

A Study of the Relationship between Parental Expectations and Adolescents' Academic Achievement in the Perspective of Positive Psychology

Xinyue Wu*

Modern College of Northwestern University Xi'an 710130, China

**Corresponding author: Xinyue Wu, E-mail: 1695095201@qq.com.*

Abstract

From the perspective of positive psychology, this study explores the relationship between parental expectations and adolescents' academic development. With the help of questionnaires and in-depth interviews, this study revealed that under the framework of positive psychology, parental expectations have a significant positive effect on adolescents' academic development by enhancing their psychological capital and improving their academic self-efficacy. Moreover, the match between parental expectations and adolescents' actual abilities is a key factor. On the basis of these findings, the collaborative home-school intervention programme proposed in this paper provides an actionable guidance strategy for family practice.

Keywords

positive psychology, parental expectations, adolescents, academic development, psychological capital, academic self-efficacy

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the academic development of adolescents is highly important. As important factors in family education, parental expectations have a profound impact on adolescents' academic performance and psychological health. Traditional studies have focused on the negative effects of high parental expectations, such as anxiety and stress.(Subramani, C., & Venkatachalam, J. ,2019;Rizwan, M., Talha, M. A., & Qi, X. ,2020) With the rise of positive psychology, scholars have begun to pay attention to the possible positive effects of parental expectations. This study provides a new perspective on the relationship between parental expectations and adolescents' academic development.

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between parental expectations and adolescents' academic development under the framework of positive psychology, analyse the mechanisms of their influence, and propose corresponding educational suggestions. By exploring this topic in depth, we expect to provide parents and educators with new ideas to promote the holistic development of adolescents.

2. Overview of Research

2.1 Motivational Effects and Potential Risks of Parental Expectations

Existing studies generally agree that parental expectations have a “double-edged sword” effect on adolescents' academic development. Chen (2019) reported that raising parental expectations within a reasonable threshold can effectively increase secondary school students' motivation to learn, and its mechanism of action is reflected in the fact that moderate expectations can positively predict the level of learning input by promoting the quality of parent–child interaction. However, the study does not clearly define the operationalisation of the 'threshold of reasonableness', nor does it reveal the psychological mechanisms underlying the differential impact of different levels of expectation. This theoretical gap is addressed in the present study through the mediating pathways of psychological capital and academic self-efficacy.

A systematic study by Gong (2023) further verified the bidirectional mechanism of parental expectations: on the one hand, it confirmed the positive role of the “Pygmalion effect”, i.e., positive expectations can trigger adolescents' motivation to achieve academic success; on the other hand, it revealed the existence of the threshold effect, which leads to an exponential increase in learning pressure and ultimately to the formation of academic burnout when the level of expectations exceeds adolescents' psychological tolerance. Notably, although the study points to the existence of the threshold effect, it does not provide a complete explanatory model of the mediating variables in the path of influence and their interaction.

2.2 Mediating Mechanisms from a Positive Psychology Perspective

In recent years, research has begun to focus on the buffering role of positive psychological attributes in the process of expectancy transmission. Through an intervention experiment, Yuan (2024) confirmed that increased academic self-efficacy significantly improves the academic performance of junior high school students, and its mechanism of action is reflected in the fact that individuals with high self-efficacy are more adept at transforming external expectations into internal goal commitment and enhancing academic resilience by improving problem-solving skills. This finding provides methodological insights for this study to explore the mediating role of psychological capital, but existing studies have focused mostly on a single psychological variable and have not yet established a multidimensional model of positive psychological resource integration.

Wang (2015) pioneered the construction of a positive emotion–academic achievement association model and reported that positive emotions such as expectations and gratitude can improve cognitive processing efficiency through neuroendocrine mechanisms, and his study confirmed that parents' emotional support styles directly influence adolescents' cognitive decoding process of educational expectations. This provides a new perspective for understanding the affective dimension of expectancy transmission, but the model lacks a cross-level interaction analysis between the family system and individual psychological variables.

2.3 Research Gaps and Theoretical Breakthroughs

There are three major research gaps in the literature: (1) the operationalised definition of “moderate expectations” remains at the theoretical level and lacks quantitative standards based on developmental psychology; (2) the existing mediation models are mostly single-path analyses that fail to integrate the multidimensional protective effects of psychological capital (hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy); and (3) intervention studies in positive psychology focus on after-the-fact remediation and lack exploration of the preventive regulatory mechanisms of the expectancy transmission process.

This study aims to construct a dynamic model of “family expectation-psychological capital-academic development”, and its theoretical breakthroughs are reflected in the following: first, developmental context theory is introduced to establish an expectation assessment system matching the cognitive developmental stage of adolescents; second, chain mediator analysis is adopted to reveal the sequential mechanism of the dimensions of psychological capital in the process of expectation transmission; and third, the intervention framework of family expectations from the perspective of positive psychology is reconstructed, and the

traditional problem correction model is transformed into a potential stimulation-oriented developmental model. Intervention framework, changing the conventional problem correction model into a potential stimulation-oriented developmental model.

3. Theoretical Foundations

This study uses positive psychology theories as the core framework and combines developmental context theory and psychological capital theory to construct a dynamic model of parental expectations affecting adolescents' academic achievement. The rationale for choosing these theories is as follows:

- 1) Positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) emphasises the promotion of development by tapping into individual potential and positive psychological resources (e.g., psychological capital), which provides theoretical support for this study in revealing the pathways through which parental expectations are positively transmitted (Seligman Sood Chung , Zhao Yukun, 2012) . For example, self-efficacy (Seligman, M. E. P. , 2002) and resilience (Snyder, C. R., & Lopez, S. J., 2002) in psychological capital can explain how adolescents transform external expectations into internal motivation.
- 2) Developmental context theory (Lerner, 2002) points out that individual development is influenced by the interaction of the environment and stage characteristics, which guides this study in establishing an expectation assessment system that matches the cognitive stage of adolescents and avoids “one-size-fits-all” expectation standards.
- 3) Psychological capital theory (Luthans, 2004) proposes a multidimensional protective role for hope, resilience, optimism and self-efficacy, providing an integrative framework for this study to analyse the mediating mechanisms of parental expectations.

Together, these theories explain “why parental expectations need to be dynamically matched to adolescents' abilities” and “how positive psychological resources can buffer the negative effects of high expectations,” thus responding to the core research question.

4. Research Methodology

This study was conducted through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The subjects of the study were junior high school students and their parents in two middle schools in Nanchang city; 500 valid questionnaires were collected, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 pairs of parents and students. The questionnaires included the parental expectations scale, the psychological capital scale, and the academic self-efficacy scale. The data were analysed via SPSS 22.0 to explore the relationships among the variables.

The in-depth interviews were semistructured and focused on the formation and expression of parental expectations and their impact on children. The interviews consisted of 10 parents and 10 students. The interviews were transcribed and coded through a process of transcription and coding and then analysed for in-depth themes.

5. Findings and Analyses

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the main variables

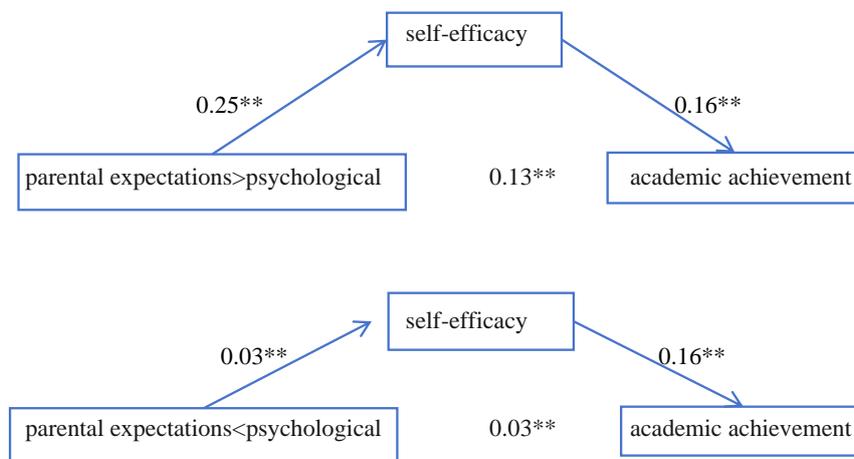
Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Realistic Parental Educational Expectations > psychological capital	0.24	0.43						
2. Realistic Parental Educational Expectations < psychological capital	0.19	0.39	-0.27**					
3. Parents' perceived educational expectations > psychological capital	0.15	0.35	0.34**	-0.02				

4.Parents' perceived educational expectations<psychological capital	0.18	0.39	0.01	0.41**	-0.20**			
5.self-efficacy	40.89	8.72	0.02	0.09**	-0.10**	0.10**	-0.10**	
6.academic achievement	0.31	0.84	0.15**	-0.02	-0.07*	0.08*	0.19**	0.38**

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The above data indicate that parental expectations are positively related to adolescents' academic achievement, academic self-efficacy, and psychological capital. Structural equation modelling revealed that parental expectations positively influence adolescents' academic achievement through the mediating variable of academic self-efficacy. Specifically, as far as possible, the higher the parental expectations are, the greater the self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience of the adolescents, and the greater their academic self-efficacy, which in turn leads to improved academic performance.

Figure 1: The Mediating Effect of Parental Expectation Discrepancy on Academic Performance



However, research has also revealed that the match between parental expectations and adolescents' psychological capital is a key factor. When the match between parental expectations and children's psychological capital is consistent, expectations can have the greatest positive effect, whereas when expectations are too high or too low, they may have a negative effect on adolescents' academic development and mental health. The results of the in-depth interviews further confirmed this finding. The students interviewed admitted that moderate parental expectations acted as a catalyst to stimulate their enthusiasm for learning, whereas excessive expectations acted as a heavy burden, which could be counterproductive and inhibit their learning effectiveness.

In addition, the way parents expressed expectations had a significant effect on adolescents' acceptance. Expectations expressed in a supportive and encouraging manner are more likely to be accepted by adolescents and transformed into intrinsic motivation, whereas expectations expressed in a critical and coercive manner are likely to cause resentment and resistance among adolescents.

6. Research Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for Practice

To overcome the dilemma of family education, which is “known but difficult to operate”, this study proposes a three-pronged intervention programme, namely, “assessment-expression-support”.

6.1.1 Development of Dynamic Capacity Assessment Tools

- 1) Staged Diagnostic Scale: Combined with developmental context theory, a three-dimensional assessment matrix containing the level of cognitive development (e.g., Piagetian Stage Indicators),

emotional regulation (simplified version of the DERS scale), and academic foundation (standard deviation of the last three exams) was constructed, and individualised thresholds of expectation were determined through joint home–school assessment meetings.

- 2) Digital feedback platform: This platform develops a parent-side app that integrates data such as teacher comments (weekly), fluctuations in the correctness of homework (daily), and emotion diaries (filled by students) and uses machine learning algorithms to generate dynamic expectation adjustment suggestions (see Figure 1).

6.1.2 Expectation Expression Skill Training System

(1) GROW-E communication model (Cai, 2024). The improved parent training module, which is based on coaching techniques, consists of four steps: (1) Goal (goal negotiation), which replaces “You must be in the top ten in your class” with “What area do you want to break through in the next examination? 1) Goal negotiation), which replaces “You have to be in the top 10 of the class” with “You have to be in the top 10 of the class”; 2) Reality (current situation analysis), which guides parents to use the sentence “I have noticed that you have recently made progress in.....”; 3) Options (strategy cocreation), which use Yuan's (2024) “Wheel of Choice” tool to list 3--5 feasible paths for improvement; and 4) Will (commitment to action), which results in a milestone agreement (e.g., “Complete two wrong questions every day for two consecutive weeks”).

(2) Emotional labelling training. Help parents master the “expectation–emotion” linkage expression through role-playing (Wang, 2020), e.g., transforming “Do not play with your mobile phone if you fail again” into “If you pass this time, we can talk about increasing the play time by 30 minutes!”.

6.1.3 Home-School Collaborative Support Networking

(1) Mental capital development programme. Four modules of training are embedded in the school after-school service: hope, which uses the “Goal Ladder Chart” to break down semester goals into weekly tasks; resilience, which uses the “Frustration Scenario Simulation” to learn stress-transformation strategies; optimism, which uses the “Positive Event Diary” card-punching activity; and self-efficacy, which uses the “Micro Success” recording method to accumulate problem-solving experience. Optimism, through the “Positive Events Diary”, and self-efficacy, through the “Micro Success” method of recording experience in problem solving.

(2) Parent Resource Centre: Monthly growth mindset workshops, Dweck's (2006) “Process Praise” handbook, and a special area for intercultural parenting strategies (providing culturally competent guidance to families of migrant children).

6.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

(1) Sample limitations: This study focuses on secondary school students in Nanchang city, and in the future, it needs to be expanded to include rural areas, low-SES families and cross-cultural groups to verify the generalizability of the adaptive expectations model.

(2) Insufficient longitudinal tracking: National tracking data such as the CEPS could subsequently be used to analyse the long-term interaction effects of expectations, psychological capital, and academic achievement.

(3) Intervention validation is lacking: Subsequent randomised controlled trials could subsequently be designed to test the effectiveness of the dynamic assessment tool with the home-school feedback system.

References

- Cai, Y. (2024). *Exploration of strategies to stimulate students' reading motivation in English teaching from the perspective of positive psychology*. *Campus English*, (48), 123-130.
- Chen, Z. (2019). *The relationship between parents' educational expectations and learning engagement of secondary school students* [Unpublished master's thesis, Nanjing Normal University]. Nanjing.

- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Fred Luthans, Kyle, W. Luthan. Brett, C. Luthans. Positive psychological capital: *Beyond human and social capital* [J]. *Business Horizons*, 2004, 47 (1): 45—50.
- Gong, C. (2023). The relationship between parent–child educational expectations and differences and junior high school students' academic achievement: A chain mediation model. *Educational Research*, 44(3), 56-68.
- Lerner, R. M. (2002). *Concepts and theories of human development (3rd ed)*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rizwan, M., Talha, M. A., & Qi, X. (2020). Cultural impact of perceived parental expectations on students' academic stress. *Annals of Social Sciences and Perspective*, 1(2), 53-65.
- Subramani, C., & Venkatachalam, J. (2019). *Parental expectations and its relation to academic stress among school students*. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 6(2), 95-99.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Positive Psychology: An Introduction*. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14
- Seligman Sood Chung, Zhao Yukun (2012)- *Sustained Happiness : Flourish: a visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*, Zhejiang People's Publishing House
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Snyder, C. R., & Lopez, S. J. (2002) *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, .
- Wang, T. (2020). *The effect of cognitive emotion regulation on junior high school students' academic performance: The mediating role of psychological capital* [Unpublished master's thesis, Zhengzhou University]. Zhengzhou.
- Wang, W. B. (2015). *The relationship between positive emotions and academic achievement among college students: The mediating role of academic engagement* [Unpublished master's thesis, Shaanxi Normal University]. Xi'an.
- Yuan, X. (2024). *Research on the effects of junior high school students' academic self-efficacy and life satisfaction on academic achievement and its intervention* [Unpublished master's thesis, Guizhou Normal University]. Guiyang.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

I am filled with profound gratitude as I pen down this section. First of all, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Prof. Yan Wang from the Department of Psychology at Fudan University. She has broadened my reserve of professional knowledge and enhanced my critical thinking ability. Meanwhile, I also want to thank all of my family members and friends. They have been by my side and unconditionally supported me all the time.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).