

Teacher Appraisals of Pupil Difference

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Abstract

Research indicates that teachers form appraisals of their pupils based on their perceptions of pupils' characteristics. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of the formation of such appraisals. Data were collected through interviews carried out with seven educators: three class teachers, two Learning Support Educators (LSEs), and two Nurture Group (NG) teachers. The participants, who were working with Year 1 pupils, were recruited from the same primary state school. The findings from this study highlight how appraisals tend to be formed at the beginning of the scholastic year. During this process, perceived differences in pupil attributes have been found to exert a decisive influence. Important differences regarding the nature of the appraisals made were noted amongst the participants. Lastly, the data revealed that educators draw on their appraisals to change their pedagogy and practice. Recommendations are made for future research.

Keywords: Teacher Appraisals, Teacher Expectations, Pupil Characteristics, Pygmalion Effect.

Introduction

Few social phenomena have pervaded the educational field of research, with such controversy and debate, as the field of teacher expectations. The interest in this research area was provoked by Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968a) study, which famously reported that "... poor children lag in school because they are members of a disadvantaged group. Experiments in a school suggest that they may also do so because that is what their teachers expect" (p. 19).

Since the publication of this controversial study, scholars have sought to investigate the contention that teachers' expectations may alter the academic outcomes of pupils. Unfortunately, researchers have found teacher expectations hard to grasp and pin down. This difficulty meant that academics have turned to various theories to comprehend the process of teacher appraisals—such as the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948), and

criminology labelling theories (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Lo (2014), and Zimmerman (1985), noted that this has led the field to remain disjointed; with no overarching theory that can explain teachers' appraisals.

Academics have also noted that the prevailing use of quantitative methods to investigate this social process has led to the disregard of various factors embedded within classroom interactions (Johnston, Wildy, & Shand, 2019; Wang, Rubie-Davies, & Meissel, 2018). Indeed, such findings have been blind to the roles that social class, race, and school culture, may play in how teachers form their appraisals (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Weinstein, 2002). This lacuna in the literature has been identified as a research problem within the field. It is here that this study, through the use of ethnographic interviews with educators, has sought to provide qualitative knowledge to this area of research.

Research aims and research approach

The purpose of this small-scale interview study is to explore the process of the formation, and elaboration, of educators' appraisals. Purposeful sampling was used to gain access to participants. Seven educators, working in a primary state school in Malta—three class teachers, two Learning Support Educators [hereafter LSEs], and two Nurture Group [hereafter NG] teachers—were interviewed. Lastly, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data gathered.

Theoretical Background

Defining the terms

Research over the years has used different terms to address the phenomenon of teacher appraisals; **Table I** provides a guide to terms used by key exponents. Although scholars may differ in regard to how they define teacher expectations, a widely agreed-upon definition was presented by Good and Brophy (2008), whereby they define teacher expectations as “. . . inferences that teachers make about the future behaviour or academic achievement of their students, based on what they know about these students now” (p. 79). For the purpose of this study, the term *teacher appraisals* will be used to describe the phenomenon taking place in classrooms and schools. This term has been evaluated as the most befitting for the purpose of the research—as it denotes the judgements and perceptions that teachers have, and make, of pupils' current behaviour and performance. In relation to this, the term *teacher expectations* is restricted to predictions of academic performance.

Terminology	Research
Self-fulfilling Prophecy	Rist (1970); Darley and Fazio (1980); Jussim (1989); Weaver, Filson Moses, and Snyder (2016)
Pygmalion Effect	Rosenthal and Jacobson, (1968a); Rubovits and Maehr (1973); Cooper, (1979); Karakowsky, DeGama, and McBey, (2012)
Labelling	Algozzine and Stoller (1981); Zimmerman (1985); Maas (2000); Hudak (2001); Gates (2010); Glass (2013); Lo (2014)
Teacher Perceptions (incl. teacher attitudes, teacher appraisals, and teacher beliefs)	Sharp (1975); Archambault, Janosz, and Chouinard (2012); Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014); Murdock-Perriera and Sedlacek (2018)
Teacher Expectations	Brophy & Good (1969); Claiborn (1969); Rothbart, Dalfen, and Barrett (1971); Rubie-Davies (2007); Hinnant, O'Brien, and Ghazarian (2009); Timmermans et al., (2016)

Table I. A Chronology of Teacher Appraisal Terminology within Research.

Research and its Outcomes

Fifty years of research since the inception of interest in the “Pygmalion effect” (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968b) have yielded a wealth of data and information. The field has adopted two main research strategies in seeking to understand teacher expectations: experimental and naturalistic research. Studies adopting an experimental design have sought to manipulate teacher expectations, and subsequently, to evaluate the effects of these manipulations. Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968a) study is a significant example of this approach. The publication of this study – and subsequent studies that failed to find evidence for the Pygmalion effect (e.g. Barber et al., 1969; Mendels & Flanders, 1973) – made scholars aware that the phenomenon of teacher expectations is much more complex than portrayed by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968a, 1968b).

After the 1970s, experimental research into teacher expectations seems to have experienced a shift in focus – which appears to be due to stricter research ethics protocols. Previously, researchers were affecting the academic outcomes of pupils, by explicitly manipulating expectations. This was deemed to be highly unethical; and indeed, many criticised Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968a, 1968b) research for this reason (Snow, 1969; Thorndike, 1968). Subsequently, modern experimental research has attempted to investigate teachers’ implicit biases by

using fictional scenarios (e.g., Algozzine & Stoller, 1981; Tournaki & Podell, 2005; Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008).

Naturalistic studies were a reaction to the experimental nature of the previous studies, and researchers were attempting to investigate teachers' appraisals by observing them in context (Brophy & Good, 1969). Rist's (1970) research is another prominent naturalistic study carried out in the field. His two-year-long ethnography is famous for inferring that, after the initial two weeks of the academic year, pupils acquire certain social positions, in class, that they maintain throughout their educational careers. Ultimately, employing a qualitative methodology has allowed researchers to adopt a wider perspective of the interactions taking place within the classroom (Johnston et al., 2019).

Non-experimental quantitative studies in teacher appraisal have most often used data collected from questionnaires (e.g., questionnaires assessing teacher appraisals), socio-demographic data of pupil characteristics, and data regarding academic outcomes. Such large-scale studies have used statistical methods to try and identify causal, or reciprocal, relationships between these different kinds of data. At the outset, it can be noted that the majority of such studies have been carried out in the past twenty years – whereas earlier quantitative studies into teacher expectations tended to be experimental. By permitting large amounts of data to be collected, quantitative methodologies have allowed scholars to analyse the relationship between certain pupil attributes and teacher expectations. Quantitative research – carried out by e.g., Timmermans, Kuyper, and van der Werf (2015), Timmermans, de Boer, & van der Werf (2016), Timmermans and Rubie-Davies (2018) and Timmons (2018) – has been able to dispel any doubts surrounding the existence of teacher expectations.

The role of pupil attributes

Academic achievement, a non-cognitive attribute, has been one of the main mediating factors upon teacher expectations, that has been researched within the field. Nonetheless, scholars have also observed the role of other attributes – such as cognitive characteristics, and socio-ethnic background – in the formation of differential appraisals (Sneyers, Vanhoof, & Mahieu, 2020). Overall, pupils' SES, gender, and ethnicity are identified as the three, most prominent, socio-demographic variables that impact teacher expectations (Ready & Wright, 2011).

On a cognitive level, stereotypes may contribute to the formation of teachers' perceptions (Good & Brophy, 2008). Stereotypes can be defined as mental representations, of the characteristics, pertaining to a particular social group (Smith, 1998). Within the classroom, stereotypes are activated when the teacher identifies a pupil, with a particular attribute associated with a specific social

group. Once activated, such stereotypes affect the teacher's expectations for that pupil (Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2014). Stereotyping, an implicit process, may then lead to labelling, a formal and explicit process.

Teacher appraisals: The current debate

Brophy and Good's (1969) six-step expectations process model has been largely confirmed by the findings of research that have emerged throughout the years. Explained simply, according to this model, teacher expectations are formed at the beginning of the scholastic year. Such expectations lead to teachers' differential behaviours, which are, in turn, perceived and understood by the pupils. As pupils internalise their teachers' expectations, they act and react accordingly; thus, ultimately, affecting their academic and social outcomes (Good, 1987).

Effects on pupil outcomes have been found to accumulate over the scholastic years, as pupils continue to be met with similar expectations throughout their scholastic careers (Weinstein, 2002). In their systematic review of research carried out in the past 30 years, Wang et al. (2018) have noted that most studies report effects on three pupil outcome factors, namely: socio-psychological outcomes, behavioural outcomes, and achievement outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic and classroom interactions

The Coronavirus outbreak has brought drastic global changes, and the educational field has not been spared from its repercussions. It is clear that communication between teachers and pupils, classroom interaction, and pupil engagement, have been negatively affected (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marshall, Shannon, & Love, 2020). In contextualising the literature that has been discussed, we must ask how the formation and maintenance of teacher appraisals will be affected by these newfound challenges. A study carried out by Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, and Jungmann (2020), has found that educators teaching higher academic track students have spent more time teaching their pupils, than their counterparts, who teach lower academic tracks. This might imply that teacher expectations are affecting the practice of teaching – even remote teaching. As the situation is still unfolding, we cannot reach any conclusions just yet; nonetheless, the literature must be rooted within the current social and cultural environment.

Materials and Methods

Research aims and research questions

The purpose of this small-scale study is to explore how educators form and elaborate appraisals of their pupils. It also sets out to investigate the pupil

characteristics that may affect or shape such appraisals. In pursuing these research aims, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do teachers form expectancies of, or give labels to, their pupils?
- (2) What kind of pupil attributes lead to teachers ascribing labels to their pupils?

Research design

A qualitative methodology was adopted due to the focus placed on the teacher's sense-making of the social processes occurring in the classroom. In this study, "the central aim or purpose of research is understanding" (Robson & McCartan, 2002, p. 25). Initially, ethnography was the chosen research strategy. Observation would have allowed the generation of an in-depth, and context-specific, understanding of which social processes underlie labelling (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Unfortunately, observing a classroom was not allowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the study had to rely on depth interviews, carried out remotely.

The interviews were semi-structured, and an interview guide was prepared. The construction of the interview questions was led by the guidelines set forth by Spradley (1979), and Brinkmann and Kvale (2018). This approach provided enough flexibility so that questions were adapted accordingly as the data emerged. The interviews were carried out both in English and in Maltese, depending on which language the participant felt most comfortable using. Questions were asked to: probe participants to describe events and pupils, structural questions to gain insight into how the teacher maintained knowledge of their class, and contrast questions to make comparisons over time.

Participants and data collection

Seven educators took part in this study. Two educators were NG teachers. In Malta, Nurture Groups are a short-term intervention for children showing particular social, behavioural, and emotional, difficulties. Two educators were LSEs. In Malta, the role of the LSE is to assist the class teacher in meeting the special educational needs of pupils in class. Three educators were class teachers and worked with the other participating LSEs. All educators taught Year 1 pupils; allowing insight into the formation of appraisals at the start of the pupils' educational careers. Ethical clearance was provided by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), as well as the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC), at the University of Malta. Lastly, authorisation to conduct research in state schools was sought from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability. Participants read an Information Letter informing them about the research and signed a Consent Form prior to the interview. The interviews were carried out online and lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. They were

audio-recorded, transcribed, and later analysed, using NVivo. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to maintain confidentiality and privacy.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis—“. . . a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79)—was employed to analyse data. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phases for analysis directed this process—leading to the production of sub-themes, themes, and thematic maps. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to assist in the process of analysing data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). NVivo was used to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews. Secondly, during engagement with the data, thoughts and observations were recorded using memos. The following figure shows how NVivo was used to create codes (which can be seen on the left-hand side) whilst analysing data.

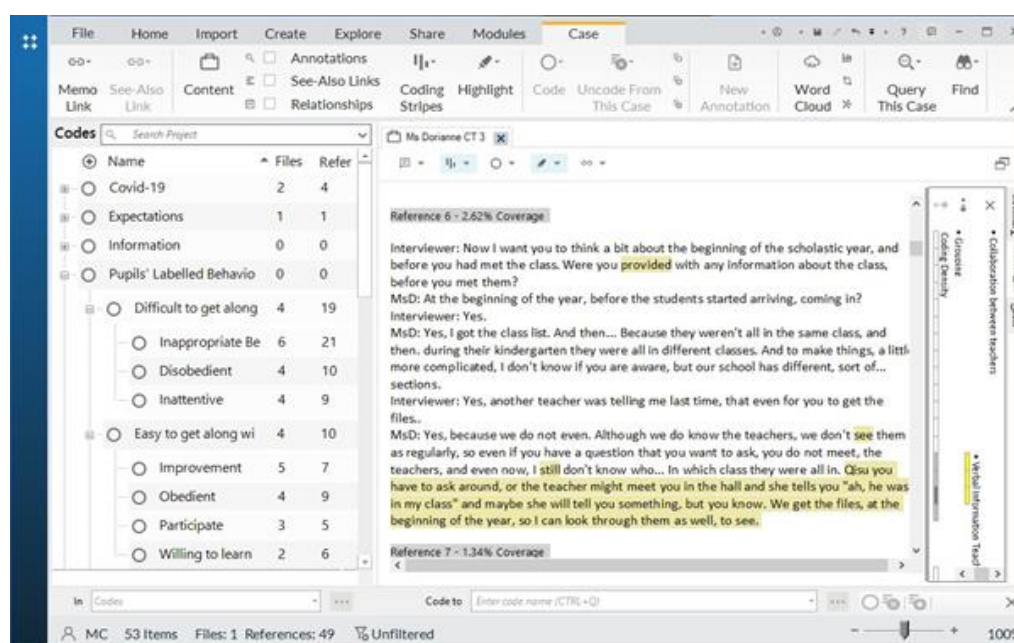


Figure 1. Screenshot of data analysis using NVivo.

Findings

Five main themes encapsulate the findings from this research. These are illustrated below, in Figure 2. For the purpose of presenting novel findings within the field, this paper will only present and discuss Theme 1: Forming the first impressions, and Theme 4: Classroom interactions and teacher appraisals.

The other themes present findings which largely corroborate the current understanding within the field. Verbatim extracts--which have been translated from Maltese to English--will supplement the presentation of findings.

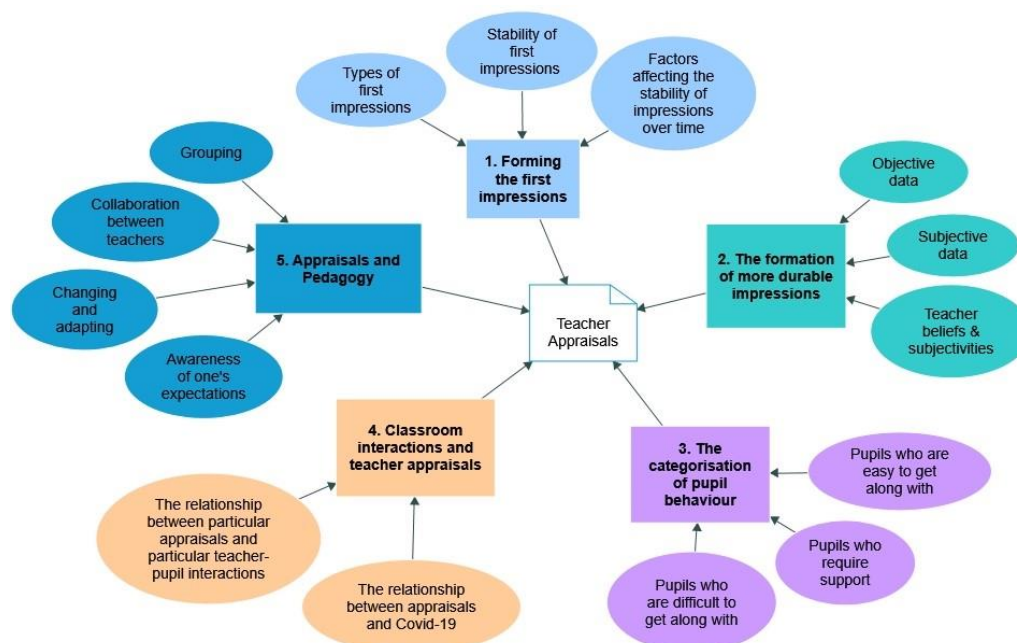


Figure 2: Thematic Map

Theme 1: Forming the first impressions

During the scholastic year 2019/2020, the class teachers and LSEs met their pupils for the first time on the first official school day. The parent meetings and introductory visits, that used to be carried out in previous years, were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before this day, class teachers were provided with verbal feedback from the teachers who taught their pupils in the previous scholastic year. LSEs would have been provided with additional feedback from parents, as well as data gathered from formal assessments. The NG teachers were carrying out online sessions with classes; but in previous years, individual pupils would be referred to them by the class teacher. The thematic map of this theme is provided below.

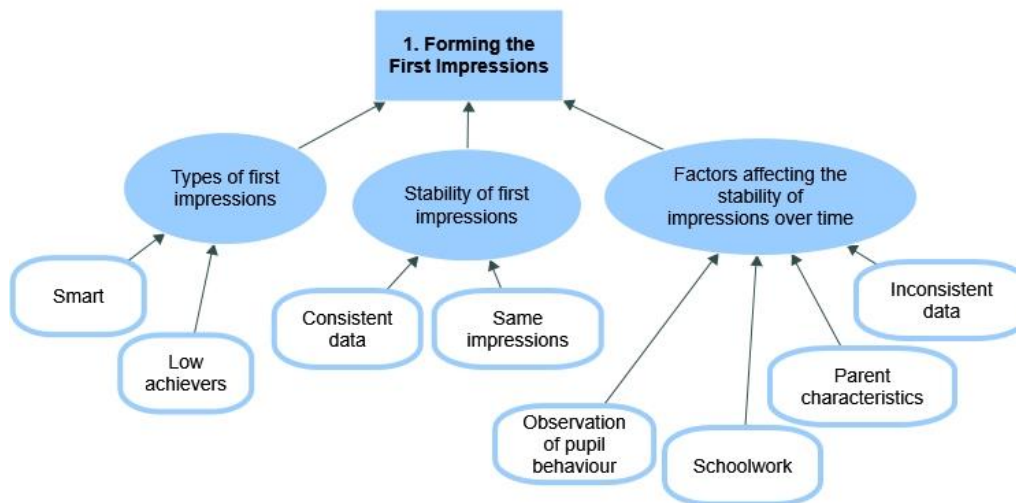


Figure 3. Thematic map of Theme 1.

Sub-theme A: Types of first impressions

The initial appraisals carried out were at the class-level; whereas impressions of specific pupils tended to form in the following weeks. It was noted that first impressions tended to be on opposing ends of a spectrum: either the pupils seemed to require support, or they were “smart” and able to fend for themselves. The majority of teachers (two NG teachers, two LSEs, and two class teachers) appraised their pupils as requiring support; and such an appraisal was influenced by the ramifications of COVID-19:

Ms Dorianne (class teacher): In the first days I was worried about... they didn't finish Kindergarten, so I was thinking, 'they're not going to have pencil grip, not going to... be able to... they're not going to be at the same level that last year students were at the beginning of the year'.

Ms Marie, another class teacher, appraised her pupils' behaviour differently:

First day they were all quiet, all eager for school. I think after seven months at home, all students were very eager to return back to school. Erm, I remember that they were all happy, and I was very excited to teach them. First impressions were very good, I would say.

Sub-theme B: Stability of first impressions

Most teachers' (two NG teachers, two LSEs, two class teachers) class-level expectations remained stable, or were further reinforced, in the following weeks. As Ms Marie continued to explain:

I think that the same attitude, because, they are all eager to come to school, [. . .]. They are very energetic. I believe that they... first impression really counts, in this case.

This also held true for the LSEs and the NG teachers. However, there were some differences. For instance, after the first few weeks, class teachers tended to form more specific appraisals for particular pupils in their class. Contrastingly, NG teachers felt that their first impressions rarely changed; as pupils would have been referred by another educator, who would have provided an 'accurate' description of the pupil. Similarly, the LSEs stated that data from clinical assessments was the factor that led to them forming stable first impressions. As Ms Lara (LSE) describes:

It [the impression of the pupil] didn't change a lot because... from the reports I read, I mean, I was expecting... how do you say?... Characteristics that they weren't that bad, as the reports said.

Sub-theme C: Factors affecting the stability of impressions over time

Of the factors which led to the modification of impressions, educators cited: objective data, the role of parents, schoolwork presented by pupils, and their own observation of pupils' behaviour.

All educators used objective data to shape their appraisals over time. Class teachers were provided with what they called a 'checklist', which included the pupils' academic records and information on their family background. This checklist was provided two weeks after the first encounter, and class teachers stated that this information helped them to further understand their pupils. The NG teachers, and LSEs—who received such data before meeting their pupils—seem to have used it to form their first impressions:

Interviewer: And in what way did it [psychometric assessment report] help you at the beginning of the year?
Ms Lara: It prepared me, mentally it prepared me, of what I was expecting.

All class teachers stated that their appraisals were heavily influenced by observing pupils' behaviour and schoolwork. An example of this was provided by Ms Sharon:

For example, I had a child that came in a week or two weeks after the rest of the class, so he was a late-comer, and I thought, 'I think it will be a bit difficult for him to get used to the tasks'. But then, eventually, by the time that I got to know the child better and he got to know me, I figured out that he is a good child, that he is learning, that he is a very high-achiever. So yes, sometimes my perspectives of the children, from a first glance, they change. As I get to know the children, as I see them

working, doing their classwork, even when I see their homework and their writing at home.

Subjective data, provided in the form of verbal feedback from other educators and parents, was another influential source of information guiding teachers' appraisals. All educators stated that the comments received from other educators, who would have taught or had experience with the pupil, were a crucial contributing factor to their understanding. Ms Valentina, an LSE, spoke of this clearly:

So, before I met him, I was already told by his previous LSE what working with him would mean. I knew what it would be like, due to his behaviour last year.

In a similar manner, educators stated that meeting their pupils' parents helped them make appraisals. The two NG teachers and one class teacher stated that parents had changed impressions of some of their pupils; whereas the remaining two class teachers explained that encountering parents helped them to better understand their pupils, but it did not change their perception of the pupil:

Ms Claire (NG teacher): My perception has changed of him, but the student is still the same, still behaves the same way. But I know that there are underlying issues, to how he's behaving.

Ms Dorianne (class teacher): Hmm, I think that knowing their family can help you understand students, [. . .]. When you get to know the parents, it's almost like you are getting to know the student. Not that my perception necessarily changed, but you get to know the child more. You get to know his background and himself, and you understand.

The NG teachers and LSEs mentioned that their past experiences facilitated the process of understanding their pupils. Ms Lara (LSE) demonstrated this when I asked her how she imagines her pupil to progress through the scholastic year. As she sought to understand her pupil, and what he might be capable of doing; she compared her current appraisal of him, to appraisals of pupils that she had had experience with, in the past:

Ms Lara: Letter formation, I do believe, eventually, when he will let me. I've had children like him that I've managed with before, but slowly.

Interviewer: And what are the main reasons for what you just said?

Ms Lara: I find that comparing to what we learned, but comparing to past experience mostly... experience with other children that I've had which were autistic. One in particular, who is quite similar, who was kind of the same.

Lastly, some educators showed a certain level of awareness of their own biases and expectations. This awareness affected the stability of their impressions as it led them to re-evaluate such perceptions. The two NQT class teachers embodied this the most – especially through their discourse, as they faltered in their descriptions of certain pupils. Ms Dorianne demonstrated this wariness when I asked her how her perception of a pupil had changed when noting that she needed to be stricter with him:

Erm, not that it necessarily changed a lot [the impression of the pupil], I think that I became aware that I needed to, to keep sort of... erm, how can I explain it? That there still needs to be that... erm... I am not sure how to explain it...

As Ms Marie aptly states “. . . first impression really counts”, and indeed, first impressions did remain relatively stable for all educators. The changes to teachers’ appraisals were brought on by external influences (e.g., receiving subjective and objective data), as well as internal influences (e.g., the educator’s past experiences, training, and beliefs).

Theme 4: Classroom interactions and teacher appraisals

Teacher appraisals materialise within, and interact with, the classroom environment. The two prominent factors present within the classroom environment, showing this reciprocal relationship with teachers’ appraisals, were: the affective component of teacher-pupil relationships, and the influence of COVID-19. These two factors differ from those factors identified in Theme 1, by their inherent nature present within the classroom. On the one hand, the factors identified in Theme 1 relate directly to the pupil (e.g., objective data would regard a specific pupil). On the other hand, classroom relationships and COVID-19 were reciprocally affecting, and affected by, teacher appraisals – irrespective of pupils’ characteristics. The following figure presents an overview of this theme.

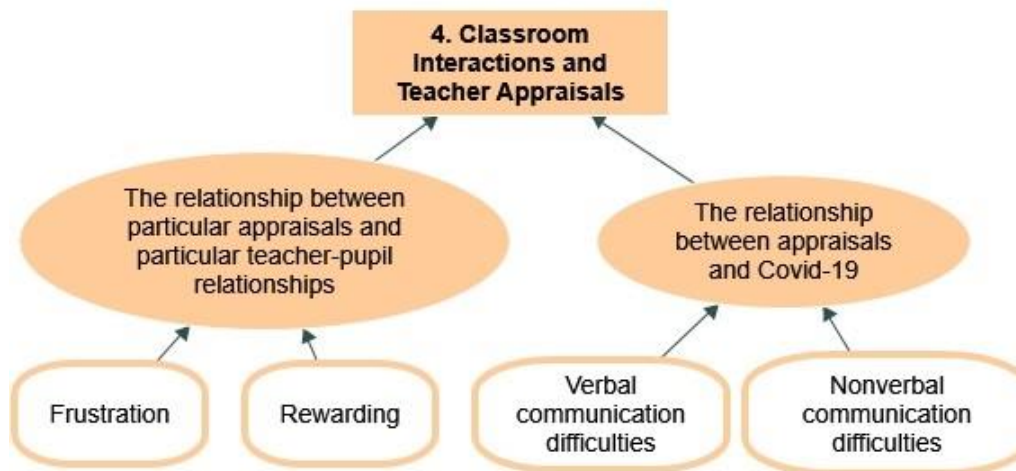


Figure 4. Thematic map of Theme 4.

Sub-theme A: The relationship between particular appraisals and particular teacher-pupil relationships

Participants, apart from remarking that certain behaviours led to particular appraisals, explained how specific feelings were linked to particular appraisals. Despite this, it is not clear whether the emotion was felt as a result of the appraisal, or whether the emotion felt around a specific pupil led to a specific appraisal.

A feeling of frustration was often mentioned when describing pupils who are difficult to get along with. In the words of a class teacher and an NG teacher:

Ms Dorianne (class teacher): I mean, it's frustrating. For example, they seem to feel hurt by little things. "Ms, he did this to me, she did...", and so it seems that they are always telling on each other, it becomes even tiring and annoying to hear them constantly. It becomes hard to form a bond with someone who does that. At the same time, you have to be aware that maybe that's their character, maybe they have to grow up a little bit. You have to be patient, and you still, sort of, guide them, even if they do these things.

Ms Angela (NG teacher): It's not an easy role aye, as one thinks, okay? It's frustrating. You have to keep working, and working, u with these children. Sometimes they start from Year 1, and they seem to show no improvement.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a feeling of reward and a sense of connection were often communicated when speaking of those pupils appraised as easy to get along with. All class teachers elucidated this link:

Ms Sharon (class teacher): It's their behaviour sometimes that helps me. I like being in contact with the children, they give you... something that you enjoy, you enjoy yourself in the classroom, it's rewarding. When I am teaching children I know that they are learning something.

Sub-theme B: The relationship between appraisals and COVID-19

COVID-19 exerted an influence on the appraisals of all educators, albeit in different ways. Within the classroom, communication was heavily impacted by the various restrictions that were present in class. All educators described how wearing masks made it harder to understand pupils' speech and their facial expressions:

Ms Sharon (class teacher): It's been very difficult with the masks because, I cannot see the facial expression of the children, and they cannot see my facial expressions. Sometimes I cannot understand what they say. When I smile at them, to tell them that they did something good, they cannot see me smiling.

Two class teachers, the NG teachers, and one LSE explained how this indirectly affected their ability to form impressions of their pupils. Educators need to be well-acquainted with their pupils to form detailed appraisals of them. This was hindered by inadequate communication in class, as well as the restrictions on the type and number of activities that could be carried out. Ms Lara (LSE) expressed this when I asked her which events made her pupil stand out as 'friendly':

I can't remember of one right now. Because this year, as I mentioned, due to COVID-19, we don't have many activities, hands-on tasks, extra-curricular subjects. So, it's a bit difficult, we didn't have a lot of activities.

Lastly, the class-level expectations of one class teacher were influenced by the effects of COVID-19 on the type of education that the pupils were receiving. Indeed, Ms Dorianne's first impression of her class was that they were going to struggle:

Well, last year I was excited and nervous because it was my first year [of teaching], this year I was more aware of what's going to happen, but at the same time, it was different. Because children, for example, had to wear the mask. I was really worried that they're not going to know what to do, or how to wear it, or they would find it hard to learn.

This theme has made apparent the influence that certain factors within the classroom environment—external to pupils' characteristics—affect, and are affected by, appraisals. It is clear that pupil appraisals have an affective

component; although it was less clear whether the affective component preceded the appraisal or vice versa. Lastly, COVID-19 seems to have exerted an effect on classroom interactions, and consequently, on teachers' ability to form detailed appraisals.

Discussion

The findings from this research align with the current understanding of teacher appraisals within the field. For instance, the participants in this study showed how appraisals of pupils are set at the beginning of the scholastic year (Brophy & Good, 1969; Rist, 1970). There was, however, one notable difference: whereas class teachers had not received any prior objective data regarding their pupils (thus, forming their impressions as they met them), the LSEs and NG teachers received, the so-called, objective data prior to meeting their pupil/s (thus, having already formed an initial impression). Such data included “. . . speech therapy reports, occupational therapy reports, psychometric assessment reports. . .” (Ms Lara), which would delineate the pupil's diagnosis. According to Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014), such social categories induce stereotype activation – in turn leading to the cognitive appraisal of generalised knowledge pertaining to that particular social group. Such knowledge may then impact the teacher's judgement, appraisal, and expectations for that pupil (Good & Brophy, 2008). From this small-scale Malta study, we cannot be sure that such stereotype activation did occur, but it might be a possibility.

Overall, Good (1987) reports that most educators feel that objective data tend to correspond with what they observe in class. Furthermore, such data tend to provide an accurate basis for understanding (Good & Brophy, 2008). Indeed, the LSEs who took part in this study stated that they were “. . .expecting [the experience with the pupil] exactly how it was” (Ms Valentina). Nonetheless, we must question the relationship of correspondence between data and living, human, subjects. Abikoff, Courtney, Pelham, & Koplewicz (1993) have reported a halo effect incurred by the provision of a diagnostic label. In their research, teachers were asked to assess a pupil's performance, after being told that the pupil was diagnosed with ADHD. In contrast to the control group, these teachers were more likely to report hyperactive behaviours. Many scholars have found evidence for such effects (see Algozzine & Stoller, 1981; Stinnett et al., 2001) – leading us to believe that teachers tend to look for information that confirms their prior beliefs (Glass, 2013). Indeed, we might speculate that, upon receiving information regarding their pupils, educators were more likely to be attuned to observing behaviours that confirmed such information. Furthermore, we can hypothesise that this might be one of the reasons for the stability of the impressions of LSEs and NG teachers when compared to the appraisals of class teachers.

Rist (1970), and Good (1987), stated that teachers' expectations tend to remain relatively stable. This appeared to be the case with the LSEs and NG teachers; it was not found with the class teachers, who indicated that some of their appraisals did change throughout the scholastic year. Indeed, the class teachers asserted that observing pupils' behaviour and schoolwork, and meeting their pupils' parents, helped them to re-evaluate their appraisals. This coincides with what Datnow et al. (2018, p. 10) termed as "moments of mismatch". During such moments, ". . . teachers questioned whether assessment data provide an accurate picture of student achievement and also acknowledged the role of student effort, behavior, and family circumstances as important factors that could not be easily measured" (Datnow et al., 2018, p.10).

The use of objective data to form expectancies of pupils may well be the most researched, and evidenced factor, involved in the appraisal process (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Datnow et al., 2018; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Despite this, understanding the mechanisms underlying this relationship is another matter. In their meta-analysis, Wang et al. (2018) highlighted that the literature remained inconclusive as to the type, and degree, of the effects of data appraisal. Even within the current study, educators showed differing degrees of importance attributed to information about their pupils, and to different sources of data. For example, class teachers frequently referred to academic data, regarding prior achievement, to help supplement their appraisals and observations. Contrastingly, the LSEs, and NG teachers, referred to information accrued from behavioural and/or psychological reports, instead of achievement data. These educators also depart from the class teachers in the way that they use such information—in that they state it helped them form their appraisals (e.g., Ms Lara explained: "[i]t prepared me, mentally it prepared me, of what I was expecting"); rather than using it to supplement their observations. This is especially important in light of past research that indicates that diagnostic reports, and labels, may induce stereotypes (Good & Brophy, 2008); lead to lower expectations (Hurwitz, Elliott, & Braden, 2007); and negatively affect how a pupils' work, and behaviour, is evaluated (Algozzine & Stoller, 1981; Bertrand & Marsh, 2015). It appears that in the case of these educators, this is what has happened.

As the participants elucidated their appraisals, it became evident that there were factors within the classroom environment which became inherently part of the appraisal process. Amongst these factors are the ramifications of COVID-19, which changed the nature of the classroom environment. Additionally, there was an affective component intrinsically tied to such appraisals.

In their study, Brophy and Good (1969) observed that teachers sought more contact with those pupils for whom they held positive appraisals. Thus, we might speculate that the teachers participating in their study had linked positive emotions with positive appraisals—leading them to seek those pupils

for whom they held such appraisals. Newberry and Davis (2008) provided further evidence for this. In their research, teachers reported feeling “emotional closeness” with those pupils for whom they held positive appraisals. This feeling of care was also depicted in this study; when Ms Sharon was describing the pupils that she felt were easy to get along with, she added that it was easier to relate to them: “[t]hose children that are caring, and also that you can build up communication with them”. On the other end of the spectrum, the participants in this study expressed feelings of frustration when interacting with those pupils whom they felt are difficult to get along with. Indeed, Hastings and Bham (2003) have found a link between student misbehaviour (especially the disobeying of rules), and teacher burnout. Bertrand and Marsh (2015) have also reported that, when pupils repeatedly show challenging behaviour, teacher motivation is greatly lowered. Both of these consequences – burnout and lowered motivation – gained visibility through the experiences of the NG teachers. For example, in describing their work, Ms Angela said: “[i]t’s not an easy role, as one thinks, okay? It’s frustrating. You have to keep working, and working. . .”.

Additionally, the repercussions of COVID-19 were frequently mentioned as a force shaping classroom interactions. The participants explained how COVID-19 restrictions made it harder to communicate and get to know their pupils – a sentiment that has been felt and reported by Maltese educators (Busuttill & Farrugia; 2020). Indeed, within the educational field, one of the most severely impacted aspects may well be communication (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marshall et al., 2020). Thus, when we consider that teacher appraisals are built upon the information that teachers gain when they are communicating, and relating with their pupils (Good & Brophy, 2008); it comes as no surprise that the participants found it harder to form concrete appraisals.

Apart from complicating the appraisal process, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have affected the type of expectations that teachers have of their pupils. Marshall et al. (2020) found that teachers have lowered their expectations for their pupils’ academic achievement. Such sentiments were embodied by the class teachers, especially by Ms Dorianne, who explained: “I was really worried that they’re not going to know what to do, or how to wear [the mask], or they would find it hard to learn”. Overall, the observations coincide with the findings that have been reported so far. Nonetheless, since the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, and research regarding the matter is still unfolding; we can only form hypotheses, and not make assertions.

Lastly, the participants showed an introspective awareness of their own appraisals. The literature seems to have focussed more on how teachers form, and communicate, their expectations; rather than exploring whether they are aware of them and whether they seek to change them. However, research carried out by Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014) has found evidence for this

introspective awareness. Their investigations found that, although certain pupil characteristics led to “stereotype activation”, some teachers “suppressed stereotypical expectations” (Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2014, p. 602). Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014) go on to speculate that teacher training, which places a heavier focus on inclusive education and fairer pedagogical practices, is indeed successful; at least to some degree, in reducing prejudice. Recent years have seen an increased appreciation of, and importance towards the use of such inclusive pedagogical practices, even in Malta. Indeed, in this study, it was those participants who have joined the profession recently – and thus, would have received more education regarding inclusion – that embodied this awareness most clearly. Investigating this phenomenon further would not only be interesting, but also beneficial to the field, and practice, of education.

Conclusion

Some of the major findings from this study have shed light on how educators form their appraisals at the beginning of the scholastic year. Amongst the participants, it became apparent that these initial appraisals tended to remain relatively stable throughout the scholastic year. Nonetheless, class teachers showed an ongoing process of re-formation of their appraisals; whereas the appraisals of the NG teachers, and LSEs, were less amenable to change. The findings also showed that one source for change to such appraisals occurred through repeated exposure to conflicting information – be it ‘objective’ data, verbal feedback, or information gathered through observation. Another source for change was the educator’s introspective awareness of his/her perceptions.

It also became evident that educators’ appraisals were rooted within their context – inevitably shaped by the classroom environment, the teacher-pupil relationship, and the emotions that surround these. The characteristics that pupils embody are indeed important to the formation of appraisals. Nonetheless, such characteristics do not stand in isolation and are surrounded by the wider school environment, which consequently, interacts with how the educator would then appraise these characteristics.

The study – although small in scale and rooted within the Maltese socio-cultural environment – about offered participants a perspective into how they form appraisals; and it explored the processes of appraisal not commonly captured by quantitative studies. So far, research has failed to provide a comprehensive and holistic view of teacher expectations – instead, a focus on quantitative data (such as academic scores, or data from questionnaires) has pervaded the field (Johnston et al., 2019). On the one hand, the findings from this study have started to unveil the complexity of this process. On the other hand, they also bring to light the need for further qualitative research that will help us increase our understanding. Most importantly, such research is needed to understand factors – such as the pupils’ perceptions of their teachers’

appraisals – which, historically, have been placed on the back burner (Wang et al., 2019; Weinstein, 2002).

This Malta study also showed that some educators had acquired an introspective awareness of their own appraisals – leading them to change their pedagogy in ways that reduced any biases they held. Thus, irrespective of how the participants in this study acquired such awareness, the findings show us that there is a window of possibility for educators to become self-managers of their expectations. To this day, research has shown that teacher training programmes tackling stereotypes may achieve just that (Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2014); but more research is required to investigate this further. Lastly, policymakers should be cognizant of the power that teachers' appraisals hold in shaping pupils' futures; and in response, create policies that demand fairer pedagogical practices.

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