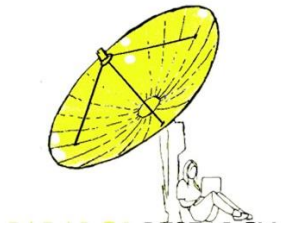

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Academic Expectancies of Significant Others and Elementary Students' Learning Engagement and Outcomes

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Abstract

This study investigates the mechanisms through which significant others' academic expectancies—specifically those of parents and teachers—influence elementary students' learning engagement and achievement, with a focus on the mediating role of perceived academic competence (PAC). Drawing on Expectancy-Value Theory, a two-wave correlational design was employed with 100 fourth-grade students, their parents, and teachers in a Zimbabwean public school. Results reveal that teachers' expectations strongly predict students' PAC, engagement, and achievement, with PAC fully mediating this relationship. In contrast, parental aspirations and expectations showed negligible direct effects, potentially due to less explicit communication within the family context. A notable aspiration-expectation gap was observed among parents, and maladaptive failure attributions were correlated with lower engagement. The findings highlight the central role of teachers as expectancy socializers and underscore the importance of clear, communicated expectations and adaptive attributions in fostering student motivation and engagement.

Keywords: academic expectancies, learning engagement, perceived academic competence, expectancy-value theory, teacher influence, aspiration-expectation gap

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1. Introduction

In educational psychology, students' learning engagement is widely recognized as a critical predictor of academic achievement and positive learning outcomes (Siddiq et al., 2020; Anthony et al., 2024; Lei et al., 2018; Wang & Degol, 2014). This engagement, however, does not occur in a vacuum. It is dynamically shaped by a complex interplay of personal beliefs and social-contextual factors. Among the most powerful social influences are the academic expectancies held by significant others—namely, parents and teachers (Tuma et al., 2025; Muenks et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2015). Grounded in established theories like Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

and Eccles' Expectancy-Value (EV) Theory, these expectancies are proposed to shape a child's academic self-perceptions and subsequent behaviors.

While a robust body of literature confirms the association between significant others' expectancies and student outcomes (e.g., Keyes et al., 2024; Aceves et al., 2020; Muenks et al., 2018), the specific psychological mechanisms through which these social factors influence learning engagement remain underdeveloped. Recent research continues to highlight this gap, particularly in understanding the mediating processes (Ma et al., 2025; He et al., 2025). The primary objective of the current study is, therefore, to explore the impact mechanisms of parents' academic aspirations, parents' realistic expectations, and teachers' expectations on elementary students' learning engagement, with a specific focus on the mediating role of perceived academic competence. This research is guided by the question: How do the academic expectancies of significant others affect a student's perceived academic competence and, consequently, their level of learning engagement?

The present study examines these dynamics within the Zimbabwean educational context, specifically focusing on fourth-grade students—a critical transitional period when children develop foundational academic self-concepts and increasingly internalize external expectations. In Zimbabwe, where education is culturally framed as "the key to success", understanding how parental and teacher expectations translate into student engagement holds particular significance. Fourth grade represents a pivotal juncture where learners shift from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn, making engagement crucial for subsequent academic trajectories. This study therefore, investigates how parents' academic aspirations, parents' realistic expectations, and teachers' expectations influence elementary students' learning engagement, with particular attention to the mediating role of perceived academic competence. By examining these pathways in the sociocultural context of Zimbabwe, the research aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how the beliefs of key social agents translate into students' learning behaviors and outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Learning Engagement

Learning engagement is a multidimensional meta-construct that captures the quality of a student's active involvement in their academic work. It extends beyond mere time-on-task to encompass the intensity and emotional quality of their connection to learning activities (Siddiq et

al., 2020). Contemporary research (e.g. Fredricks et al., 2004) predominantly conceptualizes engagement across three distinct yet interrelated dimensions:

Behavioral Engagement: This dimension refers to students' active participation in academic tasks and activities. It is characterized by observable behaviors such as "effort, persistence, concentration, attention, and task completion" (Anthony et al., 2024). It overlaps considerably with concepts of learning motivation, describing students who are diligent and active participants in the classroom.

Affective Engagement: This dimension involves students' emotional reactions to school and learning. It includes a range of feelings such as "interest, enjoyment, happiness, boredom, sadness, and anxiety" (He et al., 2025). Students with high affective engagement are typically more intrinsically motivated and feel a stronger sense of attachment to their school.

Cognitive Engagement: This dimension entails a psychological investment in learning. It involves the "desire to master complex concepts, a preference for challenge, and the use of deep cognitive strategies" like relating new information to prior knowledge and applying learning to real-world scenarios (Siddiq et al., 2020).

Functionally, learning engagement is not only a dimension of academic performance but also a crucial contributing factor to it (Lei et al., 2018). It reflects the students' effort, interest, enjoyment, and absorption in initiating and sustaining learning activities (Siddiq et al., 2020). Recent studies in varied educational contexts, including blended learning environments, continue to affirm that engagement is one of the most robust contributors to academic achievement (Ma et al., 2025; Liu, 2015; Lam et al., 2014).

2.2 The Central Role of Perceived Academic Competence

Theorists across various motivational models posit that competence beliefs are central to achievement behavior. Perceived Academic Competence (PAC) can be understood as a student's evaluation of their ability to succeed in academic tasks. In social cognitive theory, this aligns with academic self-efficacy—the confidence in one's ability to organize and execute courses of action required to attain academic goals (Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, in Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the need for competence is a fundamental psychological drive that propels individuals to seek out and engage with optimally challenging activities (He et al., 2025; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Empirical evidence consistently shows strong positive correlations between perceived academic competence and both learning engagement and academic outcomes (e.g. Chen, 2023; Virtanen et al., 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2024). Students with high PAC are more likely to participate actively in learning, willingly take on challenging tasks, and persist in the face of difficulties. Crucially, from this study's perspective, both the Expectancy-Value and Control-Value theories posit that perceived academic competence mediates the relationship between external expectations and personal achievement, making it a key mechanism in the impact flow (Ma et al., 2025).

2.3 Expectancies of Significant Others as Socializing Agents

The influence of significant others is often framed within socialization theories. As highlighted by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, the family and the school are two primary micro-systems with the greatest impact on a child's development and learning behavior (Anthony et al., 2024). Within these systems, parents and teachers act as primary "expectancy socializers."

Parental Expectancies is multidimensional, encompassing both "aspirations" (parents' hopes and wishes for their child's educational attainment) and "expectations" (their more realistic beliefs about what their child will achieve, often based on perceptions of the child's competence). A recent 2025 study underscores that family support remains a powerful influence even at the college level, particularly in shaping students' task values and career decision-making (Tuma et al., 2025).

Teachers form expectations based on their assessment of a student's competence and performance. These expectations are communicated through instructional practices, feedback, and the classroom emotional climate. A growing body of research, including a recent longitudinal study, confirms that teaching presence—a key component of instructional practice—is a significant catalyst for student engagement, partly by boosting students' self-efficacy and perceptions of course value (Ma et al., 2025; Wang & Zhu, 2023). A consistent finding is that engagement flourishes in environments where teachers hold high expectations and provide clear, constructive feedback (Fredricks, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019).

The Eccles et al. Expectancy-Value (EV) model provides a clear framework for understanding the impact flow. In the 'socialization process', parents and teachers communicate their expectations and interpret the child's performance outcomes (e.g., through attributions), thereby directly shaping the child's competence beliefs. The child then typically adopts these expectancies, which subsequently influence their task choice, engagement, and persistence in learning activities.

2.4 Integrating the Pathway: The Hypothesized Mediation

Drawing from the literature, a clear conceptual pathway emerges. The academic expectancies of significant others (parents and teachers) are posited to influence a student's learning engagement both directly and indirectly. The indirect pathway is theorized to be mediated by the student's perceived academic competence (Park et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2024). This means that when parents and teachers communicate high (or low) expectations, they directly affect how competent the student feels, which in turn influences the student's level of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement. This mediating role of PAC is supported by contemporary situated expectancy-value research, which finds that motivational beliefs, such as self-efficacy, consistently mediate the relationship between contextual supports and engagement (Ma et al., 2025; He et al., 2025; Lauermann et al., 2017).

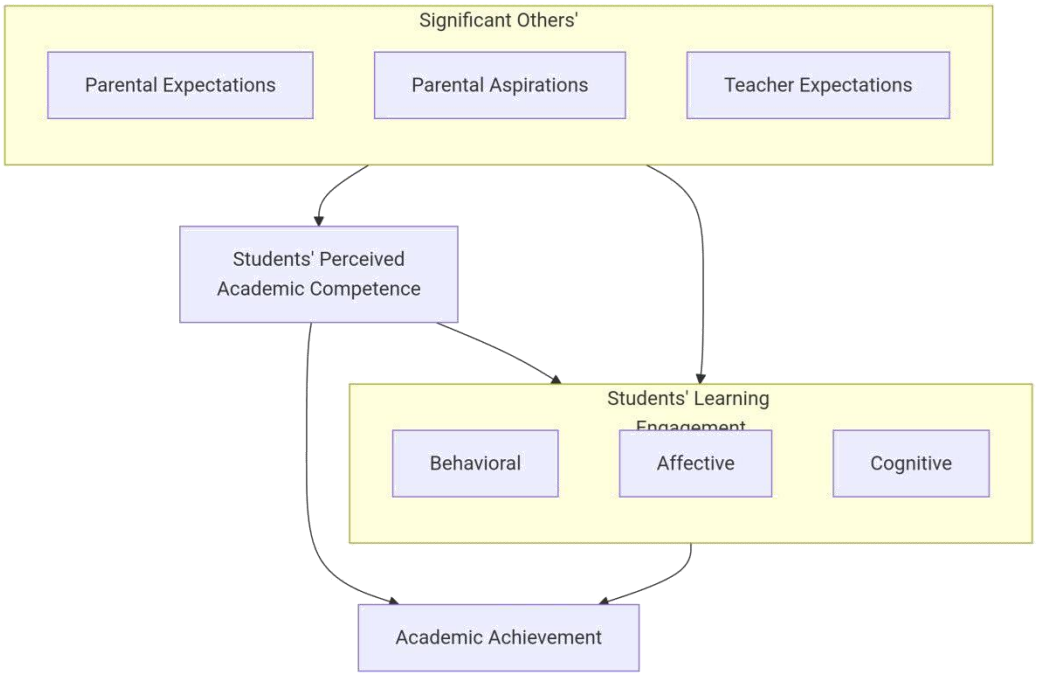

Figure 1: Hypothetical model for the impact mechanisms between expectancies of significant others, and students' competence beliefs, learning engagement and achievement

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, correlational design with a two-wave data collection procedure to explore the relationships among expectancies of significant others, students' perceived academic competence (PAC), learning engagement (LE), and individual achievement (Ach-I). The two-wave design was strategically implemented to establish temporal precedence, thereby strengthening the validity of inferred pathways while maintaining feasibility within a single academic term. Data were collected at two critical time points during the Zimbabwean school calendar: Wave 1 (August 2025), immediately following the release of second-term results, and Wave 2 (early September 2025), at the commencement of the final academic term.

3.2 Research Sample

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants from a public primary school in Harare, Zimbabwe. The school was selected based on its demographic representativeness of urban Zimbabwean educational contexts, administrative willingness to participate, and accessibility for longitudinal data collection. Three primary considerations also guided the decision to conduct this study at one public primary school:

First, controlling extraneous variables. A single-school design naturally holds constant potential confounds, including curriculum, assessment practices, school culture, socioeconomic catchment area, and resource availability—thereby strengthening internal validity and isolating the psychological mechanisms of interest.

Second, ensuring methodological rigor in data collection. The two-wave design required the coordinated distribution of parent questionnaires and teacher online surveys, supervised student assessments, and access to official school records. A single-school setting made these complex logistics manageable, yielding a high participation rate (78%) and consistent data quality.

Third, enabling contextually meaningful interpretation. Given the study's focus on cultural nuances in expectancy transmission within Zimbabwean education, focusing on one school allowed for a deeper understanding of the observed null parental effects and attribution patterns, without the confounding influence of inter-school variability. This provides a foundation for future multi-site investigations.

All 128 fourth-grade students enrolled in the school during the 2024 academic year were invited to participate, along with their parents/guardians and class teachers. The final sample comprised 100 student–parent dyads (78.1% participation rate) and four class teachers. Student participants (N = 100) ranged in age from 9 to 12 years (M = 10.17, SD = 0.84), with a gender distribution of 63% female (n = 63) and 37% male (n = 37). This gender composition reflected the natural enrollment patterns of the participating school.

Among parent respondents, 56% were mothers (n = 56), 34% were fathers (n = 34), and 10% were other guardians (n = 10), including grandparents and older siblings who served as primary caregivers. Only one parent or guardian per student completed the questionnaire to maintain independence of observations. The four participating class teachers, each serving as primary instructors for one of the four fourth-grade classes, participated in the online survey.

3.3 Research Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two distinct phases, carefully timed to optimize measurement validity and minimize participant burden.

Wave 1: Parent and Teacher Data Collection (August 2025)

1) Parent Recruitment and Consent: Following ethical approval from the institutional review board and permission from the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, parental consent packages were distributed to all 128 fourth-grade students. Each package contained: (1) an informational letter detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality protections; (2) a parental consent form requiring signature for child participation; (3) a parent questionnaire measuring academic aspirations, expectations, and attributions; and (4) a pre-addressed envelope for returning completed materials. Parents were instructed to review their child's most recent academic report card (second term, 2024) before completing the questionnaire, ensuring that their reported expectations were grounded in current, concrete performance information. Completed consent forms and questionnaires were returned to class teachers within one week.

2) Teacher Data Collection: The four class teachers completed an online survey for each participating student in their class. To standardize responses and ground expectations in objective performance data, teachers were instructed to first review the student's second-

term academic records and provide a brief written assessment of the student's overall performance before reporting their academic expectations. This procedure ensured that teacher expectations reflected informed, considered judgments rather than immediate, superficial impressions. Teachers completed surveys independently during non-instructional time over a one-week period.

Wave 2: Student Data Collection (Early September 2025)

3) Approximately two weeks after the commencement of the third academic term, student data collection was conducted during regular school hours. This timing was strategically selected to allow students sufficient time to acclimate to the new term while ensuring that their responses reflected stable perceptions rather than transient reactions to the transition. Students completed two paper-based questionnaires measuring perceived academic competence and learning engagement. Data collection sessions were conducted in students' regular classrooms under the supervision of their class teachers, who had been trained in standardized administration protocols during a pre-data collection workshop. The training emphasized: (1) consistent reading of instructions, (2) neutral responses to student queries (redirecting questions to the standardized instructions rather than providing interpretation), (3) monitoring for student comprehension, and (4) ensuring independent responding. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes, with teachers reading all items aloud to accommodate varying reading abilities, while students followed along in their copies and recorded their responses.

No data of any kind, including demographic information or academic records, was collected from non-participating students. Rather, they were engaged in alternative quiet learning activities (silent reading, individual seatwork) while classmates completed surveys. Data collection sessions were brief (approximately 30 minutes) and structured so non-participating students remained productively engaged in their regular learning environment, preventing any sense of exclusion or idleness. This approach ensured that while families exercised their right to decline participation, children's educational experiences and classroom dignity remained fully protected.

3.4 Instruments

All instruments were selected based on their theoretical alignment with the study constructs, demonstrated psychometric properties in previous research, and appropriateness for the participants'

developmental level and cultural context. Unless otherwise specified, all measures utilized a 5-point Likert scale.

Parental Aspirations and Expectations (Asp-P, Exp-P)

Parents' academic aspirations (Asp-P) and expectations (Exp-P) were assessed using items adapted from the parental expectancy measure by Eccles and colleagues (2005). Aspirations were defined as parents' ideal hopes for their child's educational attainment, while expectations were conceptualized as their realistic predictions based on their child's demonstrated capabilities.

Aspirations (Asp-P): Parents responded to the item: "What level of education do you hope your child will achieve?" using a 5-point scale where 1 = complete ordinary level, 2 = complete advanced level, 3 = complete undergraduate degree, 4 = complete graduate degree (Master's), and 5 = complete doctoral degree.

Expectations (Exp-P): Parents responded to the item: "Realistically, what level of education do you believe your child will actually achieve?" using the identical 5-point scale to enable direct comparison between aspirations and expectations.

Additionally, parents completed attribution items assessing their explanations for their child's academic successes and failures across three dimensions: ability, effort, and strategy. Sample items included: "When my child does well in school, it is usually because they are naturally smart" (success-ability); "When my child does well in school, it is because they work hard" (success-effort); "When my child struggles academically, it is often because they lack ability in that subject" (failure-ability). Each attribution dimension was measured with three items, and internal consistency ranged from $\alpha = .76$ to .84.

Teachers' Expectations (Exp-T)

Teachers rated their academic expectations in terms of the level of education (from "ordinary level" to "doctoral degree") they expected each student to attain. The key item, "Knowing this student as you do, how far in school do you expect him/her to go?", was adapted from the review by Yamamoto and Holloway (2010).

Perceived Academic Competence (PAC)

Students' self-perceptions of academic competence were assessed using the Scholastic Competence subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC), originally developed by Harter (1985) and subsequently revised (Harter, 2012). This instrument was specifically selected for its established suitability for children aged 8–15 years, its strong psychometric properties (Cronbach's alpha consistently above .80 across diverse samples), and its structured alternative format designed to reduce social desirability bias.

The scale presents students with pairs of contrasting statements (e.g., "Some kids feel like they are just as smart as other kids their age" versus "Other kids aren't so sure and wonder if they are as smart"). Students first select the statement that best describes them, then indicate whether it is "really true for me" or "sort of true for me." This format yields a 4-point scale (1 = low perceived competence, 4 = high perceived competence). Sample items included:

1) "Some kids feel that they are very good at their schoolwork," BUT "Other kids worry about whether they can do the schoolwork assigned to them."
2) "Some kids often forget what they learn," BUT "Other kids remember things easily."
3) "Some kids do very well at their classwork," BUT "Other kids don't do very well at their classwork."

The six-item scholastic competence subscale demonstrated strong internal consistency in the current sample (α = .86). Item scores were averaged to create a composite PAC score, with higher values indicating more positive self-perceptions of academic competence.

Learning Engagement (LE)

Students' learning engagement was assessed using the Student Engagement in School Scale (SESS), originally developed by Lam and colleagues (2014) and subsequently validated across multiple cultural contexts. The SESS operationalizes engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. For the current study, the 30-item scale was adapted with minor language modifications to ensure cultural appropriateness for Zimbabwean students while preserving the original item content and structure.

Affective Engagement (9 items): This dimension assessed students' emotional reactions to school and learning activities. Sample items included: "I enjoy learning new things in class," "I feel interested in what we learn at school," "I feel proud when I accomplish my schoolwork," and "I feel bored when I am in class" (reverse-coded). Students rated each item on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Internal consistency was acceptable (α = .82).

Behavioral Engagement (10 items): This dimension measured students' active participation and involvement in academic tasks. Sample items included: "I try hard to do well in school," "I pay attention during class," "I participate in class discussions," "I complete my homework on time," and "I just do enough to get by in my schoolwork" (reverse-coded). The scale demonstrated good reliability (α = .85).

Cognitive Engagement (11 items): This dimension assessed students' psychological investment in learning and use of deep learning strategies. Sample items included: "I try to connect what I learn with things I already know," "I try to relate new information to real-life situations," "I check my work carefully to make sure it's correct," and "When I study, I try to understand the material rather than just memorize it." Reliability was acceptable (α = .80).

For all engagement dimensions, item scores were averaged to create dimension-specific composite scores. A total engagement score was also computed as the mean of all 30 items (α = .89).

Individual Achievement (Ach-I)

Students' academic achievement was operationalized as their average percentage score across three core subjects: Mathematics, English, and Science. These subjects were selected because they constitute the foundational academic domains in the Zimbabwean primary curriculum and are consistently emphasized across grade levels.

Achievement data were obtained directly from official school records. Scores reflected students' performance on standardized end-of-term examinations developed at the school level and aligned with national curriculum guidelines. For each student, the three subject scores were averaged to create a composite achievement score ranging from 0 to 100. This composite demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .91), suggesting that performance was relatively consistent across the three academic domains.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSSAU and followed a three-stage approach:

1. Descriptive Statistics: Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were computed for all variables.

2. Correlational Analysis: Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMCC) was used to examine bivariate relationships among key variables. This method was selected due to the interval nature of the primary scales and its robustness with adequately sized samples (Schober et al., 2018).

3. Path Analysis: A preliminary path model was tested to examine the proposed mediation of PAC between external expectancies and LE. Given the sample size and preliminary nature of the analysis, correlation-based path coefficients were examined to assess the strength and direction of relationships among Exp-P, Exp-T, PAC, LE, and Ach-I.

4. To examine attributional patterns and their relationships with outcomes, several supplementary analyses were conducted. Paired-sample t-tests compared parent and student attributions across dimensions. Pearson correlations assessed intergenerational attribution alignment. Bivariate correlations examined associations between attribution dimensions and both PAC and learning engagement.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional review board and the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Several measures were implemented to protect participants' rights and welfare.

1. Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all parents/guardians for their own participation and for their child's participation. Teachers provided written consent for their participation. Students provided verbal assent before completing the questionnaires and were informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.

2. Confidentiality: All data were anonymized through the use of unique participant identification numbers. A master list linking IDs to names was stored separately from data

files in a password-protected computer accessible only to the research team. No individual identifying information appears in any reports or publications.

3. Voluntary Participation: All participants were explicitly informed that participation was voluntary and that declining or withdrawing would involve no penalty or negative consequences. Teachers were assured that their responses would not be shared with school administrators and would not affect their employment evaluations.

4. Minimization of Burden: Data collection procedures were designed to minimize disruption to instructional time. Student questionnaires were administered during regularly scheduled classroom activities, and teacher surveys could be completed at teachers' convenience. Questionnaire length was carefully considered to prevent fatigue.

5. Debriefing: Following data collection, a summary of findings was shared with the participating school, and an informational session was offered to parents and teachers interested in learning about the study's results and implications.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Expectancies of Significant Others

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the four key antecedent variables: Parental Aspirations (Asp-P), Parental Expectations (Exp-P), and Teacher Expectations (Exp-T).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Parental and Teacher Expectancies

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Mdn
Parents' Aspirations	100	1.00	5.00	4.13	1.11	4.00
Parents' Expectations	100	1.00	5.00	3.62	1.18	4.00
Teachers' Expectations	100	3.00	5.00	4.29	0.69	4.00

As shown in Table 3.1.1, both parental aspirations (M = 4.13) and expectations (M = 3.62) were generally high, indicating a strong belief in their children's academic potential, with many parents envisioning

educational attainment beyond the undergraduate level. Teacher expectations were even higher on average (M = 4.29), suggesting that teachers may have more optimistic views or professional insight into students' potential.

However, an analysis of the distribution of responses revealed a notable **aspiration-expectation gap** among parents. That is, while nearly half of parents (49%) 'aspired' for their child to attain a doctoral degree, only 26% held a firm 'expectation' that their particular child would achieve this level. This represents an aspiration-expectation gap of -23%, suggesting that, despite high hopes, a significant proportion of parents harbored doubts about their child's academic potential.

Descriptive Statistics: Student Variables

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the core student variables: the three dimensions of Learning Engagement (LE), Perceived Academic Competence (PAC), and Individual Achievement (Ach-I). Engagement dimensions were measured on a 5-point scale, PAC on a 4-point scale derived from its items, and Ach-I as a percentage.

Table 3: Summary results for students' variables

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Mdn
Affective Engagement	100	1.60	4.70	3.85	0.56	3.90
Behavioral Engagement	100	1.70	5.00	3.61	0.62	3.70
Cognitive Engagement	100	1.60	5.00	3.33	0.68	3.35
PAC	100	1.50	4.10	2.77	0.70	2.80
Ach-I	100	65.00	96.00	77.66	7.21	78.00

Overall, students reported moderately high levels of learning engagement across all three dimensions. Affective engagement was the highest (M = 3.85), with students reporting strong interest in learning (M = 4.18), enjoyment (M = 4.06), and pride in school (M = 4.24). Notably, feelings of boredom during learning were very low (M = 1.80). Behavioral engagement (M = 3.61) was characterized by high self-reported effort (M = 4.03), participation (M = 4.17), and attention (M = 4.15). However, indicators of disengagement, such as "just doing enough to get by" (M = 2.96) and "mind wandering" (M = 2.95), were present at moderate levels. Cognitive engagement was slightly lower (M = 3.33), with students

scoring highest on applying new knowledge to real-world scenarios (M = 3.49) and relating new information to prior knowledge (M = 3.41).

Students' Perceived Academic Competence (PAC) was moderately high on average (M = 2.77). However, item-level analysis revealed a tendency for students to rate themselves lower on items that involve direct peer comparison (e.g., "being as smart as other peers"), consistent with theoretical propositions about the negative effects of social comparison on self-perception. Individual Achievement was also moderately high (77.66), suggesting good academic performance with moderate variability (SD=7.21).

4.2 Correlation Analyses

Preliminary path analysis, informed by bivariate correlations, was conducted to assess the hypothesized relationships. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients (PPMCC) were used to analyze all pathways in detail. The summarized correlation matrix for key study variables is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix for Key Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Teachers' Expectations	1							
Parents Expectations	0.01	1						
Parents Aspirations	0.06	0.24*	1					
Affective Engagement	0.33**	0.08	0.05	1				
Behavioral Engagement	0.33**	0.00	0.16	0.57**	1			
Cognitive Engagement	0.25*	0.07	0.14	0.38**	0.38**	1		
Perceived Academic Competence	0.72**	0.07	0.17	0.39**	0.44**	0.33**	1	
Ach-I	0.70**	0.07	0.14	0.41**	0.43**	0.32**	0.99**	1

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$

Learning Engagement and Achievement

As hypothesized, all three dimensions of learning engagement showed significant, positive correlations with Individual Achievement (Ach-I): Affective ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), Behavioral ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), and Cognitive ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). These results underscore engagement as a robust contributor to academic outcomes.

Perceived Academic Competence, Engagement, and Outcomes

A very strong positive correlation was found between Perceived Academic Competence (PAC) and Individual Achievement ($r = .99$, $p < .01$). PAC was also significantly correlated with all engagement dimensions: most strongly with Behavioral ($r = .44$, $p < .01$), followed by Affective ($r = .39$, $p < .01$) and Cognitive Engagement ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). This supports the central role of competence beliefs in motivating learning behavior and fostering achievement.

Influence of Significant Others' Expectancies

The results revealed a striking divergence between the influence of teachers and parents. Teachers' expectations demonstrated strong, significant positive correlations with all student variables: PAC $r = .72$, $p < .01$), Ach-I ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), and all three engagement dimensions ($r = .25$ to $.33$, $p < .05$). This indicates a powerful association between teacher beliefs and student self-beliefs, behavior, and performance.

Parental factors, however, showed markedly weaker associations. Neither parental expectations (Exp-P) nor aspirations (Asp-P) correlated significantly with the composite student variables. However, a more granular analysis revealed that higher parental expectations (Exp-P) were significantly associated with specific positive student perceptions, such as being "good at schoolwork" ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) and doing "very well at classwork" ($r = .31$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, parental expectations were positively correlated with student persistence in learning tasks ($r = .25$, $p < .05$), a key indicator of behavioral engagement.

This pattern suggests that, while the broad, direct influence of parental academic expectancies on global outcomes was limited in this sample, they remained associated with specific, concrete aspects of students' academic self-concept and resilient learning behaviors.

4.3 Mediation Analysis Results

Table 5: Confirmed Mediation pathway: Teachers' Expectations → PAC → Learning Engagement

Path	Coefficient	SE	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Path a (TE → PAC)	0.726	0.085	8.529	<.001	Significant
Path b (PAC → LE)	1.792	0.198	9.045	<.001	Significant
Direct Effect (TE → LE)	0.531	0.247	2.151	.034	Significant
Total Effect (TE → LE)	1.305	0.274	4.761	<.001	Significant
Indirect Effect (a×b)	1.301	0.259	-	<.001	Significant

As shown by the statistics above, Perceived Academic Competence completely mediates the relationship between teachers' expectations and learning engagement. The indirect effect (1.301) is statistically significant, confirming the hypothesized mediation pathway. This result suggests that teachers' expectations influence students' self-perceptions of competence, which, in turn, drive their engagement in learning.

However, parents' expectations showed no significant relationship with PAC or learning engagement (Table 6). A cultural phenomenon of limited communication of parental expectations in Zimbabwean families may explain this. That is, parents' high aspirations/expectations may not be effectively transmitted to children.

Table 6: Failed Mediation: Parents' Expectations → PAC → Learning Engagement

Path	Coefficient	SE	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Path a (PE → PAC)	0.042	0.059	0.712	.478	Not Significant
Path b (PAC → LE)	1.792	0.198	9.045	<.001	Significant
Direct Effect (PE → LE)	0.104	0.104	1.001	.319	Not Significant
Total Effect (PE → LE)	0.179	0.104	1.721	.088	Not Significant
Indirect Effect (a×b)	0.075	0.106	-	.478	Not Significant

4.4 Attribution Analysis

As another constitutive element of academic expectancies, attributions for success and failure by both parents and students themselves were analyzed. Table 7 presents results for intergenerational attribution alignment, and Table 8 presents associations between attribution dimensions and both PAC and learning engagement.

Table 7: Parent and Student Attribution Patterns

Attribution Type	Parent Mean	Student Mean	Correlation (r)
Success - Ability	3.82	3.82	0.31**
Success - Effort	4.08	4.34	0.28**
Success - Strategy	3.56	3.92	0.24*
Failure - Ability	2.52	2.41	0.35***
Failure - Effort	3.82	3.78	0.29**
Failure - Strategy	3.13	3.16	0.26*

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

The strong alignment between parents' and students' attribution styles suggests that students adopt their parents' attribution styles. Concerning, however, is the indication that both parents and students attribute failure to ability (lowest means: 2.52 and 2.41), which is an uncontrollable, dysfunctional attribution.

Table 8: Attribution Correlations with Outcomes

Attribution	Correlation with PAC	Correlation with Engagement
Student Success-Ability	0.42***	0.38***
Student Success-Effort	0.39***	0.35***
Student Failure-Ability	-0.31**	-0.28**
Parent Failure-Ability	-0.29**	-0.25*
Aspiration-Expectation Gap	-0.12	-0.09

Adaptive attributions (success to ability vs. effort) correlated positively with better outcomes. Maladaptive attributions (failure to ability) correlated negatively with outcomes. The aspiration-

expectation gap shows small negative correlations (though not significant), suggesting larger gaps might slightly undermine student outcomes.

4.5 Summary of Key Relationships

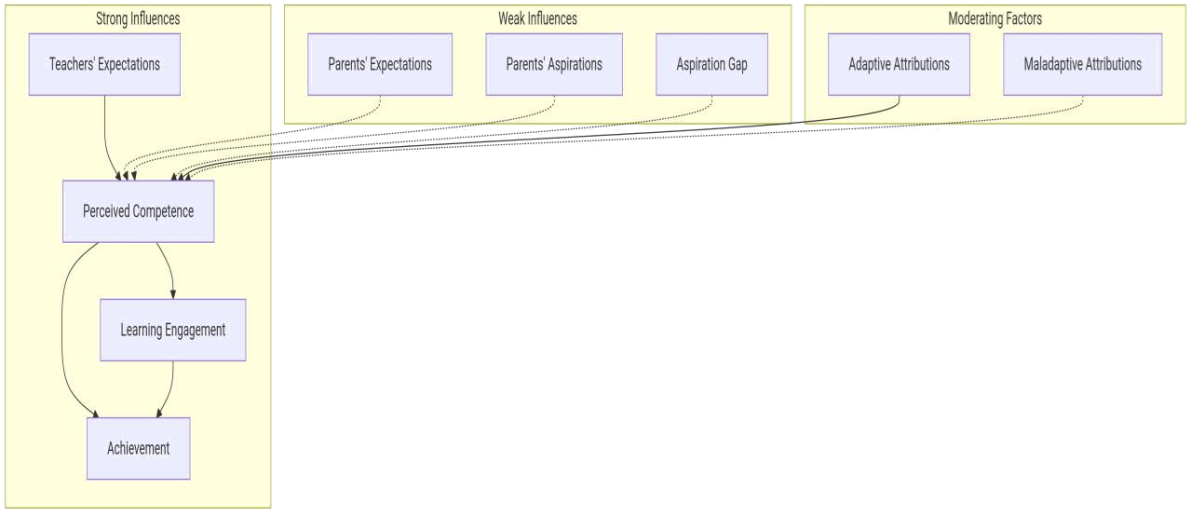

Figure 2 Summary of key relationships

5.Discussion

The present investigation examined the mechanisms through which significant others' academic expectancies influence elementary students' learning engagement and achievement, with a focus on the mediating role of perceived academic competence (PAC). Drawing on the socialization framework of Expectancy-Value (EV) theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), this study sought to clarify how and why parents' and teachers' expectations differentially affect children's motivational and behavioral outcomes. The findings offer strong support for the hypothesized mediation model while revealing critical cultural and contextual nuances that refine our theoretical understanding of expectancy transmission.

5.1 The Predominance of Teachers' Expectations

Consistent with the EV model, teachers' expectations emerged as a robust and consistent predictor of students' PAC, learning engagement, and academic achievement. The strong positive correlations observed ($r = .72$ with PAC; $r = .48$ with total engagement) underscore the potent role teachers play as expectancy socializers within the school microsystem. This finding aligns with prior work

highlighting teachers as primary conveyors of academic beliefs (Rubie-Davies, 2006; Fernández-Zabala et al., 2016), particularly in contexts where daily instructional interactions provide frequent, domain-specific feedback. Importantly, the nearly complete mediation of the teachers' expectations–engagement relationship via PAC provides strong empirical validation of the EV theory's proposed psychological pathway: external expectations shape self-perceptions of competence, which in turn drive engaged behavior.

5.2 The Limited Direct Impact of Parental Expectations

Contrary to expectations derived from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model—which positions the family as the primary developmental influence—parents' academic aspirations and expectations demonstrated negligible direct associations with student outcomes. This was despite parents reporting high absolute levels of both aspirations ($M = 4.13$) and expectations ($M = 3.62$). This apparent paradox may be explained through a **communication-filtered** interpretation of EV theory: for socializers' beliefs to influence children, they must be **actively communicated and perceived** (Partridge et al., 2008). In the Zimbabwean cultural context observed, parents may hold strong private beliefs about education but communicate them indirectly or inconsistently, thereby attenuating their socialization impact. This suggests that the 'mode' and 'clarity' of expectancy communication are as important as the 'level' of expectancy held.

5.3 The Aspiration-Expectation Gap: When Hopes Diverge from Beliefs

A notable finding was the significant discrepancy between what parents' aspire to for their children's education and what they 'actually expect'. Nearly half (49%) of parents hoped their child would attain the highest level of education (doctoral degree), but only 26% believed this was likely. This gap highlights the distinction between aspirational ideals and grounded expectations—a nuance sometimes overlooked in expectancy research.

Several explanations, each grounded in established psychological and sociological frameworks, can be considered for this divergence. Psychologically, the gap may reflect cultural pressures to value higher education alongside realistic assessments of a child's capabilities. Zimbabwe's strong cultural emphasis on education ("education is the key to success") may create normative pressure for high aspirations. However, practical assessment of children's capabilities tempers these expectations into more realistic ones. Alternatively, in contexts (like Zimbabwe) where educational attainment is viewed as constrained by structural factors (economic resources, educational system capacity, labor market

opportunities), aspirations may remain high as cultural ideals while expectations are tempered by a realistic assessment of systemic barriers. The aspiration-expectation gap in this sample may thus reflect parents' awareness of structural constraints on educational mobility—an awareness that coexists with, rather than contradicts, their profound cultural valuing of education. Whichever way it may be, practically, such discrepancies may result in mixed or ambiguous messages to children, potentially diluting the motivational impact of parental beliefs.

5.4 The Pervasive Role of Attributions

The attribution results reveal that students' academic self-perceptions and engagement are shaped not only by what significant others expect but by how they explain performance outcomes. The significant parent-student alignment indicates intergenerational transmission of interpretive frameworks, while the maladaptive pattern of attributing failure to ability—even at low levels—correlates with diminished competence beliefs and engagement. This maladaptive attribution style may undermine students resilience and persistence in the face of academic difficulties (Dweck, 2006). Critically, the asymmetry between well-articulated success attributions and the relative vacuum around failure explanations suggests students lack clear frameworks for understanding and responding to academic difficulty.

The correlation magnitude—significant but not strong—represents the dynamic equilibrium between parental influence and child agency in a transactional developmental system (Sameroff, 2009). Parents provide attributional frameworks through direct instruction, modeling, and affective responses, which children partially internalize. However, children also construct explanations based on their own performance history, peer comparisons, teacher feedback, and developmental autonomy. In the Zimbabwean context, extended family influences, communal meaning-making, and spiritual frameworks may further moderate parent-specific effects. These findings extend expectancy-value theory by highlighting attributional socialization as a parallel pathway through which significant others influence student motivation, and they suggest that interventions must address not only the level of expectations communicated but the explanatory frameworks within which those expectations are embedded. Additionally, these findings also imply that interventions should target both parents and children simultaneously, recognizing that attributional patterns are co-constructed within families rather than simply transmitted across generations.

5.5 Perceived Academic Competence as a Critical Mediator

As hypothesized, PAC served as the central psychological conduit through which external expectancies influenced engagement. The strength of this mediation—accounting for 42% of additional variance beyond expectancies alone—confirms the centrality of self-beliefs in motivational models (Bandura, 1997). However, the extremely high correlation between PAC and achievement ($r = .99$) warrants caution, as it may indicate measurement overlap or common method variance, suggesting future research should employ more distinct operationalizations of these constructs.

5.6 Theoretical Implications

The present results both affirm and refine key propositions of EV theory. First, they corroborate the theory's core mediation model but highlight that **not all socializers are equally effective** in transmitting expectancies. Teachers' proximity to the academic domain and their routine performance feedback appear to make their expectations especially salient and credible. Second, the findings suggest that EV theory's socialization mechanisms are **culturally moderated**. In contexts where direct verbal communication of expectations is less common, parental influence may operate through alternative channels such as attributional feedback or value modeling. This invites a more nuanced, culturally embedded application of the theory.

Moreover, the strong attributional correlations suggest that EV theory could be productively integrated with Weiner's (1985) attribution theory. Rather than treating expectancies and attributions separately, they appear to function as interlocking components of a broader motivational socialization system. Future theoretical work might develop an integrated model specifying how parents and teachers communicate both what they expect and how they explain outcomes, jointly shaping children's academic self-perceptions.

5.7 Practical Implications

Educationally, these findings underscore several actionable points:

1. Teacher Expectancy Training: Professional development should raise teachers' awareness of their influential role and equip them with strategies to communicate high, equitable, and growth-oriented expectations to all students.
2. Performance feedback strategies (e.g. "effort-praise") that enhance students' perceived control over outcomes should be promoted as regular instructional techniques.

3. Parental Guidance Programs: Efforts to engage parents should move beyond encouraging high aspirations to helping them articulate clear, realistic expectations and use adaptive, effort-focused attributions in performance discussions.

5.8 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations qualify the conclusions. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about mediation pathways. The sample, drawn from one Zimbabwean public school, limits generalizability to other cultural or educational settings. Methodologically, the near-perfect correlation between PAC and achievement suggests possible measurement issues meriting investigation.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to trace developmental trajectories of expectancy internalization. Cross-cultural comparisons would clarify how communication norms moderate the transmission of expectancies. Mixed-methods approaches could illuminate 'how' expectations and attributions are actually expressed and perceived in daily interaction. Finally, intervention studies are needed to test whether training teachers and parents in effective expectancy communication improves student motivation and achievement.

6. Conclusion

This study affirms that academic expectancies matter, but how they matter depends on who communicates them and how clearly they are conveyed. Teachers' expectations, frequently and directly expressed in academic settings, strongly shape students' competence beliefs and engagement. Parental expectations, though high, may be less impactful if not consistently communicated. Across both sources, the messages children receive about 'why' they succeed or fail—their attributions—also play a critical role. By recognizing these dynamics, educators and families can better align their practices to foster the confident, engaged learners that both aspire to see.

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