomes (Jussim, 1986; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Trouilloud & Sarrazin, 2003). Two mechanisms have been put forth to explain the effects of teacher expectations on both individuals and groups. Demonstrated in the famous *Pygmalion in the Classroom* study carried out by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), the first mechanism is self-fulfilling prophecy. According to this mechanism, erroneous belief "comes true" because, in this case, students believe their teachers and act accordingly (Jussim, 1986; Merton, 1948). As explained by Jussim (1986), self-fulfilling prophecy is manifested through students' reaction to their teachers' differential treatments. When low-expectation students receive less instructional feedback or less challenging subject matter, they may come to believe they are low achievers and behave as such. The second mechanism plays out when teacher expectations are shaped by perceptual biases (stereotypes, for example) that alter the teacher's judgment of students or lead to misinterpretation or inaccurate evaluation of student behavior, achievement, attitude, or other outcomes (Jussim, 1989; Jussim & Eccles, 1995; Trouilloud & Sarrazin, 2003). In this case, teacher expectations would predict student achievement only when teachers evaluate a particular student, not when the same student is judged by a standardized test or another teacher. Unlike self-fulfilling prophecy, perceptual biases exist only in teachers' mind because students do not modify their behavior according to their teachers' biases (Jussim & Eccles, 1995). Nevertheless, such preconceptions may have an impact on student achievement. This would apply if teachers gave a grade that did not reflect the students' real performance, but rather fit the teachers' perceptual bias. Under other circumstances, the same students would get a grade that matched their performance.

### 1.2. School environment determinants of teacher expectations

Beyond individual-level factors like teachers' and students' personal psycho-social profiles (Braun, 1976; Brophy, 1983; Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Finn, 1972; Jussim, 1986; Trouilloud & Sarrazin, 2003), some characteristics of the classroom and school environment have an impact on teacher expectations (Finn, 1972; Trouilloud & Sarrazin, 2003). Ecological perspectives, based on the previous work of Lewin (1951) and Bronfenbrenner (1977), suggest that the social and political contexts in which individuals are embedded as well as the interactions between environments must be considered for a thorough understanding of human development, behaviors, and attitudes. From this point of view, teachers (the microsystem) are part of a school. Their traits interact with the school characteristics (the mesosystem) that influence teachers' behaviors and attitudes. Previous empirical evidence also points toward an influence

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