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Influence of Parental Expectations on Young Children's Approaches to Learning

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Abstract

This study explores the level of young children's Approaches to Learning (ATL) in Shanxi, China, with a specific focus on the impact of parental expectations on ATL. 360 parents with preschool-aged children were enlisted for a comprehensive questionnaire survey. Applying descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, correlation, and regression analyses on the data gathered revealed that children's ATL was moderate, with noticeable variations based on gender and age. Importantly, parental expectations were positively correlated with children's ATL and remained a significant predictor even when accounting for age and gender, highlighting the strong relationship between parental expectations and early learning development.

Keywords: parental expectations; Approaches to Learning (ATL); young children

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1.0 Introduction

Early childhood development and education have received more attention, as children are the potential driving force for a country's future growth. With the deepening of theoretical research on children's learning and development, policymakers and researchers have not only focused on children's learning outcomes and academic achievements but also turned their attention to children's learning processes and abilities, that is, how children learn and what capacities they have acquired to cope with the rapidly changing world in the future. Therefore, cultivating children's approaches to learning (ATL) has become a hot topic in current research. Approaches to learning refer to children's learning inclinations, patterns, habits, and styles (Kagan, Moore, and Bredekamp, 1995), which generally include curiosity and interest, initiative, persistence and concentration, creation and imagination, reflection and explanation (Yan, 2009). Many researchers have found that positive approaches to learning (ATL) are at the core of children's cognitive, emotional and social development. It enables children to better cope with difficulties and show stronger resilience. It also significantly predicts children's learning, school readiness, and future academic performance (Sung, Wickrama, 2018).

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The factors affecting the development of children's ATL are diverse. Children's ATL can be influenced not only by innate and internal factors, such as a child's gender and personality traits, but also by the external environment. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the family, as a pivotal element of the microsystem, is the most immediate environmental setting containing the developing child. Parents are central figures within the family structure, and their attitudes towards children and parenting behaviours invariably impact children's development. The family setting has a notable connection with children's readiness for school, encompassing their approaches to learning (Hair et al., 2006).

Parents' expectations are their beliefs about the future achievement of their children (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010), which contribute to their academic achievement (Pinquart & Ebeling, 2020) and social development (Ren & Pope Edwards, 2015). Despite these connections, there is a need for further research specifically examining the impact of educational expectations on young children's ATL. Moreover, the current understanding of ATL's developmental level and characteristics among preschool children needs to be sufficiently profound. Hence, this study aims to investigate young children's approaches to learning (ATL) and examine how parental expectations impact it.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Importance of Approaches to Learning (ATL)

Initially, Kagan's team proposed "Approaches to Learning" (Kagan et al., 1995). ATL is distinct from both intellectual factors and learning content and is an encompassing term that encompasses attitudes, habits, learning styles, and dispositions toward learning (Kagan et al., 1995). It pertains to the learning process, precisely children's inclination to enter, approach, and engage in education or to complete learning tasks rather than focusing solely on the learning outcome (Hyson, 2008). ATL represents learning-related behaviour that is externally visible and observable (Lee, 2012). In the research conducted by various scholars, ATL has often been described as representing positive dispositions that enhance children's involvement in or contribution to their learning process (Hyson, 2008).

There is substantial evidence that ATL plays an important role in children's learning and development (Amber et al., 2022). According to research by McDermott et al. (2004), ATL and general skills such as cognitive, motor, and social abilities are the two main factors in children's early educational success. Even when accounting for differences in child demographics and family backgrounds (Mcwayne et al., 2004), ATL accounts for nearly 11% of the difference in children's early school achievements. In the early stages of child development, ATL is a significant predictor of school readiness in subjects like mathematics (Dobbs-Oates & Robinson, 2012) and language (Vitiello & Greenfield, 2017). Studies in China have also found that ATL substantially affects young children's early language and mathematical skills (Zhang & Zhou, 2018). The development of ATL benefits current learning and has a lasting impact on future learning. Children's attention skills during preschool consistently predict their academic success at the end of kindergarten and into higher grades according to longitudinal studies (Rikoon et al., 2012).

2.2 Parental Expectations and Children's Learning and Development

Parental expectations refer to parents' judgments and predictions of their child's future achievements relative to their goals. Numerous earlier research has demonstrated a beneficial relationship between high academic performance in children and parental expectations (Danışman, 2017). Because children have a tendency to internalize their parents' expectations and attitudes about achievement, parental academic expectations have a favourable effect on children's learning (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Higher self-regulatory learning behaviours are the end consequence (Luo, Gao, 2021), along with increased school involvement and achievement. From early infancy through adolescence, parental expectations can exert a significant and lasting influence on children's academic accomplishments (Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2013). Besides, parental expectations vary across different cultural backgrounds. This study investigates the educational expectations and their role among Chinese parents within the context of Chinese culture.

While there has been significant research on the impact of parental expectations on children's overall learning and development, there needs to be more studies that specifically examine the relationship between parental expectations and preschool children's approaches to learning (ATL) within China. Therefore, this study examined the characteristics and extent of children's ATL and parental expectations, while delving into the impact of demographic variables and parental expectations on young children's approaches to learning (ATL).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study Design, Location, and Sampling

In this study, 380 preschool children were randomly chosen from six different kindergartens in Shanxi Province, China, and their parents were enlisted for a comprehensive questionnaire survey. The parents received detailed information about the survey, including its objectives, the research procedures that would be followed, and the questionnaire they were asked to complete. Out of the original group, 360 valid questionnaires were collected, ensuring a substantial response rate. To protect the privacy of the respondents, measures were taken to allow the questionnaire to be filled out anonymously. This anonymity ensured that participants could respond freely and honestly without concern for personal identification, contributing to the integrity and reliability of the study's findings.

3.2 Research Instruments

This study employed a questionnaire survey approach for data collection. The survey questionnaire was structured into three sections. The first section captured demographic information, including the child's gender, age, primary caregiver, etc. The second section focused on parental expectations and used the Chinese version of the Parental Expectancies Scale (PES), revised by Wang (2019). This scale contains four dimensions: learning and development, family life, sociality, and self-reliance. It is a Likert scale with five levels, ranging from 1 (completely does not match) to 5 (completely matches). Higher scores indicate higher parental expectations. The third section evaluated preschoolers' approaches to learning via the Evaluation Scale for Children's Approaches to Learning (ESCAL), developed by Chinese scholar Cai (2015). The scale encompasses five aspects: introspection and explanation, curiosity and interest, persistence and concentration, initiative, and imagination and creation. Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, scores ranged from 1 (completely does not match) to 5 (completely matches). Elevated scores denote a higher level of developmental progress in approaches to learning.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

This study utilized SPSS 26.0 to process the data, involving descriptive statistics, tests for differences (independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA), correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Demographic Information of Respondents

The demographic information of the 360 participating preschool children was statistically analyzed, including their gender, age, and primary caregivers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Respondents (n=360)

| Variable | Type | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 176 | 48.90% |
| | Female | 184 | 51.10% |
| Age | 3-4 years old | 107 | 29.72% |
| | 4-5 years old | 133 | 36.94% |
| | 5-6 years old | 120 | 33.33% |
| Primary caregiver | Mother | 288 | 80.00% |
| | Father | 46 | 12.78% |
| | Grandparents or others | 26 | 7.22% |

4.2 Level of Children's Approaches to Learning (ATL) and Parental Expectations

Table 2 shows the levels of parental expectations and preschoolers' approaches to learning (ATL). Overall, parental expectations were at a high level (Mean=3.79), with the individual four sub-dimensions also registering as moderate to high. Notably, parental expectations pertaining to children's learning and development scored the highest, while those for family life were the lowest. In terms of preschoolers' approaches to learning, the overall level was moderate (Mean=3.59), with the individual five sub-dimensions also varying between moderate and high levels. Among these dimensions, curiosity and interest garnered the highest scores, while the dimension of initiative obtained the lowest score.

Table 2. Level of Children's Approaches to Learning (ATL) and Parental Expectations

| Variable | Mean | Min | Max | Std |
|--------------------------------|----------------|------|------|------|
| Parental Expectation (total) | 3.79(high) | 2.67 | 4.94 | 0.52 |
| Family Life | 3.67(moderate) | 1.56 | 5.00 | 0.78 |
| Learning and Development | 3.96(high) | 2.33 | 5.00 | 0.58 |
| Self-Reliance | 3.75(high) | 1.00 | 5.00 | 0.90 |
| Sociality | 3.80(high) | 1.00 | 5.00 | 0.85 |
| Approaches to Learning (total) | 3.59(moderate) | 1.97 | 4.72 | 0.61 |
| Introspection and Explanation | 3.60(moderate) | 1.00 | 5.00 | 0.71 |
| Curiosity and Interest | 3.83(high) | 1.83 | 5.00 | 0.69 |
| Persistence and Concentration | 3.62(moderate) | 1.14 | 5.00 | 0.73 |
| Initiative | 3.25(moderate) | 1.00 | 5.00 | 0.95 |
| Imagination and Creation | 3.73(high) | 1.78 | 5.00 | 0.70 |

4.3 Gender Differences in Approaches to Learning (ATL)

This study aimed to analyze differences in order to enhance our comprehension of the development of preschoolers' approaches to learning (ATL). The outcomes of the independent samples t-test (refer to Table 3) demonstrate a significant distinction in preschoolers' approaches to learning (ATL) based on gender. To be specific, the ATL score for girls (Mean=3.42, SD=0.65) was significantly higher than that of boys (Mean=3.75, SD=0.52).

Table 3. Gender Differences in Approaches to Learning (ATL)

| Variable | Type | N | Mean | SD | t-value | p-value | 95%CI |
|------------------------|------|-----|------|------|-----------|---------|------------------|
| Approaches to Learning | Boy | 176 | 3.42 | 0.65 | -5.382*** | 0.000 | [-0.459; -0.213] |
| | Girl | 184 | 3.75 | 0.52 | | | |

(Note: * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$)

4.4 Age Differences in Approaches to Learning (ATL)

An analysis was performed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine if there were notable variations in preschoolers' approaches to learning (ATL) among different age groups. Table 4 portrays the fundamental distribution of ATL among the different age groups. Preschoolers aged 5–6 years exhibit the highest scores in ATL (Mean = 3.73, SD = 0.57), followed by those aged 4–5 years (Mean = 3.59, SD = 0.65), while the lowest scores are recorded for preschoolers aged 3–4 years (Mean = 3.43, SD = 0.57).

Further outcomes from the analysis of differences (refer to Table 5) indicated notable disparities in the developmental levels of preschoolers' ATL across distinct age groups. In particular, the ATL of children between the ages of 5-6 was notably higher than that of children aged 3-4, and likewise, the ATL of children aged 4-5 was significantly greater than that of those aged 3-4.

Table 4. Distribution of Approaches to Learning (ATL) among Different Age Groups

| Variable | Age group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error |
|----------|---------------|-----|------|----------------|------------|
| ATL | 3-4 years old | 107 | 3.43 | 0.57 | 0.06 |
| | 4-5 years old | 133 | 3.59 | 0.65 | 0.06 |
| | 5-6 years old | 120 | 3.73 | 0.57 | 0.05 |
| | Total | 360 | 3.59 | 0.61 | 0.03 |

Table 5. Age Differences in Approaches to Learning (ATL)

| Variable | (I) age | (J) age | Mean Difference (I-J) | Sig. | 95%CI |
|----------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------|----------------|
| ATL | 3-4 years old | 4-5 years old | -0.16* | 0.037 | [-0.32; -0.01] |
| | | 5-6 years old | -0.30*** | 0.000 | [-0.46; -0.15] |
| | 4-5 years old | 3-4 years old | 0.16* | 0.037 | [0.01; 0.32] |
| | | 5-6 years old | -0.14 | 0.063 | [-0.29; 0.01] |
| | 5-6 years old | 3-4 years old | 0.30*** | 0.000 | [0.15; 0.46] |
| | | 4-5 years old | 0.14 | 0.063 | [-0.01; 0.29] |

4.5 Correlations between Parental Expectations and Approaches to Learning (ATL)

Table 6 presents the results of the correlation analysis between parental expectations and approaches to learning (ATL). Parental expectations and their respective sub-dimensions demonstrate significant positive correlations with approaches to learning and their corresponding sub-dimensions.

Table 6. Correlations between Parental Expectations and Approaches to Learning (ATL)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
|----|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| 1 | 1 | .433** | .515** | .608** | .782** | .732** | .316** | .302** | .380** | .349** | |
| 2 | | 1 | .300** | .348** | .235** | .292** | .716** | .782** | .858** | .791** | |
| 3 | | | 1 | .195** | .233** | .168** | .157** | .172** | .273** | .304** | |
| 4 | | | | 1 | .275** | .160** | .225** | .199** | .307** | .375** | |
| 5 | | | | | 1 | .485** | .233** | .174** | .216** | .108* | |
| 6 | | | | | | 1 | .219** | .255** | .238** | .190** | |
| 7 | | | | | | | 1 | .560** | .596** | .442** | |
| 8 | | | | | | | | 1 | .612** | .473** | |
| 9 | | | | | | | | | 1 | .542** | |
| 10 | | | | | | | | | | 1 | |
| 11 | | | | | | | | | | | 1 |

(Note: 1=parental expectations, 2=approaches to learning, 3= learning and development, 4= family life, 5= sociality, 6= self-reliance, 7= introspection and explanation, 8= curiosity and interest ; 9= persistence and concentration, 10= initiative, 11= imagination and creation)

4.6 The Impact of Parental Expectations on Approaches to Learning (ATL)

Employing a hierarchical regression model, a further examination was carried out to explore the impact of parental expectations on preschoolers' ATL, while also considering the child's gender and age as control factors. As highlighted in Table 7, after controlling for the child's gender and age, the predictive power of parental expectations on preschoolers' ATL remains significant, particularly in dimensions such as self-reliance, learning and development, and family life (with the exception of the sociality dimension). The variance in preschoolers' ATL explained by parental expectations amounted to 16.2%.

Table 7. The Impact of Parental Expectations on Approaches to Learning (ATL)

| | Beta | S.E | t | sig. |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|-----------------------|-------|
| Step 1 | | | | |
| Gender | 0.273 | 0.061 | 5.478*** | 0.000 |
| Age | 0.195 | 0.038 | 3.913*** | 0.000 |
| | | | R ² =0.114 | |
| Step 2 | | | | |
| Gender | 0.207 | 0.057 | 4.445*** | 0.000 |
| Age | 0.13 | 0.035 | 2.821*** | 0.005 |
| Self-Reliance | 0.217 | 0.035 | 4.177*** | 0.000 |
| Sociality | 0.012 | 0.039 | 0.231 | 0.817 |
| Learning and Development | 0.17 | 0.051 | 3.549*** | 0.000 |
| Family Life | 0.219 | 0.038 | 4.516*** | 0.000 |
| | | | R ² =0.276 | |

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Level of Children's Approaches to Learning (ATL) and Parental Expectations

This study showed that the Approach to Learning (ATL) in preschool children aged 3-6 is moderate, in line with previous research (Li-Grining et al., 2010; Tan et al., 2021). Among various aspects of ATL, curiosity and interest are the most developed in these children. This is natural since children tend to be inherently curious, wanting to explore and show positive interest in nature and their surroundings (Yan, 2009). On the other hand, the initiative aspect was found to be less developed. This indicates that preschool children may not show enough enthusiasm or take proactive steps when facing challenges or demanding tasks, indicating an area that could be improved. Furthermore, the study noticed that the development of different parts of pre-schoolers' ATL is not even (Zhang & Zhou, 2018).

In this study, it was observed that Chinese preschool parents exhibited high educational expectations. This aligns with prior research results, which suggest that Asian and particularly Chinese parents often expect more from their children (Dibartolo & Rendón, 2012). It has been found that Asian American parents generally have higher expectations than those from other ethnic backgrounds, and this is related to their children's notably better academic achievements (Qin, 2008). Additionally, this study emphasizes that parents' expectations for pre-schoolers are broad, covering areas like learning progress, social development, independence, self-care skills, and active participation in family life.

5.2 Differences in Children's ATL Based on Demographic Variables

This study conducted a comparative analysis of children's ATL and identified significant differences in ATL based on both gender and age. Firstly, it was observed that girls generally exhibited higher ATL levels than boys, which is consistent with existing research. Longitudinal studies have even indicated that sex (male) was linked to lower ATL (Buek, 2019). This suggests that boys might face relatively disadvantaged ATL development and necessitate more focused attention and support. Secondly, it was found that children in higher age groups displayed greater ATL than their lower age group counterparts. Existing research has also indicated a considerable increase in the development of children's ATL and its sub-dimensions with age (Zhang, Zhou, 2018).

Nevertheless, some studies have not discovered significant gender differences in children's ATL. This could be attributed to the fact that, when evaluating specific sub-dimensions, certain dimensions might score higher in females than in males, as previously found in research highlighting that persistence tends to be more pronounced in females (Zhang & Zhou, 2018). Conversely, males might outscore females in other aspects, such as curiosity (Ruan & Zhao, 2021). These sub-dimension variances could balance out the overall gender-based differences in ATL. Future research should investigate detailed comparisons across specific dimensions to uncover children of different genders' developmental strengths and weaknesses.

5.3 The Relationship Between Parental Expectations and Children's ATL

This research has identified a noteworthy and positive correlation between children's ATL and parental educational expectations. In simpler terms, greater parental expectations are linked with better development of children's ATL. Furthermore, even when accounting for the gender and age of children, educational expectations continue to exhibit a positive effect on children's ATL. These findings are partially consistent with existing research that links parental educational expectations to children's self-regulatory learning (Luo & Gao, 2021). They also provide some support for the idea of the Rosenthal effect. Hence, educational expectations, forming a part of parents' educational beliefs, have a notable motivating impact on molding children's behaviour. Nevertheless, prior research has primarily concentrated on examining how educational expectations impact children's academic achievements (Froiland et al., 2013; Pinguart, & Ebeling, 2020), with less attention given to children's learning processes. The findings from this research contribute positively to our understanding of the significance of educational expectations and their impact on the development of children's ATL.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In summary, the overall level of children's ATL and parental expectations tends to be slightly above average. Demographic factors like gender and age have an impact on children's ATL. There exists a notable and positive relationship between parental expectations and children's ATL. Furthermore, even when accounting for children's gender and age, educational expectations remain a substantial predictor of children's ATL. Therefore, reasonable expectations can contribute to the development of children's ATL. Parents should utilize appropriate expectations, allowing children to experience their parents' aspirations and internalize them as their own expectations and motivational factors, thereby fostering positive ATL.

However, this study has several limitations due to the researcher's limited time and resources. Firstly, the relatively small sample size may not adequately represent the developmental landscape of all preschoolers in China. It is recommended to employ more rigorous sampling techniques to expand the research scope. Additionally, during the sample selection process, considerations should be made for various regions (such as rural and urban areas) as well as families with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Secondly, this study exclusively delved into exploring the impact of educational expectations on children's ATL, without investigating the underlying mechanisms. Future research could incorporate more family-related factors and children's psychological variables to examine the internal mechanisms and processes through which educational expectations influence children's ATL.

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