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# **Are the voices of students heard: a case study of the impact of parental and school expectations on the emotional well-being of students in China**

## **Introduction**

Parents and schools always have expectations of their children. Whether children could eventually meet the expectations depends on a range of social, cognitive developmental and behavioural factors. Parents and schools very often get disappointed once children fail to do so. However, adults seldom question themselves whether they have set realistic expectations for children, whether the expectations have any impact on children's emotional well-being, whether they ever listen to children's voices and what the consequences would be if the voices are ignored.

This article identifies the current Chinese educational context with regards to the impact of parental and school expectations on the emotional well-being of students in junior middle schools. Taken the concerns that students may interpret the expectations differently based on their personalities, education backgrounds, their capacities in learning and their cognitive development, the author draws on theories and research of child development and educational psychology (McInerney, 2005, Tardif and Miao, 2000, Webster-Stratton, 2002, Aldgate, et al. 2006, Jones, 2003, 2006) to help her make sense of her perspectives as a parent and teacher.

## **The context for the research**

Faced with ever increasing challenges of today's children, the needs of creating a power sharing ethos are felt across the world (Klein, 2003). Teacher-student interaction and parental-child relationships are much researched internationally as the

most important processes in childhood education through voices from different sources (Fielding, 2004). An overwhelming amount of research has shown that emotions are very much part of life experience and the knowledge of it can lead to success (Buchanan and Hudson, 2000, Salisch, 2001, Goleman, 1998). People become increasingly aware that children have much to offer by having their voices heard. However, research has not yet attached importance to children's perspectives because very little exist that describe their feelings and thoughts (Sherman 1996). Some researchers (e.g. Taylor, 2000: 32) argue that 'educational development has shown little concern for children's rights. In spite of the rhetoric on raising standards, the key stakeholders in the system, the children, have diminished opportunities to play their part in defining or contributing to what those standards are'.

For various historical, socio-economic and cultural reasons, China has a long tradition of valuing education (Su, et al. 2001). The expectations upon students from parents and schools are mostly related to educational achievements. On the one hand, Chinese parents have always been willing to invest on their children's education (Bai, 2006) as the academic achievements of their children influence greatly the images and economic well-being of families. On the other hand, Chinese education is very much teacher-centered and test-oriented (Forrester, et al. 2006, Suen and Yu, 2006). The reputation and images of schools depend upon students' academic performances. Though adults are well aware the danger that inappropriate expectations would cause various problems (Chang, et al. 2003, Davies-Kean, 2005) rather than merely function as motivation for learning, children are still urged to work hard on their studies on the

sacrifice of their physical and emotional well-being. Whilst students describe attempts to discuss with adults about their problems in achieving the goals (Wise, 2000: 140), there still lacks the willingness and desire to seek students' own perspectives from parents and professionals.

### **The aims of the research**

By providing detailed descriptive data from a small scale investigation, the research aims, first, to provide opportunities to students to articulate their perspectives on the expectations; second, to draw attention from educators, families and society as a whole to the emotional well-being of students who might take the expectations negatively and, finally to discuss the complexity and issues related to parental and school expectations and students' emotional well-being for an implication of a paradigm shift in Chinese educational system in terms of empowerment to students.

### **Parental expectations of children**

Parental expectations of children can be influenced by a range of factors. Marjoribanks (2005) suggests that academically orientated family environment increases children's learning outcomes. This agrees with Child (2004: 267) that 'environmentally, gifted children benefit from having parents with well-defined attitudes to education'. Studying the indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment, Davis-Kean (2005) suggests that parent's education influences child achievement indirectly through its impact on the parental achievement beliefs and stimulating home. But researchers have very little understanding of how parent education may influence their beliefs and behaviours and how factors like parents'

beliefs such as achievement expectations or efficacy might function as links between socio-economic status and achievement outcomes.

According to Eccles (Eccles, 1993, cited in Davis-Kean, 2005:303), parents' educational expectations have direct and indirect effects on children's academic achievement scores for the European American sample and a strong indirect influence in the African American sample. These findings are consistent with previous research (Alexander, et al. 1994) documenting the strong relationship between parental expectations and beliefs and achievement outcomes. Alexander and colleagues (1994) indicate that parents of moderate to high income and educational background hold beliefs and expectations that are closer to those of low-income families to the actual performance of their children. However, Varma (1990:85) finds that typically middle-class or professional parents will have higher expectations of their children. Other research (Halla, et al. 1997) also indicates that mothers with higher education have higher expectations for their children's academic achievement and that these expectations are related to their children's subsequent achievement. Webster-Stratton (2002) also shows that when parents are trained to use effective child management skills, their children become more pro-social, have higher self-esteem and fewer aggressive behavioural problems. However, even parents are successful in bringing about a more harmonious family life at home, there is no necessary corresponding improvement in the children's relationships at school.

### **School expectations of students**

School is such an important part in children's daily life that whatever happens in

school inevitably has a great impact on children. Gill and Reynolds (2000, cited in Cram, et al. 2003) find that teacher expectation has a powerful direct influence on academic achievement. Low expectations in particular are likely to have sustained effects on children's performance. The research (Cram, et al. 2003) on teachers' rating of academic competence in children from low-income families shows that teachers have different values from parents on students. Teachers expect less of children from low-income and other stigmatised groups (Florian et al.2006) and therefore provide less rigorous academic instruction and lower standards for achievement. Consistent with this view, relatively low expectations exist in many schools serving low income students which further cause low self-esteem of children (Babad, 1993, Brophy, 1983, cited in Cram, et al. 2003) and teacher expectations for student performance do influence teachers' behaviour towards students and students' learning (Jussim & Eccles, 1992, cited in Cram, et al 2003). Children who typically receive relatively low expectations may be the most affected by teacher expectations.

### **Gaps and mismatches of expectations**

Studying the voices from different stakeholders on parental-child relationships in Hong Kong, Fong and colleagues (2005) find gaps and mismatches between parents' and children's expectations and perceptions of the parent-child relationship. The most outstanding point is the children's yearning for time and communication together with their parents which most parents miss out entirely. Lasky (2000, cited in Cram, et al. 2003:818) finds value differences appear to be a central feature in teacher judgments of students' competence. Teachers are comfortable with parents who share a similar

education-related value system to their own. Or they rate students as less competent academically and have lower expectations for their future academic success. Thus students are often presumably disadvantaged when their parents and teachers hold different values with respect to desired classroom practices and behaviour. Consequently, teachers may lower their expectations of such students. The study indicates that teachers' ratings of students' academic competence and their expectations for their future performance relate highly to students' actual skills.

Fong and colleagues (2005) argue that knowing the needs of children provides a good starting point to improve parent-child relationships. Research by Marsh and colleagues (2001) also shows children's comments on the unequal relationships inherent in schools between children and adults and their favour of the development of a more democratic ethos and structure within schools for the well-being of their emotional development.

### **Emotional well-being**

Emotion (Goleman, 1996:289) is 'a feeling and its distinctive thought, psychological and biological states and range of propensities to act'. Some emotions (anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, surprise, shame and etc.) are arguably considered as primary ones among hundreds of emotions. Koestler (1964, cited in Cairns, 2002:42) describes emotional states as either self-assertive or self-transcending which are universal in human experience and may be creative or destructive in its impact on the individual. AS the power of emotion is too important to be ignored (Mayer, 1990, cited in Weisinger, 2000), Goleman (2002: 14) suggests four major emotional intelligence

domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. They are shared by all the main variations of emotional intelligence theory. Weisinger (2000) argues that to intelligently use emotions, one should intentionally make emotions work to help guide behaviour and thinking.

Buchanan and Ritchie (2004:6) reveal that emotional and behavioural problems in children have many causes and interfere with school work, affect their life chances, impinge on peer group and family relationships and may make them more vulnerable to mental and physical health problems in adult life. Children with emotional problems often communicate their distress by 'troubled' behaviour. However, different definitions of emotional and behavioural problems, different ages, and different areas will give very different figures for the number of children involved.

### **Are the voices of students heard?**

The last two decades have witnessed in education a significant shift from professional 'knowing best' towards a culture where students have their views listened to and respected. The shift takes its initial shape in 1980s when there is a call for the rights of children at school (Jeffs, 1986). This shift in focus from advocacy to self-advocacy is seen as a natural extension of the process of empowerment (Garner and Sandow, 1995). Giving children a voice in decision making highlights this shift to a much greater extent and makes children visible and gives them a stake in that process (Shevlin and Rose, 2003). Some research (Canney and Byrne, 2006, Kelly, 1999) demonstrates that children with emotional and behavioural difficulties seem to bring about a marked positive change. However, others complain that since the shifting of



the balance of power to children, teachers have voiced increasing concerns about children being less respectful and of their having less control over unruly pupils (Jones, 1996, cited in Taylor, 2000:32).

### **Parental and school expectations, students' emotional well being and their voices in China**

The single child in a Chinese family is inevitably the focus of family attention and resources (Short, et al. 2001). The consequences of the birth planning in late 1970s have altered the quality of care parents can or desire to provide for their children. Though frequently recognised, the connections between what might be the effects on family life or whether there is correlation between more care for children and higher expectations upon them are seldom explored, especially empirically (Chen, et al. 1997). But there is little doubt that China's one-child policy has had a profound input on Chinese family life that has inevitably influenced children's emotional well-being. In addition, Confucianism dominates the content of Chinese education for centuries which aims to shape 'the ordinary child' in accordance with a Confucian image of 'the ideal child' (Bai, 2005:9). The opening and reform policy in late 1970s fosters an even more highly competitive culture in this densely populated country. Though the government has already realised the side-effect of the test-orientated educational system which directly causes the unrealistic expectations of students, and has been striving to avoid the big social issues of students' emotional well-being, empirical research in this aspect has not been conducted as much as that in developed countries (Ho, 2004; Wo, 2000, Wo, et al. 2003a, 2003b). Despite the call for the empowerment

of students internationally, the voices of students in China are yet to be heard.

### **The school participants**

The research was conducted in a junior middle school (students age from 12-15) in a medium-sized city in the eastern part of China. The city is renowned for its historic and cultural heritage as well as its dynamic economic growth and rapid development in education over the past 20 years. This school enjoys a reputation of high enrollment rate of students to senior middle schools. There are 50-60 students in each class with 12 classes in each of the three grades. Teachers were heavily loaded in helping students pass tests to senior middle schools. The school selected participants from one class of Junior Three together with their parents and the staff. The sample size for the questionnaire was 87 gained from 55 students, 27 parents and 5 teachers respectively. Four pilot students were chosen as the researcher knew them and their parents personally and was aware that they were able and willing to voice their opinions.

### **The case study student**

The case student, one of the four pilot students, showed great interest in the research. This provided easy access for the researcher to have a detailed observation of the case based on the parent-child relationship between the two. The case was 14 years old. She was studying in a very selective boarding school in terms of academic achievements. She used to be a top pupil in her primary school but was no longer so currently. She was good at Chinese but not very interested in math and science. She had traveled extensively for her age. Her parents both had higher education and had good positions in their jobs.

## **Methods**

The research took the form of a qualitative case study approach with multi-methods applied (Walsh 2001). A self-completion questionnaire with open-ended questions was designed and carried out in the school to compensate for the validity weaknesses of the data from the case. A face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted to allow the case much more flexibility of response (Robson 2002). The interview included key questions like: What are the impacts of the parental/school expectations on students' emotional well-being? Are the voices of students heard? This interview was employed to complement participant observations. It also helped to modify the author's line of enquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying motives. Cues and leading questions were avoided. The interview was in English. No mistakes in the scripts were corrected. The ethical code was followed strictly all through the research process.

## **Research Findings**

### **Perceptions of expectations**

Good senior school/university, good job and good academic achievement were rated the highest by parents while students thought good academic achievement came first. Teachers matched with students in 'study hard'. Most students did not specify the expectations from parents or school but they mentioned that they were expected to earn fame for the family and school. Interestingly, no adults explicitly expressed this. The case student differed from the general survey results as she perceived the expectations from her parents to be more holistic.

*They want me to be a good girl, meet nice friends, kind to people, honest. Anyway, just to be a pleasant girl...the other characters, I think it's the most basic to be a person.*

Case student

About the parental expectations of her classmates, the case student replied that expectations vary from parents to parents.

*Jenny, her parents are both professors in a university. They always want her to do the best. Judy, she never worry about her achievement. Her parents, too. They care about her health more than her achievement.*

Case student

However, the case student felt that her teachers expect much of her.

*For my primary school's expectation, I think it's important to me. Because I just like a deputy of my school, I must do my things better, to show to the people, that the students from my primary school is great! ...*

Case student

### **Perceptions of expectations on children's emotional well-being**

Seventeen parents (62%) regarded expectations as pressure verses nine others (33%) as motivation, to which teachers and students broadly agreed. Students perceived the impact could be the constraint for freedom, nervousness and upset at times and being afraid of tests and schooling. But they also felt confident in themselves when they considered expectations as support, which teachers mostly viewed as 'a sense of responsibility'.

*Jenny, a good achievement student, she would like teachers' higher expectations, so she has the power, and she will be proud about it. Judy, she doesn't care. But I think most of us would like teachers' a little higher expectation.*

Case student

*We do need some expectations, but can't be too much. And I think it may as well be a little higher than the student's ability. And maybe there was more surprise than the parental and school expecting. So, I think they can have expectation on students, but mild.*

Case student

Students have opinions on teachers in some cases:

*For my class teacher, also my math teacher, she just likes students who are good at math. If she thought you are clever and you have talent in studying math, then even if you are a naughty student, she'll talk to you, and tell you, that she expects you to be a good achievement student. Then she will always help you, even though, sometimes, you are wrong! But others have to suffer...*

Case student

### **Should students voice their opinions?**

All stakeholders are very positive about it. Students believed they could set parents thinking about their wrong decisions and it was for their self-development and independence as they knew themselves best and they were going to live their own life.

They wanted to enjoy equal rights as human beings and needed respect from adults.

They regarded empowerment as a means of releasing their feelings. Students and

parents further mentioned that sometimes there were communication barriers and one parent (3.7%) thought that children should understand the good intention of parents by reserving their opinions to show their respect to their parents. Surprisingly, quite some students did not want to voice their opinions, to which the case student agreed.

*I think it's different to everybody. Some parents are strict. They shouted and hit the children. I don't think the child should talk with them. That's wasting their time.*

Case student

### **Are the voices of students heard?**

Parents and students generally agreed that it depended on situations. Nine students (16%) complained that their voices were ignored if they made little or no achievement academically. This matched with the answers from eight parents (29%) that they were not willing to listen to the opinions or 'excuses' if their children were not able to convince them with improved attainments in their studies. Besides, many parents and children were both aware that voices from children were not interested if parents themselves were busy or stressed. Six students (10%) mentioned that the best time for voices was at table when parents were unfortunately not often available. Students and teachers varied in their comments on students' voices. 80% of teachers thought that they 'listened at any time', while only 10% of students agreed to this.

Researcher: *When do your parents not listen to your opinions?*

Case: *My parents always listen to me when I want to say something about them.*

*But sometimes, when they were tired, or angry about something, they won't listen to me any more...Maybe when they come back from work, they were tired or they*

*have some trouble on their work or they were worry about something.*

Researcher: *Can you give me an example?*

Case: *One day, I came back from school; dad picked me up. He was tired, and he has a big problem on his work, but I didn't know that. So I told him that he should do this and do that. Then he was really angry I can feel he was really unhappy. So I say nothing.*

Researcher: *When do your teachers listen to your opinions?*

Case: *Well, actually, I don't think anyone of my class had talked to my class teacher. But if we did, of course on the surface, the teachers will smile and say "well, thanks for the suggestion" or something like that. But are they going to do what we said? I think it will not happen in China. Maybe, some of the teachers will do what the children said, but some didn't.*

Researcher: *Can you give me an example?*

Case: *For example, my class teacher, she opened a theme meeting, she asked us to give her some suggestion. After about 10 minutes, no one say anything. It's just so quiet. Yes, we have many ideas for her, but we can't, we even didn't dare to say it. So, I think, to give a suggestion to teacher in China is not very sane.*

### **The impact of voices on emotional well-being of students**

The responses from parents were 'pressure', 'rebellion' and emotional problems including disappointment, lack of confidence and isolation from parents. Teachers' views included 'hopeless', 'negative towards teachers', 'rebellion', 'ill-emotion' and 'de-motivation'. Students' answers were 'hopeless', 'try again if necessary or never

again' and 'try to understand'.

*I will be really happy (if they listen). I will find something new to tell them what I think. Our relationship will be better. Sometimes, I could allow for them (if they don't listen), but sometimes I couldn't. I'll be very angry and maybe I'll shout to them! Or I shall never talk to them again. I feel just like I lose my face.*

Case student

## **Discussion**

The findings are consistent with relevant previous research conducted internationally but indicate the area of the correlation between student voices and the impact of expectations on them needs further exploring in China. Though 'children may have immense difficulties grasping their parents', teachers' and their own points of views, let alone the views represented by the media or implicit in the social and political systems and the global context' (Fong, et al. 2005:134), this case study still illuminate the complexity and the issues related to parent-child and teacher-student relationships, and the gaps between parents, schools and children. The researcher tends to argue that when parents and teachers are able to work together in partnership to promote emotional well-being in children, children would do better academically because their social and emotional needs are taken into account and teachers feel more satisfied with the support from parents. As a Chinese mother of a teenager and teacher with years' experience, the researcher would like to discuss the following:

### **Parental expectations of children**

Parental expectations mainly focus on children's education and academic



achievement. This indicates Chinese historical, social and cultural connotations in relation to parents' expectations deserve close study (Fong, et al. 2005). The underlying issues are related to Chinese traditions as well as contemporary beliefs and values in parent-child relationships as the basis for understanding of parental expectations on children. On the one hand, although Confucian tradition attaches great importance to education, the 'Cultural Revolution' from 1965 to 1975 had left very few chances for education to parents and grandparents of school children today. Besides, the Chinese social welfare system is not yet sound. Parents naturally believe good education holds the key for their offspring to success. On the other hand, the Family Planning Policy since 1970s has inevitably led to Chinese couples depositing all their hopes on their only child (Kallgren, 2004) to excel at school and in life. Meanwhile, the current data indicate the consistency with other research (e.g. Dandy and Nettlerbeck, 2002, Davis-Kean, 2005) that parent education and family income influence their expectations on children.

*Jenny's parents are both professors. They always want her to do best, but they're not strict. Teachers also think she should be the best. And Jenny can always live up to their expectations.*

Case student

### **School expectations of students**

Confucius regards knowledge through education as the highest priority and everything is subordinate to it (万般皆下品，唯有读书高). However, China is still in the midst of national education reform and quality education is not yet for all. To have a place at

a certain educational level, one needs tremendous effort from a very young age and has to take series of tests to be spotted (Suen and Yu, 2006). To achieve life goals, students have to survive tough competitions. The lack of breadth and balance in school curriculum and the assessment-focused curriculum delivery can account for the lack of interest and motivation in learning (Elliott, 2000: 59). Teachers, particularly secondary school subject specialists, emphasise hard-working rather than cognitive progress of students. They expect high academic achievements from students, which help teachers to get bonuses or promotion from their positions and enable schools to earn good reputation.

### **Children's perceptions of expectations**

Students' perceptions of the expectations share large in common with adults. The majority of students articulate that they are expected to study hard and to gain good academic attainments so that they can get enrolled in good schools or universities. Higher education would secure them good jobs and this in turn can be a promise for a happy life in the future. Meanwhile, students express that it is helpful to have guidelines and expectations of when and how different stages of development may occur but these must always be seen in the context of the circumstances and unique progression of an individual child. There has to be a balance between the concept of developmental progression, which recognises there is an order to developmental stages, and the development of an individual child.

*Our class teacher told Jenny that she wanted her to be the top ten of the grade*

*(We have 440 students in a grade!)...Judy, I am afraid that the teachers never*

*expect that her achievement will be better. But she doesn't care. She doesn't feel worried or think it is a thing to be ashamed of.*

Case student

### **Expectations as motivations or pressure**

In terms of motivation verses pressure, research (Varma 1990:84) shows that the underachievers without serious learning difficulties are unlikely to respond to remedial instruction without further efforts to improve their motivation as part of the therapeutic effort to reduce their emotional distress. Elliott (2000: 60) also argues that many educational psychologists place an over-emphasis on observable behaviours and ignore underlying processes.

*If my parents' expectations are like what I want, I think maybe I will work harder!*

Case student

This study agrees to Selye (1974, cited in Wilson, 2002:4) that 'humans require sufficient pressure to encourage them to perform creatively but excessive pressure can lead to distress and feelings of oppression, harassment or collapse. Nor can it be assumed that everyone will react uniformly to the same demands: what may be perceived as a stimulus by some may reduce others to distress'.

*And the one thing important is parents and teachers can never put their expectations lower than the child think he could do. If they do that, the child will think, well, you just want me to do things like that, I can do that easily. So I won't study harder! I think they will be happy that the teachers affirm them. Then, they'll study harder to show the teacher. 'Yes, you're right, I can do it!'*

Case student

*I think Jenny will feel tired about it. Because she told me, that top 10 is too hard for her. I don't think that teachers' expectations will change anything of Judy.... If my teacher puts a higher standard on us, I dare say our class will be better.*

Case student

### **Are the voices of students heard?**

Given the rise of student voice initiatives, the literature has not fully considered the theoretical foundations that underpin both advocacy and the emerging realities of student voice in school and community renewal (Fielding, 2004). Goleman (1998:140) points out that 'those who cannot or do not listen come across as indifferent or uncaring, which in turn makes others less communicative'. Buchanan and Ritchie (2004) urge families to get involved in their children's lives or do things together with them as this creates the opportunities for talking about things that concern children. However, the answers vary from different stakeholders on empowerment. Teachers, in order to maintain their power, may not encourage students in decision making with the excuse that what they are doing is for the good of the students only or they think they 'listen at any time'.

### **The impact of expectations on students' emotional well-being**

The current data indicate that whilst appropriate expectations can be motivations for students, unrealistic expectations (e.g. Su, 2005) will cause problems in children's emotional well-being. Emotional disorder can be viewed from the perspective of such feelings as anxiety, fear, depression or pressure. Yu (2005) points out that in middle

schools emotional disorder is the most common. However, parents and educators in China emphasise more on the cognitive development while ignoring the importance of emotional well-being (Wei, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The author conducted this research because she has witnessed as a parent and teacher an ever increasing number of Chinese students suffering from emotional problems especially in the recent few years. Whilst empirical studies (e.g. Buchanan and Hudson, 2000) indicate the relationship between the pressure on students and emotional well-being of them, there appears to be little evidence of studies attempting to explore the perceptions of students on the expectations. Another motivation for the research is a concern with helping to ensure that students struggling within Chinese current educational system and social context are given the best possible opportunities to success and fulfill their potential by encouraging adults to listen to their voices. Being aware that the expectations may possibly have the impact on students' emotional well-being which further influences their behaviour and future lives, the author sets out to allow students in the special settings in China to give free responses to questions regarding expectations. The author hopes that the research could have implications both for preventing certain behaviours in schools and providing suggestions to parents and teachers as well in setting expectations for students. The research also serves as the response to the empowerment initiatives already prevalent in a wider world but not yet in China.

To show the complexity of the parent-child and teacher-student relationships as

experienced by students in a small scale research as such, it is no without limitations. First, the background variables of the informants are not representative enough to be used for the analysis of the data. Second, teachers selection by the school may directly affect the research data obtained (Fong, et al. 2005:115). Third, the study only asks for stakeholders' perceptions but does not tap into their deeper awareness of the expectations of them. Furthermore, the perceptions of the case student may not be reflective of her actual behaviour as she might be cautious in her responses due to her relationship with the researcher. Moreover, there are not enough informants to probe into the implications of demographic valuable of parents, family type or position of children in the family (Fong, et al. 2005). The validity of any generalisation is obviously limited (Bradbury, 2006:156).

As the research simply aims to gain a better understanding of why students behave in certain ways under expectations hoping to bring about changes in the environment that may facilitate improved success and happiness in students' lives, the author hopes that her contribution can make a small difference in supporting children struggling under expectations. It is also hoped that the present study could be used as a starting point for further large scale research in this area. In particular, in-depth study of the reasons why parents and teachers have certain expectations of children in different countries could be conducted. It may also be important to research more widely to ascertain whether teachers' own emotional well-being has any impact on students' emotional well-being. Besides, further research could be conducted in the long-term impact of expectations upon children's future emotional well-being.

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