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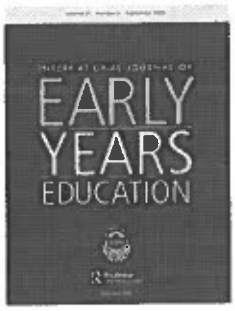

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# Children's achievements in ECEC: parents' expectations

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**ABSTRACT**

Studies about parents' expectations of their children's achievements in primary and secondary school often conclude that such expectations have an impact on academic achievements. This poses two quandaries for early childhood education (ECE): there is minimal research focusing on parents' expectations concerning achievements of young children; if parental expectations in ECE are also linked to academic achievements, other achievements of potential significance for young children and which can be promoted through early experiences are ignored. This article reviews responses to an open-ended statement submitted by 1975 parents whose children were attending early years settings in Malta. A phenomenological approach to data collection was adopted in this exploratory study as parents were invited to list three expectations about their children's achievements resulting from experiences accrued in formal settings. NVivo analyses yielded nine broad categories of expectations. Personal, social development, school readiness/academic achievements, skills development and personal learning were the four most frequently cited expectations. Results are analysed using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory. Having high expectations for each child is recommended but these need to be realistic, contextualised, shared and incorporated in the planning and design of learning opportunities which respect children's individuality, while acknowledging their abilities and learning characteristics.

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Parents' expectations; parents' voices; children's achievements in ECE; realistic achievements in ECE; high expectations and ECE

## Introduction

Research about parental expectations and their significant impact on children's achievements has attracted much interest over several decades (Englund et al. 2004). Existing research has predominantly focused on primary, secondary and high school students emphasising the significance of parental expectations on academic achievements. The literature reviewed and reported in this article is presented with a view to gaining insights which could inform expectations parents have for their children's achievements in early years.

Explicit or perceived parental expectations are seminal for academic achievements of primary and secondary school children, (Koshy, Dockery, and Seymour 2019; Au and

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Harackiewi 1986). Parental expectations have been considered as a cause, consequence or predictor of children's academic achievements (Rutchick et al. 2009; Jeynes 2005, 2007; Trusty, Plata, and Salazar 2003; Seginer 1983). The higher the expectations, the more positive are children's achievements especially when family involvement and participation are significant (Galindo and Sheldon 2012). Meta-synthesis and meta-analytic studies revealed that where parental involvement was defined as expectations, strong relationships between expectations and achievements were evident (Castro et al. 2015; Wilder 2014).

Students benefit where home and school expectations are in synch leading to both teacher and parent variables being significant predictors of academic outcomes (Wentzel et al. 2016) and academic resilience (Gyzir and Aydin 2009). Supportive social relationships offered by teachers, peers and parents, enhance students' achievements, ease the effects of stress and hence promote performance (Ahmed et al. 2010).

Parents' expectations impact students' self-concepts about their abilities. Tatlah, Masood, and Amin (2019) suggest that parents' high expectations about their children's academic achievement, ought to be conveyed to them for children to strive to fulfil these expectations. Phillipson (2013) argues that the potentially strong impact of parental expectations can be reinforced where Vygotskian notions of socio-cultural development are practised, and parents share their expectations with their children.

Variations in parental expectations across cultures have been attributed to socio-cultural norms (Yamamoto and Holloway 2010). Parents can be communicators and mediators of their cultural context (Phillipson and Phillipson 2007). For example, research with Japanese mothers concludes that the children's gender and the family's socio-economic status have a significant impact on aspirations and expectations (Yamamoto and Hosokawa 2017).

Neuenschwander et al. (2007) argue that the interplay between parents' and/or practitioners' expectations within cultural and social settings and the broadly positive impact on pre-determined skills, self-concepts and achievements seems to be well-established. Yet much depends on definitions associated with expectations as well as how and what is measured.

## Parents' expectations and children's achievements in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Research on parental expectations and young children's achievements is limited. According to the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (VEYLDF) (Dept of Education & Training 2016), having high expectations for every child is a key practice principle for practitioners. Saffigna, Church, and Tayler (2011) argue that children are more successful and show progress where practitioners have high expectations for individual children, especially those who are 'at risk'. Where high expectations by early years professionals are combined with those of parents, children's resilience, achievement, motivation and self-belief can be boosted (VEYLDF 2016).

Holding high expectations about young children's achievements contributes to children's developing sense of identity, increasing abilities, competences, self-worth and value to others (Stonehouse n.d.). Ren and Pope Edwards' (2015) investigation of Chinese parents' expectations for their children's development of socio-emotional

skills, showed that in conjunction with parenting styles, expectations influenced children's social competence. Communicating high expectations directly to children is crucial (Stonehouse n.d.). Parents who explicitly communicate their expectations to children, help them actualise their cognitive ability (Phillipson and Phillipson 2017, 2012).

Parents' and practitioners' definitions of high expectations must be teased out to take into consideration a child's developmental trajectory which is shaped by innate abilities and contextual relationships. Expectations can be classified as 'high' or 'low' if expressed in a context which acknowledges whether they are 'within' or 'beyond' a child's abilities, hence rendering them 'realistic' or 'unrealistic'. One debate in this regard concerns academic achievements in early years. Parental expectations for academic success differ according to cultural background (Ojala 2000). Irish and Finnish parents and early years practitioners differed in their ranking of pre-academic skills. These were considered an important responsibility of educators in the Irish context but were of least concern to Finnish participants. Research comparing expectations of Japanese and American mothers on their kindergarten children concluded that Japanese kindergarten children scored higher on a Math test than American counterparts because Japanese mothers held lower but more realistic expectations about their children (Bacon and Ichikawa 1988). Japanese mothers were considered to have more effective styles of mother–child interaction and engaged in more informal activities, for example to support numeracy, in comparison to their American counterparts who had more academic oriented expectations for their kindergarten children. Longitudinal research with German and American children provided evidence that unrealistically high parental aspirations can be detrimental for children's achievements (Murayama et al. 2016). The impact of realistic expectations has been linked to short or long-term effects. Huguley, Kyere, and Wang (2018) concluded that for African American parents' short-term expectations linked to performance and children's grades in school were more important than those associated with long-term attainment.

Despite contextual and cultural differences and beyond methodological parameters or variables determined by the research focus, parents' responses to research questions offer insider perspectives with intimate knowledge about their children, family contexts, personal practices and beliefs. Parents' descriptions or ranking of expectations are informed by factors including personal experiences, level of education, relationships, socio-economic background and parenting skills. They convey their expectations and share socio-cultural norms through the on-going development of relationships, intuitively supporting children's competences and learning. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Tudge et al. 2016) strengthens the argument about learning and development occurring through direct and indirect relationships initially within immediate contexts and gradually from more distal social contexts. Development and learning occur over time, in various contexts and involve communication and interaction. It is within this theoretical framework that the current exploratory study sought to find out about parental expectations for young children's achievements resulting from learning opportunities offered in non-compulsory, formal early years settings in Malta.

In the Maltese context no scientific research has thus far been conducted into adults' expectations about achievements of under-fives. Knowing about parents' expectations should help practitioners, education leaders and policy makers reinforce existing high but realistic expectations or strengthen weak expectations to support and maximise

children's growth, development and achievements whilst enabling parents to perceive their children as agentic, capable individuals. Two main research questions were considered in the study: What are parents' expectations about their children's achievements attending non-compulsory early years settings for under-fives? What expectations do parents consider as realistic?

## ECEC in Malta

In the Maltese context, ECEC services are non-compulsory. Settings are organised and referred to as 'childcare' for under threes and kindergarten for three to five-year-olds. Responsibility for all services falls under the auspices of the Ministry for Education (MFED). A sharp increase in childcare services materialised over the past decade at a time when female employment and their return to the labour market was high on the government agenda. Most settings are privately owned: of the current 156 settings, 14 are State governed (MFED 2021). Since 2014, parents in employment or studying can avail themselves of free services. Settings which register for the free childcare scheme receive €3.95 per child per hour. Collectively, these settings can cater for about 6,000 children. With some variation, childcare settings operate between 07.00 and 17.00.

Free State kindergarten provision across the islands was introduced in 1975 and attracts the largest share of the kindergarten population. Settings are located within each state primary school in every town or village on the island. Some Church and Private schools also offer kindergarten facilities. The former welcome donations from families whose children would have been admitted by ballot, the latter charge substantial fees which parents are expected to settle per term. When State kindergarten provision became available, a Council of Europe envoy reported that parents interpreted this as a downward extension of the compulsory school age with expectations about the teaching of reading and academic work accompanied by homework tasks. The purposes of kindergarten had to be explained via a thirty-minute television programme (Muralidharen 1976).

Despite it being non-compulsory, 90% of three and 97% of four-year-olds attend kindergarten (EURYDICE 2019). Opening hours are identical to schools' timetable: most kindergarten settings welcome children around 08.30 and are dismissed at 14.30. In Private settings, children have a shorter day but after school activities against additional fees are available.

The National Curriculum Framework (MEDE 2012) is the first curriculum document which officially acknowledges early years as distinct from primary. It proposes five broad learning outcomes children should achieve through learning opportunities provided in childcare, kindergarten and the first two years of compulsory school (5- to 7-year-olds). There is no prescriptive content for childcare and kindergarten but practitioners are expected to acknowledge children's agency and address their needs, interests and strengths when designing the programme of activities. To date, no large scale or national study has been conducted to establish the long or short-term impact these settings have on families, children or their achievements.

## Methodology

By obtaining insights into parents' expectations and giving them an opportunity to make their voices heard, a phenomenological approach to data collection (Cresswell 2013) was

adopted. The theoretical framework underpinning this research reflects a bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), based on the assumption that parents' expectations are formulated and develop from their personal, social and cultural milieu as well as interactions, engagements, relationships and information exchanged with their children and the social and cultural environments of their family networks.

This study was part of a larger one focusing on quality issues. Parents whose children were attending early years settings were invited to participate by responding to a questionnaire which was available in Maltese and in English. The questionnaire was organised into three sections: Section A focused on background information; Section B invited parents to indicate the extent of their agreement to a set of given statements associated to quality; Section C consisted of open-ended questions. This article reports responses to one of the open-ended items. Parents were asked to list three achievements they expect their child to gain following learning experiences offered at the setting.

Practitioners in 16 childcare and 34 kindergarten settings distributed and collected the questionnaires. The researcher had no contact with or access to families or their personal data. An information letter attached to the questionnaire introduced the researcher and the research. Parents were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. They were to refrain from signing the questionnaire or revealing their identity. Completed questionnaires were returned through their child's setting, by email or by post. Approval to conduct the study was sought and obtained from the University of Malta's research ethics committee and authorities governing the settings.

Responses from 1975 parents accounted for 47.2% of the questionnaires distributed. Most were completed by mothers (82%, $N = 1627$). A few fathers (7%, $N = 136$) and legal guardians (0.6%, $N = 11$) responded whilst 10.2% ($N = 201$) of respondents gave no information about their relationship to the child. Participation reflected the range of settings available: completed questionnaires were returned by parents whose children were attending state, church or private kindergartens and state or private childcare settings. 20% ($N = 399$) of responses came from parents with children in childcare and 80% ($N = 1576$) were from parents with children at kindergarten. The spread of respondents contributes to a broad, representative sample. Since this was an exploratory study, the results were not organised according to parents' socio-economic status, type of setting or age of the children.

Responses were analysed with NVivo in a two-step process: initially, individual responses were grouped according to their similarity, yielding a broad range of expectations. At a second stage and to strengthen the organisation of the data, the many categories which emerged from individual responses were combined yielding nine categories of expectations.

## Results

Initial analysis of the individual responses yielded 39 categories, with varying frequencies (Table 1). Children's socio-emotional and personal development were at the fore of parents' expectations, together with achievements associated to school readiness ahead of children's transition from kindergarten to compulsory school at the age of 5. There were 39 responses where parents claimed they have no specific expectations. This suggests that some parents may require professional support to enable them to value

**Table 1.** Parents' expectations about children's achievements ($N = 1975$).

| Expectations | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Socialisation, interaction and sharing | 669 |
| School readiness/academic achievement | 583 |
| Assertive, confident, self-esteem, independent | 527 |
| Personal development | 288 |
| Language and communication | 273 |
| Behaviour and discipline | 270 |
| Learning and knowledge | 242 |
| A good education | 162 |
| Values | 155 |
| Learning Maltese and English | 153 |
| Reading, knowledge of alphabet letters | 147 |
| Happiness & positive experiences | 100 |
| Writing (including motor skills & pencil grip) | 98 |
| Creativity | 75 |
| Manners | 73 |
| Fun and enjoyment | 71 |
| Potty training/toileting | 65 |
| Development through milestones and basic skills | 53 |
| Disposition and curiosity to continue learning | 53 |
| Nothing in particular | 39 |
| Concentration | 37 |
| Preparation for kindergarten | 37 |
| Play | 24 |
| Taking responsibility | 15 |
| Motor skills | 15 |
| Physical skills | 13 |
| Cognitive skills | 11 |
| Improvement | 11 |
| Crafts | 9 |
| Listening skills | 7 |
| Spiritual Values | 7 |
| Sports | 6 |
| Clever; intelligent | 5 |
| Variety of activities | 5 |
| Keeping up with others | 4 |
| Develops soft skills | 3 |
| Achievements for adult life | 3 |
| Challenged | 1 |
| Balanced between school and sports | 1 |

their children's learning and develop reasonable expectations which they can transmit to their children and which could be reinforced within formal early years settings. This finding warrants further research considering that the literature argues for the importance of having high expectations for all children (VEYLDF 2016).

The initial 39 categories yielded nine categories of expectations during the second stage of analysis (Table 2). The four categories which contained the highest number of expectations included *personal, social and emotional development*; *school and academic achievements*; *skills' development*; and a category of expectations broadly mentioning a good education, improved or increased learning and knowledge, labelled as *personal learning*. The subsequent three categories focused on children's growth as individuals within a society. Parents expect children to show good *behaviour and discipline*, enjoy *positive experiences* and grow up with *values*, respect others and develop sincere friendships. The eighth category of expectations brought together *advanced achievements* suggesting parents may be setting extremely high expectations which could be seen as unrealistic, over ambitious or far-fetched. The last category of expectations, with the

**Table 2.** Nine categories of expectations.

| Categories of expectations | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Personal, social and emotional development | 1484 |
| School and academic expectations | 920 |
| Skills' development | 613 |
| Personal learning | 458 |
| Behaviours and discipline | 343 |
| Positive experiences | 171 |
| Values | 161 |
| Advanced achievements | 75 |
| Activities | 45 |

lowest number of responses, referred to *activities* which parents expect their children to engage in. These categories and corresponding responses are discussed in the subsequent sections.

### *Category 1: personal, social and emotional development*

Children's personal, social and emotional development is the achievement attributed most importance (Figure 1). Parents' responses indicate that they expect their children to: 'learn how to play independently', develop 'self-respect', 'control bad habits like pushing, hitting and throwing things', 'increase self-confidence', 'decrease separation anxiety', 'learns to stand up for herself', 'overcome shyness', 'trust others beyond family members', 'form friendships', 'communicate with children', 'interact confidently with classmates', 'contribute to group activities', 'be more sociable' and 'learn how to share what he has with others'.

As children transition from their familiar home environment and gain access to broader social contexts and networks represented by formal early years settings, as they and their families' networks and relationships are extended and strengthened within their micro and meso systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) children are expected to establish healthy and strong relationships with unfamiliar adults and peers. Such foundations require reciprocal and responsive relationships. The 'rhythms

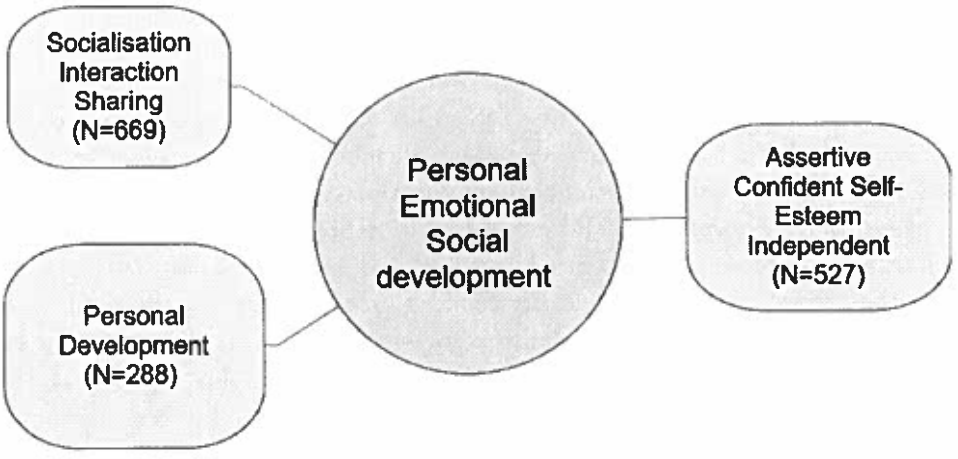


**Figure 1.** Personal, emotional and social development ($N = 1484$).

of close relationships' (Raikes and Pope Edwards 2009) involving parents, practitioners and children help children cope and deal with the influx of new information which they are faced with outside the home context. Successful development is evident where and when children 'regulate emotional responses and related behaviours in socially appropriate and adaptive ways' (Sheffield Morris et al. 2007). Strong socio-emotional foundations help children thrive in other forms of development and learning (Ho and Funk 2018).

### *Category 2: school and academic expectations*

Expectations associated with school readiness and academic achievements were expressed in various ways. Parents of kindergarten children reported an expectation that their son/daughter would 'be able to discern, recognise and write the alphabet and numbers', 'be comfortable in a classroom setting', 'be prepared for Year 1 – education-wise', 'master well core subjects especially English and Maltese and all aspects of languages – reading, speaking, writing' and have 'more meaningful homework, not just drawing'. Some parents whose children were at childcare, expected their child to be prepared for the 'routine' they would face at kindergarten; and even learn basic literacy and numeracy skills 'in preparation for kindergarten'.

Explicit reference to achievements associated with reading and knowledge and use of the Maltese and English languages were among the academic expectations (Figure 2). Maltese and English are official languages. Both are compulsory subjects taught from the first grade of primary school, hence parents' expectations about their children being comfortable with both languages. Depending on the language used at home and/or within the childcare or kindergarten setting, some aspire for their children to become 'competent', 'master' either one or both languages. Others expect children to 'be exposed to phonics', 'recognise the shapes and sounds of all the letters, in both lower- and upper-case format'; 'be exposed to books' and 'start reading three-letter words by the end of kindergarten'.

The frequency with which parents expressed expectations associated to academic achievements is not surprising. Historical developments have contributed to this

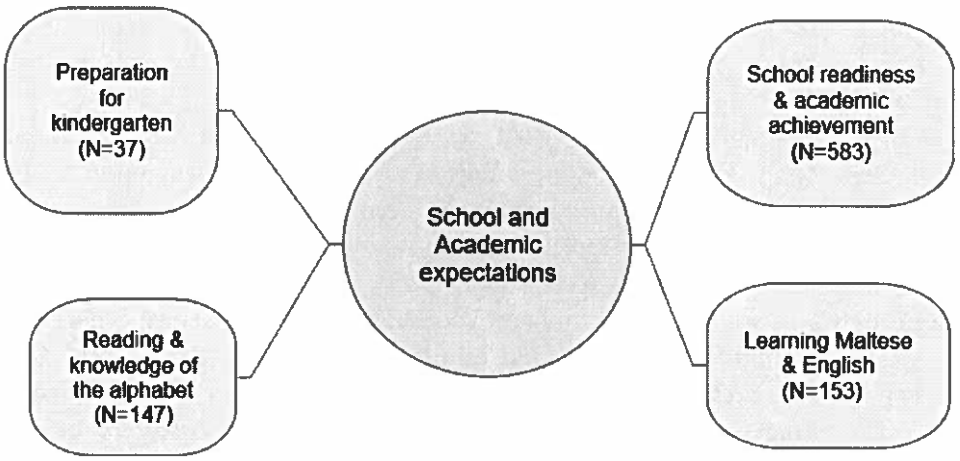


**Figure 2.** School and academic expectations ($N = 920$).

situation. Responsibility for ECEC has experienced swings and roundabouts between Ministries; no national vision has ever been established. Staff were initially untrained and current requirements demand pre-tertiary qualifications. Having kindergarten settings located within primary school premises facilitated the perception of a downward extension of school age and schooling. Over time, pedagogies, school/classroom discourse and practices associated with primary school, seeped into kindergarten. In the absence of any curricular framework, combined with minimal leadership and direction, uneven practices across settings prevailed for many years. A clear divide between 'work' and 'play', with the former enjoying a higher status and where kindergarten has been perceived as a way of preparing children for school and school-related routines took root (Sollars 2018). Workbooks and worksheets are still used and 'learning through play' is a cliché which requires deeper understanding and articulation on the part of all stakeholders. Formal introduction to letter names, letter sounds and sets of corresponding vocabulary in a decontextualised setting can still be seen in practice. As mentioned earlier, when services were introduced parents had associated the introduction of kindergarten to an earlier start of compulsory school and parents' belief that enrolment at kindergarten is compulsory persists (Sollars 2020).

Primary education in Malta is exam oriented. This too may contribute to parents' expectations about children's academic preparation and progress at kindergarten. End of primary school examinations were discontinued in 2007 (Grima et al. 2007/2008) but replaced by benchmark examinations. These are undertaken before children transition to middle-school and are compulsory for children attending State schools.

### *Category 3: skills' development*

A third category of expectations identified by parents refers to skills' development (Figure 3). A broad range of skills were identified including physical, language-related, cognitive skills and toileting. The latter was an expectation for children about to progress to kindergarten. Parents expect childcare staff to help children as it is mandatory for a child to be toilet-trained before being admitted to kindergarten. The development of basic skills through milestones was also an expectation of parents about their children in childcare. Practitioners in childcare settings frequently report following Meggitt's (2006) guide to young children's development of skills, communicated to parents as milestones.

'Cognitive skills' identified as expected achievements included 'problem solving', 'reasoning', expecting children to 'figure things out on her own', engaging in 'activities that help them develop mentally' and helping children 'to think and not memorise'.

Language and communication prevailed among the skills identified by parents. They want their children to 'begin to express themselves clearly', 'pronounce more words', 'communicate verbally with others', 'use new vocabulary and grammatical constructions' and 'speak well enough to be understood by others who do not know him'. Several parents expected their children to master writing techniques and want their child to have 'perfect writing of all the letters and numbers', 'master the use of a crayon to colour within the lines', 'learn how to hold the pencil properly', 'improve his fine motor skills', 'learn how to write, not just colouring/drawing', and even 'learn the

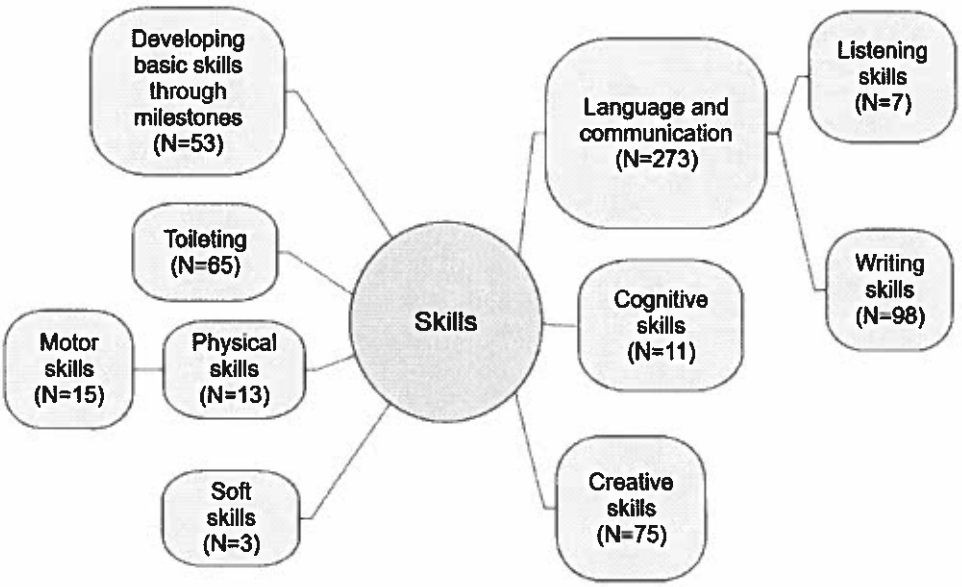


**Figure 3.** Skills' development ($N = 613$).

concept of writing, e.g. that letters have to be close to each other to form a word and of the same size writing'.

### *Category 4: personal learning*

Expectations in this category target the type of education parents expect practitioners to offer children. Parents expect children to be 'challenged', to 'receive a good education', 'develop positive learning dispositions towards learning' and that they 'learn' and 'develop their knowledge' (Figure 4). Some want their son or daughter to 'learn' or 'learn more than what she already knows', 'have different opportunities to learn new things', and 'receive knowledge about the outside world'.

Words such as 'holistic', 'high-level', 'good quality' and 'sound' were used to describe the education parents expect their children to receive. Parents are aware of the potential value early years experiences have for long-lasting positive attitudes and dispositions. These parents expect their children to 'be ready to face proper school with a positive attitude', 'discover the world around her with other children', 'foster inquisitiveness, curiosity and love for learning', 'make new life experiences away from home', become 'inquisitive and happy to explore away from parent', develop a 'love for learning, exploring and discovering leading him to become an independent learner', 'be enthusiastic about learning new things' and 'have a passion and enthusiasm for learning'. The realisation of such expectations would benefit from professional communication between parents and practitioners leading to decisions based on insights about individual children's progress and development.

### *Category 5: behaviours, discipline and manners*

Parents expect their children to develop and maintain good manners ($N = 73$), express themselves politely, be disciplined, well-behaved ($N = 270$) and show respect to

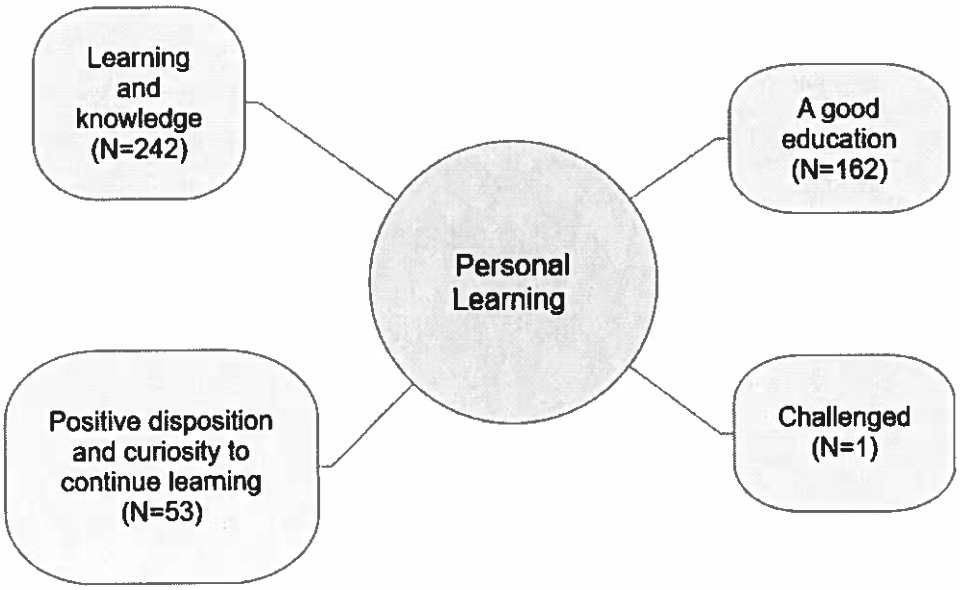


**Figure 4.** Personal learning gains ($N = 458$).

authorities and to each other. Some parents are keen to have children show good manners not only at home but even outside familiar environments. They expect children to understand that besides parents, others can correct them too. One parent reported that her child had become more obedient since attending kindergarten and expected this 'educated' behaviour to be maintained.

### *Category 6: positive experiences*

The expectations grouped under this category emphasise 'children's happiness, enjoyment' and 'having fun'. Parents expect children to 'fall in love with school and realise that learning is fun' or 'develop a love for school and her studies for the future'. Others want their child's 'memories of school are positive'; that children understand 'school can be fun although it is compulsory and academic subjects can be a tad boring'. Parents expect children to enjoy participating in school events because positive experiences obtained during the early years are a precursor for later schooling.

### *Category 7: values*

Respect, empathy, tolerance and sincere friendship are among the values parents expect their children to develop as a result of their early years experiences in formal settings. Parents expect children to be able to 'choose right from wrong'; 'appreciate' every individual; 'develop a sense of civic good' and 'respect others'; 'understand that we are all equal despite diversity', and that 'children are aware of those less-fortunate than they are'. Expectations about children's acquisition of moral and religious values were also expressed.

### *Category 8: advanced achievements*

Expectations classified under advanced achievements appeared to be somewhat unrealistic with too much expected of children at this age (Figure 5). Children are expected to 'take responsibility', 'be organised', 'learns to sit down', develop 'sitting tolerance', 'calms down because of a nervous temperament', 'becomes patient and waits for his turn' or 'gets used to a time-controlled routine'. Several responses referred to 'concentration'. Parents would like their child 'to learn how to study and prepare her mind for concentration when in class', or 'be able to focus on what he is doing'. Some expect their children to become more observant and engage fully with what is happening around them, with their friends and with what is being taught or presented.

Some expectations related to later success. 'Enjoy a profession and excel', 'being successful at whatever she chooses to do in life' and an expectation that the early years are a 'good preparation for the future' reflect far-reaching achievements. Other advanced achievements included responses where children are expected to have a competitive edge over others, are not 'falling behind', 'keeping up with others' or show 'intellectual progress' or be 'intelligent'.

### *Category 9: activities*

The final category of expectations included activities parents want children to participate in during their time away from home (Figure 6). Parents expect their children to be engaged in play, in activities which combine play and learning, where they can learn, grow and develop skills and understanding. Parents expressed their desire to see children offered playful, learning opportunities which take place outside and beyond the school grounds; activities where play and learning complement each other. What is significant is the rather low number of parents who expressed expectations focusing on playful experiences.

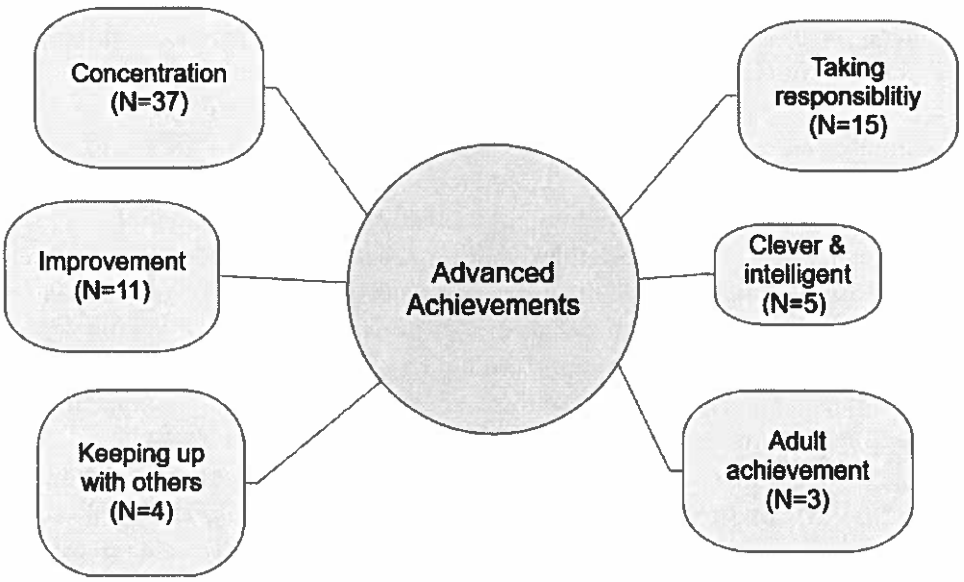


**Figure 5.** Advanced achievements ($N = 75$).

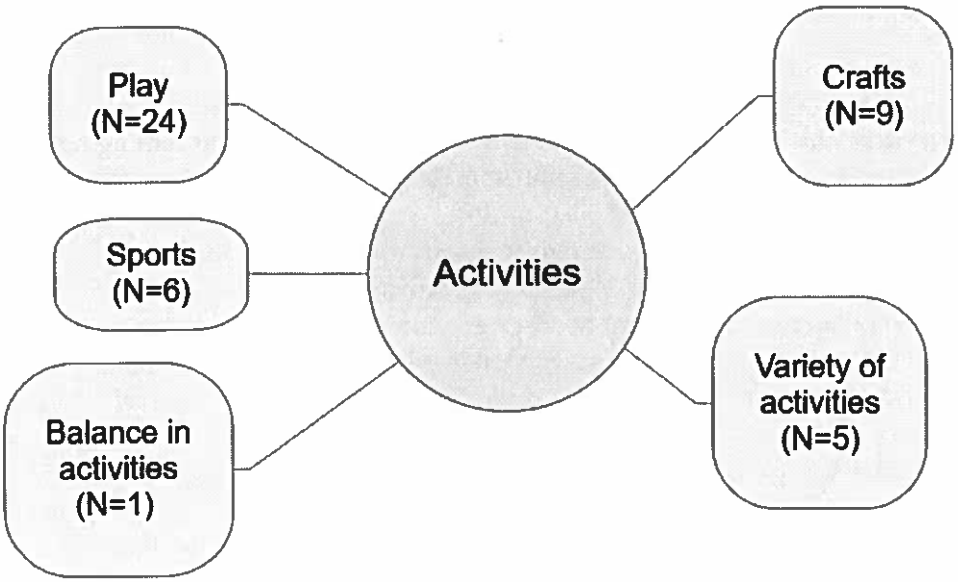


**Figure 6.** Experience of varied activities ($N = 45$).

A wide range of activities were identified by individuals. These parents expected children to be introduced physical activities and sports, art, crafts, simple science experiments, cooking, pottery, music and planting. Others expect children to engage in activities which they might not have access to at home or activities which the parents are not good at.

## Discussion and conclusions

Three general conclusions can be drawn from the results in this study. Firstly, children are expected to develop a broad range of skills – some parents expressed specific skills while others suggested achievements acknowledging children's holistic development. Secondly, with few exceptions, parents hold high expectations for their children's achievements. This augurs well considering literature which recommends that all adults' who are caring for and/or working with young children, would do well to have high expectations which contribute to children's overall personal well-being and development (VEYLDF 2016; Stonehouse n.d.). Thirdly, parents demonstrated having a wide range of insights concerning their children's achievements in early years. Some expectations are associated with future achievements, others suggest more immediate, tangible or short-term achievements. This echoes previous research which distinguished between short or long-term expectations (Huguley, Kyere, and Wang 2018). This result could also lead to the classification of parents' expectations as being realistic or unrealistic by considering the extent to which expectations are likely to be realised by children depending on the particular contexts and supporting circumstances and relationships.

However, when interpreting parents' expectations about young children's achievements through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), dichotomies or polarised classifications – high or low; appropriate or inappropriate; short or long-term; realistic or unrealistic – cease to exist. Children's

development and achievements are the product of on-going, dynamic interactions with people, objects, places and the environment which capture their imagination and respond to their curiosity. Despite a degree of similarity in parents' expectations as illustrated by the frequencies within categories, parents' responses were based on their intimate knowledge and insights about their children; their children's current level of functioning; knowledge about their family and its dynamics; and knowledge about their family's social contexts and networks. The process-person-context-time model that underpins the bioecological systems theory and is driven by proximal processes, offers one way of interpreting and understanding the expectations parents have for their children. They are in-tune with their children's development through carefully nurtured relationships. They intuitively set and adjust their expectations about their children's achievements andthe expectations they hold for their children are derived from regular, reciprocal interactions which have occurred over time with increasing complexity.

Parents' insights, knowledge, understanding and expectations for their children are themselves shaped and influenced by their own personal direct and indirect experiences and interactions with and within intimate personal networks and broader contexts, representing their micro, meso and macro systems. Families do not exist in isolation but are 'embedded within a larger social structure interconnected with other social institutions and social domains' (Paat 2013). Bronfenbrenner's theory captures all the systems affecting children and their families, reflecting the dynamic and complex nature of relationships within families and around them (Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2017). Establishing, maintaining and strengthening relationships between parents and their young children is akin to a 'relationship dance' (Pope Edwards and Raikes 2002). Parental expectations for their children are unique and conceived from the intimate knowledge parents have about their children. What may be unattainable, unrealistic or high expectations for some could very well be within reach for others.

Given the close relationship and intuitive knowledge parents have about their children, they are best positioned to share these expectations with early years educators. Once children transition from home to formal early years settings, the micro and meso systems for children and their families are extended. Lippard et al. (2018) refer to relationships as being 'built from interactions between two individuals ... shaped by the characteristics, behaviours, expectations, and perceptions of each individual' (3). But in early childhood education and care settings, relationships ought to be considered and constituted of triads rather than a child–teacher dyad. It is therefore vital for parents and practitioners to have opportunities where they can share and discuss their expectations about young children's achievements. Early years educators ought to know what expectations parents have for their children. There are several advantages children benefit from, where practitioners are equipped with this information provided directly by the parents.

Knowing what expectations parents have, is one way through which practitioners can get to know families and children. Establishing welcoming, positive relationships with families and their children is reassuring for all parties. It assists children's settling down in a safe, secure environment and adults developing a trusting relationship. Knowing about parental expectations allows and enables practitioners to work with the parents in assisting the children to realise and maximise their achievements

through a well-planned programme of activities which acknowledges individual strengths and interests. Professional early years educators can also support parents themselves in realising appropriate expectations for their children. The curriculum could be designed with contributions by parents, practitioners and children themselves, built on insightful and regular collaboration, observations, evaluations and communication. When parent and practitioner expectations coincide, children flourish; where parent and practitioner expectations differ, it could be detrimental and stressful for children because of different demands being made.

Conducting qualitative research whilst seeking to obtain a substantial body of data from anonymous questionnaires has its limitations. For example, in this research, no information was gathered about parenting practices. There is no data about whether parents transmit these expectations to their children or how this is done. It is also significant to note that most responses were submitted by mothers and one therefore wonders whether fathers share the same expectations. It would also be interesting to find out whether parents hold significantly different expectations for boys or girls as well as how socio-economic background and the parents' own levels of education impinge on the expectations they have for their children. Thus, this exploratory study certainly merits follow-up work.

However, these results transmit strong messages to primary stakeholders who are collectively responsible for ensuring that children are offered the best learning opportunities which support firm foundations for their development. Opportunities for dialogue which directly and simultaneously engages parents, practitioners and educational leaders are necessary. Within the micro and meso systems, stakeholders develop different relationships with each other and with the children. They need to discuss, exchange and inform each other to formulate high but realistic expectations which can be communicated to children seamlessly. Collective, shared contributions about and around expectations offer direction for meaningful designing, planning and actualisation of learning opportunities aimed to ensure all children can be supported to achieve high expectations.

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