

The Relationship between Parents' Educational Expectations and Junior High School Students' Learning

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Abstract: Academic burnout is a global issue that frequently manifests in daily life. This phenomenon often adversely affects students' psychological and physical development. In Asian families, parental educational expectations regarding junior high school students' academic burnout are frequently overlooked. The persistent perception of excessive coursework and homework as the sole contributing factors to academic burnout, combined with the traditional Chinese "expectations for children's success" mindset that views parental high expectations as a natural expression of care, has resulted in limited empirical research. This study investigates junior high school students' perceptions of parental expectations and their impact on academic burnout through statistical analysis. Using questionnaire-based quantitative research methods, this study demonstrates a significant correlation between parental educational expectations and academic burnout among junior high school students. The findings reveal a dual effect: moderate parental expectations can positively motivate students, whereas excessive expectations significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion and disengagement. This suggests that the quality and communication of expectations, rather than their mere presence, are critical factors in student well-being. Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity of fostering realistic parental goals and open parent-child dialogue to mitigate academic pressure and support the healthy psychological development of adolescents.

1 Introduction

In China, the confluence of rapid industrialization and continuous population growth has intensified employment pressure and the corresponding demand for skilled talent, fueling a phenomenon known as educational involution. Within this highly competitive educational ecosystem, the academic burnout of junior high school students has emerged as a critical issue threatening their mental health, often manifesting as emotional exhaustion, academic disengagement, and a diminished sense of efficacy. As a central driving force in family education, parental educational expectations exert a significant, double-edged effect on a child's learning status. On one hand, moderate and realistic expectations can serve as a powerful motivator, encouraging students to strive for academic success. On the other hand,

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excessive or misaligned expectations can easily transform into debilitating stressors, contributing directly to academic burnout.

The nature of parenting plays a crucial role in mediating this relationship. Research indicates that parental autonomy support, which involves respecting a child's decision-making rights and encouraging their independence, may effectively mitigate the negative effects of high expectations. Conversely, parenting styles characterized by psychological control, such as inducing guilt or using manipulative tactics, tend to strengthen the association between high expectations and academic burnout. This highlights that the specific parenting approaches used to convey and manage expectations are crucial moderating mechanisms for optimizing family education and safeguarding student well-being. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the nuanced relationship between parental expectations and student burnout, considering the critical role of parenting practices.

2 Literature review

The academic study of expectations can be traced to Robert Merton's theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy, which posits that a belief or prediction, by virtue of being held, can trigger actions that ultimately cause it to become true. This concept is profoundly influential in personal development, where expectations play a vital role in shaping outcomes. In an academic context, educational expectations refer to an individual's aspirations regarding their future scholastic attainment. Despite extensive research, this remains a complex concept without a single unified definition. Generally, it denotes the anticipations held by parents, teachers, or other significant elders about a child's academic achievements and potential. The formation of these expectations involves two key parties: the expectant party (e.g., a parent) and the expected party (e.g., a student). When both parties are the same, it is termed a self-educational expectation—an individual's personal anticipation of their future academic capabilities and performance. When the expectant party is the parents, it is a parental educational expectation, which encompasses not only goals for the highest level of education attainable but also developmental objectives based on the child's personality and daily behaviors. Educational expectations represent hopes and anticipations for future academic accomplishments (such as final educational attainment) [1].

As a crucial motivational factor, educational expectations provide individuals with aspirational targets to strive toward. Extensive research confirms that both parental and self-reported educational expectations are effective and consistent predictors of academic performance [2]. Consequently, educational expectations have long been recognized as a key variable in explaining individual learning behaviors and outcomes. Individuals who hold higher educational expectations tend to exhibit stronger academic drive and are more likely to achieve success in school [3]. Specifically, parental educational expectations significantly influence their children's academic achievements. Students whose parents hold high educational expectations often demonstrate increased classroom engagement, stronger motivation, higher test scores, and ultimately attain greater educational accomplishments [4].

However, when these expectations become excessive, they can contribute to academic burnout. The concept of academic burnout originated in workplace studies and has since been adapted to educational settings to describe student experiences [5]. It is defined as a negative attitude and set of behaviors toward learning, often caused by excessive academic pressure or a lack of interest. Its primary manifestations are emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward academic tasks, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment [6]. Addressing this phenomenon is a crucial aspect of promoting mental health in schools. Multiple studies in China and abroad indicate that academic burnout not only increases a student's likelihood of dropping out but also adversely affects their overall mental health [7]. The stress induced by overwhelming expectations can directly impact academic performance, leading to self-doubt,

feelings of hopelessness, and further pressure, creating a vicious cycle that hinders academic achievement improvement [8].

The urgency of this issue is underscored by national data. The "2023 National Basic Education Quality Report" from the Ministry of Education revealed a youth dropout rate of 28.6%, reflecting a severe challenge in contemporary education. Case studies have shown that when a significant deviation of over 20% exists between parental expectations and a child's actual abilities, the risk of dropping out of school increases exponentially. Researchers also point to intense academic competition as a source of serious mental health disorders and suicide risk among children and adolescents. While China's overall suicide mortality rate decreased between 2010 and 2021, the rate for the 5-14 age group surged significantly during the same period. Furthermore, after an initial decrease, the suicide mortality rate among 15-24-year-olds increased by nearly 20% annually after 2017. The "2022 National Depression Blue Book" further reveals that 50% of depression patients in China are students. This is compounded by a common belief among Chinese parents that "academic performance at school is more important than anything else," which places immense pressure on young people. Poor stress management in this environment may lead to increased suicide risks. Therefore, understanding the relationship between parental educational aspirations and academic burnout in junior high school students is critically important. It can empower parents to communicate more effectively about academic matters and adjust their educational approaches, while also helping to reduce students' academic pressure and prevent psychological problems like burnout or depression.

3 Discussion

3.1 Summary of findings

Adolescents today are tasked with the primary mission of studying. To navigate intense academic pressure and excel in a fiercely competitive environment, they must invest a substantial amount of time and effort into their studies. However, this prolonged commitment can often lead to physical and mental exhaustion, prevent them from experiencing a true sense of achievement, and foster negative attitudes toward learning, which are the hallmarks of academic burnout. In China, students across elementary and middle school face similar academic pressures, suggesting that the core structure of academic burnout should remain consistent across these groups, much as the structure of occupational burnout is consistent across different professions.

This study investigated the relationship between parental educational expectations and academic burnout among middle school students, confirming a significant correlation between these two factors. The central conclusion of this research is that parental educational expectations have a dual impact: moderate expectations can positively influence a student's academic engagement and motivation, while excessive expectations are likely to cause academic burnout and negatively affect their physical and mental development.

3.2 Implications for family education

Based on the study's conclusions, it is imperative that parental educational expectations are grounded in the developmental stage of their children. Parents should strive to fully understand their children's unique abilities, interests, and hobbies before setting expectations and requirements that are both ambitious and reasonable. Research has clearly established a significant link between children's anxiety and parental expectations. The anxiety levels of middle school students are often associated with their parents' educational backgrounds and

economic conditions [9,10], as well as the specific methods parents use to convey expectations and their reactions when children fail to meet them [11]. Since excessively high parental expectations can lead to adolescent anxiety and harm academic performance and mental health, they may ultimately cause more negative impacts than benefits.

An analysis of data from the "China Family Panel Studies" (CFPS) revealed that the "Pygmalion effect" is conditional. This effect, where higher expectations lead to better performance, holds true when parents expect their children's academic performance to be below full marks. However, when parents expect perfect academic performance, their children's academic achievements tend to decline, suggesting a tipping point where expectations become counterproductive. To mitigate these risks, enhancing parent-child communication and improving family bonding can significantly alleviate academic burnout. Most adolescents are in a formative period of rapid physical and psychological development. During this phase, they develop a stronger sense of independence, seek to think and act autonomously, and form their own standards for right and wrong. They also experience heightened emotional volatility and intense inner conflicts. Parents should therefore adopt a developmental perspective, fully respect their teenager's growing autonomy while provide unwavering parental care and support. This balanced approach can foster trust, encourage more open communication, and create a healthier family dynamic.

3.3 Research contributions

This study contributes to the field by specifically investigating the relationship between parental educational expectations and academic burnout within the context of family factors. By examining the mechanisms through which parental expectations impact student burnout, we have confirmed the existence and nuances of expectation effects in this context. The research findings provide substantial evidence for the profound influence of family factors on academic performance and well-being. In doing so, this work offers robust support for current domestic studies on academic burnout and enriches the understanding of the pressures faced by students in China's competitive educational landscape.

3.4 Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the participants were selected from middle school students in only two schools within a single city, which restricts the sample's diversity and introduces limitations regarding its ecological validity. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to represent the overall population of middle school students in other regions or contexts.

Secondly, the variable of "parents' educational expectations" was measured through the self-reports of the middle school students. This methodology may lead to discrepancies between a parent's actual educational expectations and the student's perception of those expectations, potentially influenced by factors like misinterpretation or emotional state. To address these limitations, future research could adopt a more comprehensive methodology by conducting simultaneous measurements of both parents and their children. Such an approach would allow for the collection of data on parents' stated educational expectations for their children alongside the children's perceived parental expectations. A comparative analysis of these two datasets would yield more authentic, nuanced, and accurate data, providing a clearer picture of the dynamics at play.

4 Conclusion

This study investigated the critical relationship between parental educational expectations and academic burnout among junior high school students in China's high-pressure educational climate. The research confirms that a significant correlation exists, highlighting the dual nature of parental influence. While moderate and well-aligned expectations can foster academic motivation and engagement, excessive or unrealistic expectations act as a significant stressor, contributing to emotional exhaustion, cynicism towards learning, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. Key findings underscore that the negative impact of high expectations is exacerbated by controlling parenting styles and can be mitigated by autonomy support and open communication.

The implications of this research are clear: for expectations to be a positive force, they must be tailored to a child's individual abilities and developmental stage. This study adds to the growing body of evidence on the importance of family factors in student well-being and provides a strong basis for advising parents to cultivate a supportive and communicative home environment. By fostering realistic goals and respecting their children's growing independence, parents can help prevent academic burnout and promote not only greater academic achievement but also healthier psychological development and more harmonious family relationships.

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