

The article by Ma, Siu, and Tse (2018) examines how high parental academic expectations among Hong Kong secondary students operate as a **double-edged** influence, simultaneously promoting better academic performance while increasing adolescents' risk of depression. ma-et-al-2018-the-role-of-high-parental-expectations-in-adolescents-academic-performance-and-depression-in-hong-kong

- The authors note that parental expectations are consistently linked to higher academic achievement, but their emotional costs—especially depressive symptoms—have been understudied, particularly in Chinese cultural contexts that strongly emphasize educational success.
- Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and expectancy-value theory, the study investigates whether high parental expectations predict adolescents' academic performance and depression, and whether these links are mediated by:
 - Adolescents' **value of academic success**.
 - **Self-efficacy**.
 - **Perceived support** from parents and school.

Methodology

- **Sample and setting:** 872 Hong Kong secondary students (435 males, 437 females) from seven schools, ages 12–18 (mean \approx 15.65 years), sampled mainly by convenience.
- **Design:** Cross-sectional survey. Students completed standardized questionnaires during school time after parental and school consent.
- **Key measures:**
 - High parental expectations (perceived parental beliefs about students' academic attainment and performance).
 - Academic performance (school-reported grades).
 - Depression (self-reported depressive symptoms).
 - Mediators: value of academic success, academic self-efficacy, frequency of parental support, and frequency of school support.
- Analyses used structural equation modelling to test direct and indirect (mediated) paths from high parental expectations to academic performance and depression.

Main findings

1. “Double-edged sword” effect

- High parental expectations were **positively associated with academic performance**: adolescents whose parents had higher expectations obtained better grades.
- High parental expectations were also **positively associated with adolescents’ depression**, indicating that the same expectations that promote achievement may increase emotional distress.

2. Mediators for academic performance

- Adolescents’ **value of academic success** mediated the relationship between high parental expectations and academic performance.
 - Parents who highly valued achievement transmitted those values; adolescents internalized them, which increased motivation and engagement and, in turn, boosted performance.
- **School support frequency** also mediated the link: higher parental expectations were associated with more frequent school support (for example, teacher involvement and resources), which then related to better academic outcomes.
- Self-efficacy and parental support frequency were positively linked to performance but did not emerge as the key mediators in the final model to the same extent as value of academic success and school support.

3. Pathways to depression

- High parental expectations had a **direct positive effect** on adolescents’ depression; adolescents who perceived very high expectations reported more depressive symptoms.
- Adolescents’ **value of academic success** was also positively associated with depression: strongly valuing achievement may increase performance pressure and vulnerability to negative mood when performance falls short.
- In contrast, **self-efficacy, parental support frequency, and school support frequency** were each **negatively associated** with depression, consistent with prior evidence that social support and confidence buffer distress.
- However, these support and self-efficacy variables did **not** significantly mediate the link between parental expectations and depression; the primary effect of high expectations on depression was direct rather than operating through these mechanisms.

Cultural context and interpretation

- The study emphasizes Chinese Confucian cultural norms in Hong Kong, where parents are seen as responsible for their children’s academic success and may be highly controlling and demanding.
- Adolescents in this context often work hard to avoid disappointing parents and to prevent loss of face; failure to meet expectations can produce shame, hopelessness, and worthlessness—core features of depression.
- The authors suggest that parents with high expectations may not simultaneously provide sufficient emotional support; instead, they may respond with criticism when expectations are unmet, fuelling adolescents’ self-criticism and worries about mistakes, which can drive depressive symptoms.

Implications and limitations

- **Implications:**
 - High parental expectations can be beneficial academically but carry psychological risks if not balanced with warmth, realistic goals, and supportive responses to failure.
 - Schools and policymakers should recognize the dual impact of expectations and bolster school-based support systems to buffer stress among high-achieving, high-pressured youth.
- **Limitations:**
 - Cross-sectional design limits causal inference; the direction between expectations and depression cannot be definitively established.
 - Convenience sampling from seven Hong Kong schools may constrain generalisability beyond similar urban Chinese contexts.

performance. At the same time, in the Confucian, high-pressure Hong Kong context, unmet expectations and associated parental criticism contribute directly to higher depressive symptoms, and this emotional cost is not fully offset by self-efficacy or perceived support from parents and school. ma-et-al-2018-the-role-of-high-parental-expectations-in-adolescents-academic-performance-and-depression-in-hong-kong.

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