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Great grade expectations? The role of pupil expectations in target setting

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between pupils' expectations of their grades in public examinations at age 16 in England and their actual grades. We define optimism as the difference between grades expected by pupils and grades predicted by pupils' prior attainment and background. We define accuracy as the difference between pupils' grade expectations and the actual grades achieved. Using data from 5507 pupils and 50 schools, we find that more optimistic expectations are associated with higher value-added, even where expectations far exceed statistical predictions and actual grades. Each extra grade expected predicts average higher value-added of about a third of a grade. We also examine the correlates of pupil optimism and expectation accuracy, finding some evidence for school effects.

1. Targets, expectations and academic achievement

Using data from 5507 Year 11 (age 15–16) pupils from 50 English secondary schools, we examined relationships between the accuracy and optimism of pupils' expectations of examination grades and the grades they actually achieved. Pupil performance was evaluated using a contextualised value-added measure which captured differences in attainment after controlling for prior attainment and other pupil personal and socio-economic characteristics. We also examined inter-school variation in optimism, thereby providing indicative evidence about the extent to which schools influence these relationships. These relationships matter for how schools respond to policies and guidance pertaining to setting targets for pupils' attainment (see for examples Muller & Associates, 2001; Davies, Coates, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Mangan, 2005; DfE, 2012; Ofsted, 2013a). Pupils in England are expected to know their target grades and inspectors commend institutions when pupils are involved in setting targets (see for example DCSF, 2008; Ofsted, 2013b). A large survey of secondary schools in England (Kelly, Downey, & Rietdijk, 2010) found that over 95% of school staff reported that they were using pupil attainment data and 80–93% of staff claimed that they used data to set targets for individual pupils. It is, therefore, likely that the majority of the pupils in this study experienced some form of implementation of target setting. One question for this policy is whether target setting is something that is 'done to pupils' or a process through which schools engage with, and seek to nurture, pupils' own expectations. Our results offer some support to the second of these alternatives. In particular, teachers may either encourage pupils to become more accurate or more optimistic in their expectations. Our results encourage fostering optimism.

2. The agency of the learner: realistic and optimistic expectations

In this section, we briefly review evidence from two research programmes which bear upon the design of this study and the

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benefits of optimistic versus realistic expectations. First, we review studies of the relationship between self-belief constructs such as self-efficacy and future academic attainment before turning to the relationship between the accuracy of predictions of task success and actual task performance. Previous research has rarely considered these perspectives side-by-side.

2.1. Optimistic expectations

The ‘target setting’ agenda encourages English schools to promote high expectations in pupils’ beliefs about the grades they could achieve. A key rationale for this is provided by evidence of positive associations between academic self-concept or self-efficacy and subsequent academic achievement. ‘Academic self-concept’ and ‘self-efficacy’ offer theoretical bases for encouraging optimistic expectations (Bong, Cho, Ahn, & Kim, 2012; Ferla, Valcke, & Cai, 2009; Morony, Kleitman, Lee, & Stankov, 2013; Parker, Marsh, Ciarrochi, Marshall, & Abduljabbar, 2014). These constructs offer reciprocal models of the relationship between self-beliefs and achievement (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Fraine, Damme, & Onghena, 2007; Van de gaer et al., 2009).

Accounts of academic self-concept tend to foreground the role of perceived ability in a subject domain, formed through comparison of oneself with the attainment of peers (Jansen, Schroeders, & Lüdtke, 2014; Wouters, De Fraine, Colpin, Van Damme, & Verschueren, 2012). Self-efficacy on the other hand is a “belief that one can successfully carry out the tasks and behaviours necessary to reach a designated level of academic achievement” (Bong, 2013, p. 64). Self-efficacy foregrounds adaptive responses to experience of mastering tasks which are moderated through social persuasion by credible others and modelling of task achievement by peers. It offers a rationale for setting goals that are specific and optimistic to raise achievement through increases in motivation, effort and persistence (Coe, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mento, Steel, & Karren, 1987).

As it is more focused on task mastery, self-efficacy is more closely aligned than academic self-concept with the policy expectations that schools can raise achievement by encouraging high pupil self-beliefs. Whilst broad definitions of achievement within a subject domain resonate more closely with academic self-concept, expectations of examination grades are task orientated and more closely associated with self-efficacy. There is considerable overlap between the two constructs, however, especially in the context of beliefs pertaining to expectations of examination grades in the medium to long term. Such links have been emphasised in recent research linking self-efficacy with, on one hand, mastery experiences, praise (social persuasion) and peer comparisons, but also perceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ grade (mastery norms) and subjective values such as the utility of the subject (Sheldrake, 2016).

Both theoretical perspectives predict that high pupil self-beliefs will raise achievement, although much of this evidence stops short of demonstrating causal effects (Gorard, See, & Davies, 2011). Researchers consistently report positive associations between self-efficacy and subsequent academic attainment (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Stankov & Lee, 2014; Zimmerman, 2000). There is a smaller but growing body of evidence showing a positive but smaller association between academic self-concept and subsequent academic attainment (Parker et al., 2014).

Researchers have reported systematic variation in pupils’ academic self-beliefs by sex (Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983; Davies, Mangan, & Telhaj, 2005; Kleitman & Gibson, 2011), socio-economic status (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006) and ethnicity (e.g. Goyette & Xie, 1999). These studies predict that the attainment of boys, Asian pupils and pupils with professional or managerial parents will be boosted by relatively higher levels of self-belief. These socio-economic and ethnicity effects may be influenced by the relative importance of school grades to pupils’ life-course aspirations (as suggested, for example, by status attainment theory). We might, therefore, expect to find that pupils who aspire to higher education are more optimistic in their grade predictions, although, as far as we are aware, previous research has not examined this relationship.

School effects on pupils’ self-belief may operate either through the composition of a school’s intake or through the development of a school culture which emphasises academic achievement and encourages teachers to trust pupils and parents whilst developing ‘collective efficacy’ (Hoy et al., 2006). This model suggests that attending a private school will be positively associated with more optimistic expectations about examination grades. Goldsmith (2004) found that pupils from minority ethnic groups more optimistic about their academic progress if they are taught in a school in which their ethnic group is more strongly represented amongst teachers and pupils. Two studies carried out with large samples of secondary school pupils in Belgium (Fraine et al., 2007; Van de gaer et al., 2009) found modest positive school-level associations between academic self-concept and attainment. Whilst they found that intake composition accounted for a large part of the school effect, their results are consistent with the model put forward by Hoy et al.

2.2. Realistic expectations

Support for target setting in English schools¹ emphasises the importance of ‘appropriate’ targets that reflect a realistic prediction of what a pupil could achieve. A realistic prediction is one that seeks to maximise ex post accuracy using the information available ex ante (see below). In schooling systems with regular assessment of pupils (as in England), pupils are likely to have good information about their past attainment and they know how much interest they have in a subject. So, although a pupil’s knowledge will be imperfect, there is some basis for believing they could make a broadly realistic judgement about future grades. Realism in this ex ante context involves a comparison between a pupil’s grade expectations and what might be reasonably predicted on the basis of evidence of their prior attainment. This can be distinguished from ex post accuracy or calibration (Alexander, 2013) which compares a pupil’s

¹ See for example the Fischer Family Trust at <http://www.fft.org.uk/fft-aspire/target-setting.aspx>.

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