

Research Article

On Class Difference in Educational Aspirations and Educational Expectations: A CUCDS-Based Social Analysis

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Educational aspirations under an ideal state and educational expectations based on reality have an important impact on children's academic development, but distinct differences between them exist. On the basis of distinguishing the differences between the two, using the national data of Tsinghua University's China Urbanization and Child Development Survey (CUCDS), this article endeavors to explore the inequality of educational aspirations and expectations from the perspective of class and urban-rural areas, and lay out the influencing factors of educational aspirations, expectations, and the difference between them. It is found that Chinese parents generally have high aspirations for their children's education. There is no distinct class difference in "high hopes for children's bright future." However, in the sense of educational expectations, there are distinct class differences, which are deeply rooted in socioeconomic status and closely related to education level, family type, family structure, and family economic status, as well as children's academic performance.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have confirmed the significant role of educational background on socioeconomic status acquisition [1–3]. Therefore, educational inequality holds the key to problems such as class consolidation and intergenerational transmission of poverty. Educational inequality comprises multiple levels, besides inequality in educational attainment; inequality in educational expectations is also an important factor. However, past research studies failed to distinguish between "aspirations" and "expectations," and the former is based on subjective ideals, while the latter derives from objective reality. Given the two may have distinct measurement differences, research conclusions without distinction between the two are often in doubt. Thus, at least two problems arise—whether those factors passing the significance test affect the "aspiration based on subjective ideals" or "expectation based on objective reality?" Is it

"educational aspirations" or "educational expectations" that are more closely related to class?

To clarify these issues, this study divides parents' expectations for their children's education in more detail and endeavors to apply national data from China Urbanization and Child Development Survey (CUCDS) to explore the disparity between parents' aspirations and parents' expectations from the perspectives of class and urban or rural areas and find out the factors contributing to the difference. The specific questions to be answered are as follows: in current China, the differences and influencing factors of different classes of children's education aspirations; and the differences and influencing factors of different classes' education expectations. Supposing that educational aspiration is an ideal, expectation an alternative to the final education acquisition, the author is in an endeavor to analyze the factors hindering the realization of educational expectations of different classes.

2. Concept Definition and Literature Review

2.1. Concept Definition. “Modern Chinese Dictionary” to the explanation of “expectation” is waiting for the future of things or people with hope [4]. But this explanation does not state that “expectation” is merely a subjective hope or an expected vision of the future based on current reality. In fact, in daily life, the understanding of the word “expectation” also varies from person to person. Some people understand it more from the perspective of ideal hope, while some people hold that it is an expectation based on actual conditions. As for parents’ expectations for their children’s education (hereinafter referred to as parents’ education expectations), if not strictly defined in the survey and research, some people may think that it is the level that they hope their children’s education can achieve under ideal conditions, while others may hold that it is the expectation that children can reach the educational level in consideration of the actual situation. Obviously, these are two different concepts, and the relevant research conclusions obtained by integrating them indiscriminately under the “educational expectations” may be in doubt. In view of this, in practical research, a strict distinction should be made between educational aspirations and expectations, and the distinction between the two should first be reflected in the meticulous measurement of aspirations and expectations during data collection.

In this study, parents’ educational aspirations refer to the level that parents want their children to achieve in an ideal state. While Parents’ educational expectations refer to the parents’ expected estimation of their children’s educational attainment based on objective conditions, which include not only macrolevel educational settings, but also family and individual children’s conditions. We are well aware that in Chinese people’s perceptions, ideals based on objective reality are often confused with ideals based on subjectivity; that is, it is difficult to accurately identify attitudes in questionnaires. Therefore, on the one hand, a detailed distinction in the questionnaire design is vital, and the question that “what degree do you want your children’s education to achieve in the most ideal situation?” may be more accurate to measure parents’ education aspirations; meanwhile, the question like “sometimes, children may not be able to achieve the education level we hope for, what level of education do you expect children to really achieve?” may be more appropriate to parents’ educational expectations. On the other hand, efforts should be made to train the questionnaire interviewers to ensure their accurate and clear explanation of the difference between the two concepts to the respondents.

Educational attainment is the ultimate educational level. The relationship among educational aspirations, educational expectations, and educational attainment can be roughly illustrated in Figure 1.

Educational aspiration is one end, the ideal, and education acquisition is the other, the reality; between the ideal and the reality is the educational expectation. Theoretically speaking, the gap between ideal and reality may be very large or small, or even zero, that is, the union of ideal and reality;

as it is with ideal and reality, the distance between educational aspirations, expectations, as well as educational attainment may be very large or small or even the three may correspond exactly. In reality, there are always many factors that may hinder the acquisition of education, and there is often a gap between ideal and reality. As rational people, we can often foresee possible obstacles and correctly predict the gap between ideal and reality. Therefore, education expectations and education acquisition tend to be closer. Based on this, it is feasible to use the difference between educational aspirations and expectations as the difference between ideal and reality in this study to explore the factors that hinder the realization of ideals in the case of being unable to obtain the final education level data. However, it should also be acknowledged that educational expectations are also different from the final educational attainment. This is reflected not only in the results, but also in the meaning of expectations; that is, expectations still have the meaning of hope, although they are less idealized than aspirations. Therefore, in a sense, educational expectations also have similar effects to aspirations and play an important role in educational attainment; family and personal factors that affect educational aspirations may also affect expectations.

2.2. Literature Review. Instead of strictly differentiating educational aspirations and expectations, the existing research studies combine “expectations based on subjective ideals” and “expectations based on objective reality” under the term “educational expectations.” Taking the continuation of the use of the term in existing studies into consideration, it is customary that the term “educational expectations” is still employed in the literature review of this article. However, it should be clear that the “educational expectations” here are in fact a combination of “educational aspirations” and “educational expectations,” which are strictly distinguished in this article.

2.2.1. Parents’ Educational Expectations and Their Children’s Educational Attainment. In the research on the influencing factors of educational attainment, aspiration is often proved to be an important intermediary mechanism between family socioeconomic status and the academic performance and educational attainment of their children, which functions in the way that it impacts the educational aspirations of important people to them such as their parents, thereby influencing children’s educational expectations, which will ultimately contribute to their children’s academic performance and educational attainment [5–9]. Studies on parents’ participation in their children’s studies have found that, compared with “communication,” “supervision,” as well as “participation in school activities,” “educational aspirations” is the most closely related to children’s academic performance [10]. The “Plowden Report” pointed out that compared with the family material environment and school factors, parental attitudes account more for their children’s academic performance [11]. Some scholars even regard educational aspirations as the most effective variable for predicting educational attainment [12]. So, how do parents’

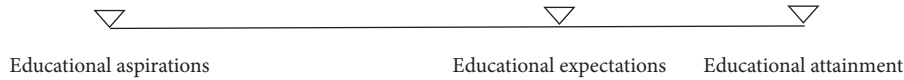


FIGURE 1: Educational aspirations, educational expectations, and educational attainment.

educational aspirations affect their children's academic accomplishments and educational attainment?

The Pygmalion effect clearly shows the mechanism of teachers' aspiration: teachers' high aspirations for students are passed on to students through positive attitudes and more praise, interaction, and other behaviors, which stimulates students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning. Positive feedback makes teachers more enthusiastic and gives more care to students. Such a virtuous circle pushes students' academic performance toward the desired direction, and finally, self-predictions can be realized [13].

The functional logic of parent aspirations is similar to teacher's ones, which can be summarized as parents' educational aspirations are closely related to their attitudes and behaviors. Higher educational aspirations often result in positive attitudes and supportive behaviors. Meanwhile, positive attitudes, in terms of encouragement, praise, and recognition, can be transformed into children's motivation and confidence in learning, helping to sharpen up academic performance; supportive behaviors will be transformed into more attention and support for children's academic studies, such as positively overcoming the difficulties encountered in the learning process together with their children, be willing to buy learning materials for children and encouraging them to participate in extracurricular tutoring classes, and actively communicating with school teachers, etc., which will also contribute to the improvement of academic performance [14, 15]. Pibquart and Ebeling's empirical research paper assessed systematically concurrent and longitudinal associations between parental educational expectations and child achievement, and factors that mediate the effect of expectations on achievement. The research found that associations between parental educational expectations and child achievement were partially mediated by children's educational expectations, child academic engagement, academic self-concept, and parental achievement-supportive behaviors [16].

However, the same aspirations are not always able to produce the same results, and the positive attitudes and supportive behaviors along with high educational aspirations also vary according to different conditions of those who are studied, and despite holding high educational aspirations for their children, some less educated or poorer parents who are in lack of resources may fail to communicate or give support timely and effectively as they desire due to their conditions. In other words, what really plays a role in the improvement of children's academic performance is not the "aspiration" in ideal, but the "expectation" in reality and the actual support in the attitude and behavior together with it, which are closely related to socioeconomic status and class. So, what are the factors that affect parents' educational expectations?

2.2.2. Factors Affecting Parents' Educational Expectations.

Studies have shown that many factors affect parents' educational expectations, including cultural traditions, the disparities in national/regional educational conditions, labor market conditions at the macrolevel, as well as family socioeconomic status, parents' educational level, children's academic performance or cognitive ability, and children's gender in microlevel. Some studies have attributed the high educational expectations of Asian parents to their children to traditional Confucian cultural traditions [17], and some studies have explored the impact of different educational systems and labor markets on educational expectations [18]. Since more research studies are (were) carried out under the same macrobackground, the microfamily background and children's characteristic factors are (were) more tested.

Among them, family socioeconomic status and parents' educational level are recognized as two vital factors affecting educational expectations [5, 9, 19–22]. The logic runs like parents with superior socioeconomic status, especially parents with higher education levels, are more aware of the role of education in obtaining individual status and maintaining the continuation of the family's superior status, so they pay more attention to the education of their children and hold a higher expectation for their children to get a higher level of education [5, 20]. However, a study based on the data of China's migrants found that family economic status did not affect parents' educational expectations, while children's academic performance, parents' education level, and life experience were the leading factors influencing parents' educational expectations [23]. A study using data from the "China Education Tracking Survey" not only found that different dimensions of family socioeconomic status have different effects on parents' educational expectations, but also found that there are gender differences in these effects. For boys, parents' education, occupation, and family cultural capital will have a positive impact on parents' educational expectations, but the family's economic level will have a negative impact; for girls, parents' educational level and family cultural capital will have a positive impact on parents' educational expectations, and the effect of occupation and family economic status is not significant [24]. Gofen believes that there is no difference in the educational expectations of parents from all walks for their children. They all hope that their children can go to college. The difference lies in their ability to accomplish expectations. Regarding the effect of gender, most studies believe that the educational expectations of Chinese parents have boy preferences and attribute this to the influence of cultural concepts [22, 25]; there are also some studies that do not support the gender preference in educational expectations [26]. The reason may be the popularization of education and the declining birth effect caused by the one-child policy.

2.2.3. The Potential Gap between Educational Aspirations and Expectations. The reason why so many research studies apply aspiration and expectation indiscriminately is that both concepts with the same meaning—possible selves. Because possible selves are not necessarily derived from empirical realities, there is always a potential gap between aspired-to selves, which the possible selves they want to become, and expected selves (the possible selves), which they believe they will become [27]. Since educational expectations are more realistic and highly susceptible to external cues, they are often lower than aspirations, particularly among disadvantaged groups [28, 29]. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore the external factors of the gap between educational aspirations and expectations to explain why the educational aspirations cannot be realized, for education intervention and school reform, and then for the upward mobility of children from disadvantaged groups. But this kind of research is rare in China.

2.2.4. Review of Existing Research. There have been some findings in existing research on the influencing factors of parent education expectations, but there are still some areas that need to be enriched. First, there is no strict distinction between educational aspirations and expectations, especially the study of Chinese society. Educational aspiration is the hope for the education level of their children in an ideal state. Although it is related to the class they belong to, they can more often than that get rid of the limitations of socioeconomic status. This is also why existing surveys often found that parents of different classes have the same educational expectation for their children.

Secondly, because “final educational attainment” data are more difficult to collect than “academic achievement,” the existing researches are likely to focus more on the impact of educational expectations on academic performance, while less attention has been paid to the relationship between educational expectations and final educational attainment. Although academic performance is closely related to the final education attainment, in reality, there are also many occasions that children with good academic performance cannot reach a higher education level due to various factors. Therefore, the two cannot be treated as the same. And the use of retrospective questionnaires (e.g., “Did your parents expect you to go to college when you were a teenager?”) is susceptible to the respondent’s current social status or educational achievements in collecting answers to educational expectations. Thus, the award situation arises in which the respondents are intended to blur the difference between educational expectations in childhood and adolescence, thereby affecting the reliability and validity of the measurement. In this way, in order to analyze the relationship between educational expectations and educational attainment, we must first solve the problem of data collection or the measurement of two variables.

Given the above considerations, based on national data, this study, by introducing the “education expectations” variable and regarding it as a substitute for “education acquisition,” endeavors to explore the influencing factors of

education aspirations and educational expectations, and the disparities between them so as to learn more about the elements affecting the realization of ideals, that is the family and personal factors resulting in the difference between educational aspirations and expectations.

3. Data, Variables, and Analysis Methods

3.1. Data. The data used in this study is derived from the China Urbanization and Child Development Survey (CUCDS) conducted by the China Economic and Social Data Center of Tsinghua University in 2012. The survey adopted a multistage stratification scheme and the PPS sampling method. In Mainland China, 500 villages were randomly selected from 28 provincial administrative units and 147 districts and counties except for Qinghai, Tibet, and Hainan, and then, field mapping was used to enumerate the probabilities. The sampling method and the Kish table sampling method are applied to sample households and household members, respectively, and conduct tests and interviews with 3–15-year-old children and their main caregivers in the sampled households. Children who meet the age requirements are required to take language, math, and English proficiency tests; the main caregiver needs to answer the “caregiver questionnaire” that covers all aspects of the child’s growth.

3.2. Variables

3.2.1. Dependent Variables. Parents’ educational aspirations and expectations. The options of parents’ educational aspirations were set as elementary school, junior high school, technical secondary school or vocational high school, high school, college, undergraduate, master, and doctorate. College education is a basic condition for finding a good job in contemporary China. Therefore, there is a clear difference between people who received college education and who did not receive college education in people’s minds. On the other hand, although we made very detailed measured both educational aspirations and expectations, the proportion of respondents with a college degree below is small, especially the educational aspirations, which is less than 5%. Based on the above analysis, educational aspirations are simply divided into “university education expectations” = 1 and “nonuniversity education expectations” = 0. The option setting and reassignment methods of parents’ educational expectations are the same as educational aspirations.

The gap between educational aspirations and expectations (hereinafter referred to as the gap between aspirations and expectations). In order to maximize the use of data, educational aspirations and expectations variables were reassigned as follow: “primary school” = 6 years; “junior high school” = 9 years; “secondary school or vocational high school” = 11 years; “high school” = 12 years; “college degree” = 15 years; “bachelor degree” = 16 years; “master degree” = 19 years; and “doctor degree” = 22 years. The value of the variable after assignment is 6–22. The larger the value (absolute value), the greater the difference between aspirations and expectations. A negative value indicates that the

TABLE 1: Frequency distribution of educational aspirations and expectations.

Educational aspirations/expectations	Frequency		Percentage		Percentage difference
	Aspirations	Expectations	Aspirations	Expectations	
Primary school	7	14	0.2	0.4	-0.2
Junior high school	35	220	1.0	6.2	-5.2
Secondary school/Vocational high school	14	104	0.4	2.9	-2.5
High school	114	631	3.2	17.7	-14.5
College degree	63	227	1.8	6.3	-4.5
Bachelor degree	2540	2105	71.1	58.9	12.2
Master degree	243	113	6.8	3.2	3.6
Doctor degree	557	158	15.6	4.4	11.2
Total	3573	3573	100.0	100.0	

Notes. The former frequency is the educational aspirations, and the latter frequency is the educational expectations; percentage difference refers to the percentage difference between educational aspirations and expectations.

expectation is less than the aspiration; a positive value indicates that the aspiration is greater than the expectation; 0 indicates that the aspiration is consistent with the expectation. See Table 1 for educational aspirations, expectations, and the gap between the two.

Table 1 shows that parents' educational aspirations for college education account for 95.2%, high school and below education aspirations are only 4.8%; parents' educational expectations for college education account for 72.9%, nonuniversity education expectations are 27.1%, and the difference between college education aspirations and college education expectations is 22.3%. The gap is distinct.

3.2.2. Independent Variables and Control Variables. The independent variables of this study are family socioeconomic status, family structure, family type, and cognitive level. The socioeconomic status of the family is explored by analyzing the following three variables: father's education level, father's occupation category, and family income per capita to represent the family's cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital. The family structure is measured by the variable of the number of children aged 0–15 years; the difference in family types is reflected by the child type variable. All children in this study are classified into four categories: left-behind children in rural areas, children in complete families in rural areas, migrant children, and urban children. Left-behind children refer to children under the age of 16 years who have stayed in rural areas for more than one month because their parents (both or one of them) go out for work or business; migrant children refer to those under the age of 16 years and have been living in urban areas with their migrant parents or business parents (both or one of them) for one month, while their household registration remains in rural area; children with complete rural families refer to children with rural household registration who live with nonmigrant parents in rural areas; urban children refer to children with urban household registration. This study uses the test scores of Chinese, mathematics, and English ability of children as the basis for measuring the level of their cognitive level so as to explore their impact on educational aspirations, expectations, and the gap between them. The gender of the children is the control variable. The descriptive

statistics of independent variables and control variables are shown in Table 2.

3.2.3. Analysis Method. Because educational aspirations and expectations are dichotomous variables, this study uses the logit regression model to analyze its influencing factors; while the gap between aspirations and expectations is a continuous variable, this study uses the linear regression model to analyze its influencing factors.

4. Analysis Results

4.1. Analysis of Factors Influencing Educational Aspirations. In Table 3, Model 1 adds the child's gender, child type, father's education level, the number of children aged 0–15 years in the family, family income per capita, and language cognition scores. The statistical results show that the father's education level and language recognition scores have a significant impact on parents' educational aspirations.

Specifically, the father's education level has a significant impact on educational aspirations. The higher the father's education level, the more distinct the college education aspirations for their children. Educational aspirations for college education of parents with junior high school, senior high school, and equivalent education, junior college education, or above are, respectively, 1.508 times ($e^{0.411}$, $p < 0.05$), 1.671 times (only reaching the significance level of 0.1), and 8.758 times compared with parents with primary education and below. Education level has a vital impact on educational aspirations, which is consistent with the conclusions of most existing studies. Meanwhile, children's language cognition scores have exerted an important impact on parents' educational aspirations. For every 1-point increase in language cognition level, the probability that parents have college education aspirations for their children increases by 1.042 times ($p < 0.001$).

Replace the Chinese cognitive scores in Model 1 with mathematical cognitive scores to get Model 2, and the conclusions obtained are the same as those of Model 1. The variables that have a significant impact on educational aspirations are still the father's education level and cognitive level. The higher the education level of the parents, the more distinct the college education aspirations of their children,

TABLE 2: Descriptive statistics of independent and control variables.

Variables	Weighted mean/ratio
Child type	
Left-behind children	0.20
Complete family children	0.38
Migrant children	0.16
Urban children	0.26
Father's education level	
Elementary school and below	0.25
Junior high school	0.46
High school and equivalent	0.21
University and above	0.08
Father's occupation	
Farmers and manual workers	0.37
Service personnel and skilled workers	0.37
Clerks, private entrepreneur, or self-employed industrialists	0.17
Management and professional and technical staff	0.09
Number of children of 0–15 years in the family (pcs)	1.55 (0.82)
Per capita household income in 2011 (thousand dollars)	11.27 (16.85)
Language cognitive level	100.16 (15.08)
Mathematical cognitive level	100.26 (15.11)
English cognitive level	99.99 (14.95)
Gender of the child (1 = male)	0.54

Notes. $N = 3573$, may not be 3573 due to partial exclusion of missing values from the sample; standard deviation in parentheses; cognitive level is the transformed standard score.

and the higher the children's mathematical cognitive scores, the more distinct the parents' college education aspirations.

The cognition level in Model 3 is English, and the conclusions obtained are different from Model 1 and Model 2. The father's education level does not reach a significant level, and only the children's English cognition level has a significant impact on educational aspirations. It displays like that for every 1-point increase in children's English cognition level, the probability that parents have college education aspirations for their children increases by 1.032 times.

Combining three models, it can be arguably stated that family type, family social capital, family economic capital, and family structure have no significant impact on educational aspirations, which is inconsistent with people's assumptions. Compared with parents of left-behind children in rural areas, other types of parents' college education aspirations are more advantageous; compared with parents of farmers and manual workers, parents of other occupations, especially parents of managers and professional technicians, have more advantages in their children's university education aspirations; compared with parents with low incomes, the educational aspirations of college education for their children of parents with high incomes are more advantageous; compared with parents with many children, the aspiration of college education for parents with fewer children is more advantageous. This may indicate that the important role of education has reached a consensus among all classes, and it is for this reason that the ideal educational aspirations do not show class differences.

The control variable gender has no significant effect, indicating that there is no significant difference in gender about whether parents have college education aspirations for their

children or not and showing that education for men and women has achieved equality at the level of parents' aspirations.

4.2. Analysis of Factors Influencing Educational Expectations.

Educational expectation is a predictive estimate of the level of education that children may reach. There are both similarities and distinct differences between educational aspirations and expectations. The analysis strategy is to include the same variables as the influencing factors of educational aspirations in the logit model to examine the influencing factors of educational expectations.

The statistics show that the following factors such as child type (i.e., family type), father's education level, number of children in the family, family income per capita, and cognitive level have a significant impact on parents' educational expectations; the impact of children's gender on parents' educational expectations has not reached a significant level; fathers occupation shows different effects in different models (see Table 4).

Specifically, in terms of family types, compared with parents of left-behind children, parents of migrant children, parents of rural complete families, and parents of urban children have more distinct college education expectations for their children. Taking Model 4 for example, the other three types of parents' educational expectations for their children's college education displayed advantages as 1.384 times, 1.441 times, and 3.059 times than that of parents of left-behind children.

The father's education level has a significant impact on educational expectations. The higher the education level, the more distinct the parents' expectations for their children's college education. This is evident in the three models.

TABLE 3: Logit regression analysis of educational aspirations.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender (female as reference)	0.187	0.171	0.116	0.173	0.157	0.219
Type of children (left-behind children as reference)						
Children in rural complete families	0.107	0.204	-0.012	0.209	0.001	0.258
Migrant children	0.305	0.291	0.132	0.297	0.747	0.407
Urban children	0.552	0.318	0.491	0.322	0.644	0.406
Father's education level (elementary school and below as reference)						
Junior high school	0.411*	0.186	0.374*	0.191	0.269	0.241
High school and equivalent	0.513	0.278	0.330	0.281	0.079	0.332
University and above	2.170*	1.006	1.933	1.001	1.010	1.026
Father's occupational category (farmers and manual workers as reference)						
Service personnel and skilled workers	0.031	0.198	0.000	0.201	0.340	0.249
Clerks, private entrepreneur, or self-employed industrialists	-0.011	0.290	-0.046	0.294	0.180	0.350
Management and professional and technical staff	-0.202	0.449	-0.018	0.446	1.770	0.976
Number of children aged 0–15 years in the family	-0.106	0.095	-0.122	0.093	-0.236	0.124
Per capita household income in 2011 (thousand dollars)	0.002	0.011	0.005	0.011	-0.006	0.008
Cognitive level	0.041***	0.006	0.040***	0.007	0.031***	0.007
Constant term	-1.337*	0.617	-1.079	0.690	-0.202	0.804
	-2LL = 1151.623, Pseudo $R^2 = 0.082$, Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$, N = 2888	-2LL = 1122.268, Pseudo $R^2 = 0.071$, Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$, N = 2843	-2LL = 727.376, Pseudo $R^2 = 0.073$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$, N = 1744			

Notes. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 4: Logit regression analysis of educational expectations.

Variables	Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender (female for reference)	0.130	0.088	0.001	0.088	0.179	0.111
Child type (left-behind children for reference)						
Children in rural complete families	0.325**	0.106	0.295**	0.107	0.209	0.136
Migrant children	0.366**	0.140	0.477***	0.146	0.374*	0.174
Urban children	1.118***	0.156	1.061***	0.158	1.453***	0.211
Father's education level (elementary school and below for reference)						
Junior high school	0.494***	0.096	0.470***	0.097	0.509***	0.123
High school and equivalent	0.829***	0.139	0.947***	0.148	0.594***	0.172
University and above	2.657***	0.552	2.554***	0.551	2.145**	0.684
Father's occupational category (farmers and manual workers for reference)						
Service personnel and skilled workers	-0.073	0.101	-0.093	0.101	0.027	0.127
Clerks, private entrepreneur, or self-employed industrialists	-0.287*	0.139	-0.145	0.145	-0.232	0.173
Management and professional and technical staff	0.197	0.254	0.237	0.253	1.295***	0.405
Number of children aged 0-15 years in the family	-0.242***	0.052	-0.226***	0.053	-0.341***	0.070
Per capita household income in 2011 (thousand dollars)	0.031***	0.007	0.032***	0.007	0.026**	0.009
Cognitive level	0.029***	0.003	0.026***	0.003	0.021***	0.004
Constant term	-2.669***	0.339	-2.272***	0.349	-1.748***	0.423
	-2LL = 3292.314,		-2LL = 3187.933,		-2LL = 2063.8722,	
	Pseudo R ² = 0.150,		Pseudo R ² = 0.145,		Pseudo R ² = 0.155,	
	Prob > chi ² = 0.000,		Prob > chi ² = 0.000,		Prob > chi ² = 0.000,	
	N = 2888		N = 2843		N = 1744	

Notes. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The number of children in a family reflects the structure of the family and also reflects the “dilution” of family resources. One more child will share the limited family resources. Therefore, in theory, the more children in the family, the less the parents need for their children’s college education. On the contrary, parents with fewer children have more distinct expectations for their children’s college education. This has been confirmed in the three models. Thus, it can be seen that the number of children in a family is an important factor influencing parents’ educational expectations.

Family income per capita reflects the economic status of the family, which is an important factor that affects parents’ education expectations. Taking Model 4 for example, for every 1,000 yuan increase in family income per capita, the probability of parents having college education expectations increases by 1.032 times.

Children’s cognitive level or academic performance is an important factor that affects parents’ educational expectations. The higher the children’s cognitive level, the greater the probability of parents having college education expectations. For example, every time children’s language cognition score increases by 1 point, the probability of parents’ college education expectations for their children increases by 1.030 times. The same goes for mathematics and English cognitive level.

It is worth mentioning the father’s occupation category. In the English cognitive model (model 6), the advantage of managers and professional technicians for their children’s university education reached 3.651 times that of farmers and manual workers ($p < 0.001$). It shows that compared with farmers and manual workers, the English scores of the

children of management and professional technicians are generally better.

The gender of children has no significant impact on parents’ educational expectations, which reflects a certain extent that in terms of gender education has achieved equality at the level of parents’ expectations.

Based on factors influencing education aspirations and educational expectations, there is a clear difference between the two. Under ideal conditions, it is acknowledged that parents tend to hold higher aspirations for their children’s education, regardless of the family’s economic status, the number of children in the family, the type of family, the gender of children, etc. However, in reality, parents’ educational expectations are affected both by family economic capital, family social capital, family cultural capital, family structure, and the family type, and by children’s academic performance.

4.3. Analysis of Factors Influencing the Disparity between Aspiration and Expectation. Rather than educational aspiration as an ideal, expectation is closer to reality. The gap between the two reflects the degree of realization of the ideal. The larger the gap, the greater the distance between the ideal and reality; the smaller the gap, the closer the ideal is to reality. Generally speaking, educational aspirations are always higher than expectations (very few cases where educational aspirations are higher than expectations are excluded). In order to make full use of the data, the study re-assigns the educational aspirations and expectations to the value of 6–22 years, so that the difference between the educational aspirations and expectations of the cases involved

TABLE 5: Multiple linear regression analysis of the disparity between aspirations and expectations.

Variables	Model 7		Model 8		Model 9	
	B	SD	B	SD	B	SD
Gender (female as reference)	-0.032	0.093	0.059	0.095	-0.040	0.117
Child type (left-behind children for reference)						
Children in rural complete families	0.037	0.127	0.053	0.129	0.245	0.166
Migrant children	-0.163	0.160	-0.197	0.164	-0.050	0.200
Urban children	-0.705***	0.153	-0.668***	0.156	-0.773***	0.199
Father's education level (elementary school and below for reference)						
Junior high school	-0.250*	0.115	-0.244*	0.117	-0.225	0.146
High school and equivalent	-0.216	0.147	-0.199	0.151	0.033	0.183
University and above	-0.200	0.231	-0.169	0.235	-0.233	0.290
Father's occupational category (farmers and manual workers for reference)						
Service personnel and skilled workers	0.204	0.113	0.191	0.115	0.220	0.143
Clerks, private entrepreneur, or self-employed industrialists	0.049	0.148	-0.008	0.152	0.159	0.187
Management and professional and technical staff	0.334	0.203	0.249	0.205	0.099	0.249
Number of children aged 0-15 years in the family	0.150*	0.060	0.182**	0.060	0.177*	0.079
Per capita household income in 2011 (thousand dollars)	-0.011***	0.003	-0.010**	0.004	-0.007#	0.004
Cognitive level	-0.018***	0.003	-0.021***	0.003	-0.013***	0.004
Constant term	3.936***	0.370	4.126***	0.369	3.203***	0.453
			$R^2 = 0.047,$	$R^2 = 0.053,$	$R^2 = 0.047,$	
			$F = 12.21***,$	$F = 13.37***,$	$F = 7.75***,$	
			$N = 3238$	$N = 3153$	$N = 2074$	

Notes. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

in the analysis is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 16, which can be analyzed by the employment of the multiple linear regression model. The analysis results are shown in Table 5.

Model 7 is the result of incorporating variables such as gender, child type, father's education level, father's occupation category, number of children in the family aged 0-15 years, family income per capita, and language cognitive level. Compared with Model 7, Model 8 and Model 9 replace the mathematics cognitive level and the English cognitive level for the language cognitive level, respectively.

Model 7 shows that the main factors affecting the disparity between aspiration and expectation are language cognition, family income, number of children in the family, and family type; the effects of gender, father's education level, and father's occupation category are insignificant. Specifically, under the premise that other conditions remain the same, every time the children's language cognition score increases by one point, the gap between aspiration and expectation decreases by 0.018 years; every time the family income per capita increases by 1,000 yuan, the gap reduced by 0.011 years; under the premise that other conditions remain unchanged, for every increase in the number of children in the family, the gap increases by 0.15 years; under the premise that other conditions remain unchanged, the gap between aspiration and expectation of urban children's parents is 0.705 years smaller than that of parents of left-behind children on average. The difference between parents of migrant children, parents of children from rural complete families, and parents of left-behind children has not reached a significant level. It is worth mentioning that in terms of the father's education level and the father's occupation category, although the gap between aspirations and expectations of

parents with high education levels is smaller compared with the low-educated parents, only those with junior high school education have reached a significant level. There is no significant relationship between the level of occupation and the size of the gap between aspiration and expectation, indicating that the difference between aspiration and expectation is not closely related to education level and professional status.

The conclusions of Model 8 and Model 9 are the same as those of Model 7. At the individual level, children's cognitive scores have an important impact on the gap between aspiration and expectation. The higher the cognitive score, the smaller the gap; at the family level, the gap between the aspiration and expectation is closely related to family economic capital, while family social capital and family cultural capital show no significant effect. The gap between the aspiration and expectations of parents of urban children is significantly smaller than that of parents of left-behind children in rural areas.

5. Limitations

Some limitations of the present analysis have to be mentioned. First, due to the limitation of data, variables confirmed in some empirical studies, such as academic motivation, self-regulating behaviors, academic self-perception, and attitudes toward teachers, have not been included in the model when analyzing the influencing factors, so the study cannot be fully compared with the existing studies. Second, studies have shown that educational aspirations and expectations change at different time points [30, 31]. In the study, educational aspirations and expectations have been modeled as a single point in time.

However, findings based on such analyses provide limited guidance toward the formation of intervention and policy [32]. Finally, in this article, educational aspirations and expectations are treated as dummy variables. Although the classification reflects the overall distribution trend of the data, the result is rough after all. More detailed classification techniques should be applied to conduct more accurate research.

6. Conclusion

Rather than the confusion of the two terms “aspiration based on subjective ideal” and “expectation based on objective reality” in existing studies, this study strictly distinguishes them. The former is called educational aspiration and the latter educational expectation. Based on the above, this study endeavors to analyze educational aspiration, expectation, and the factors influencing the disparity between them by using national sample data, and the following conclusions are drawn.

6.1. No Distinct Class Difference in Terms of Educational Aspiration. Although educational aspiration is not completely divorced from reality, it is arguably more of a wishing ideal. Therefore, when people have reached a consensus on the important role of education, the aspiration in an ideal state is free of many constraints. The study found that there is no significant effect between occupation category, economic income, family type, family structure, and the college education aspiration, except that father’s education level and children’s academic performance have significant impacts on it; that is, parents with high education levels are more likely to have college education aspiration for their children. Parents of their children with good academic performance are more likely to have college education aspirations for their children. Given the data 95.2% of the university education aspiration, it can be understood that Chinese parents universally have higher educational aspirations for their children, and there is no distinct class difference in parents’ “high expectation for their children’s bright future.”

6.2. Distinct Class Difference in Term of Educational Expectation. Compared with educational aspiration, the educational expectation is significantly more constrained. In addition to the impact of the education level and family type, it is also closely related to family structure and family economic conditions. Moreover, children’s academic performance or cognitive level contributes a lot to parents’ educational expectations. Therefore, if there is no distinct class difference in educational aspiration, the class difference is distinct in the sense of educational expectation. Children’s academic performance or cognitive level has an important influence on parents’ educational expectations, which seemingly makes educational expectations break through the limits of the class. However, compared with the disadvantaged class, children of the superior class have better academic performance and higher cognitive test scores. The

reality shows that it is still difficult to get rid of the influence of class [33, 34].

6.3. Realization of Educational Expectation Being Deeply Ingrained into the Socioeconomic Status. The gap between aspiration and expectation is the distance between ideal and reality. Analyzing its influencing factors is to dig out factors hindering the realization of ideals. The study found that the main factors affecting the realization of parents’ educational expectations are family economic status, family structure, family type, and children’s cognitive level. The logic of the role of family economic conditions is not difficult to understand. Although there are high expectations for children’s education, the limited economic conditions may eventually lead to the failure to achieve the desired education level. The number of children in a family affects the realization of educational expectations. It can be understood from the perspective of resource dilution. Under certain resource conditions, the consequence of sharing resources among multiple people is a decrease in the average education level. On the whole, compared with families with left-behind children, urban families have richer economic resources, fewer children, and parents with higher education levels. Therefore, the realization of their educational expectation is greater than that of families with left-behind children. Children’s academic performance or cognitive level has an important influence on the realization of expectations because, under the principle of merit-based admissions, academic performance is a key factor in educational triage. Better academic performance and higher cognitive levels more certainly ensure better education.

The above research findings mean that in the analysis of influencing factors of educational aspiration and expectation, it is not the best choice to use the family socioeconomic status variable in general, and the influence of family background should be analyzed from a more specific dimension.

The cognitive level of children has an important impact on educational aspiration, expectation, and especially the realization of educational expectations. It means that in recognition of the fact that education has an important role to play in the status acquisition, some families in poor economic conditions and with children having great academic performance may overcome the limitations of economic conditions and try to support their children to obtain a higher level of education, thereby breaking the intergenerational transmission of disadvantaged classes and realizing upward social mobility.

Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of the study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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