



DOI: 10.15804/tner.2023.74.4.03

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## A Quality School from the Perspective of Parents' Expectations

### Abstract

A child's entry into primary school is an important life event for parents that is accompanied not just by the child's expectations but also those of the parents themselves. We have attempted to interpret them in the present study, which presents the results of a quantitative research investigation conducted through random multi-stage stratified sampling based on analysing relevant surveys and building on the authors' previous qualitative investigations. The sample studied was 504 parents of pupils in Years 1 and 2 who attended selected primary schools in the 2020/2021 school year. The main data collection tool was an online questionnaire that mapped primary school choice strategies and parents' expectations of the school, schooling, and teachers. These factors were then examined in relation to the variable choice of an educational program and parents' attitudes toward education (an academic approach versus a personalistic one). We found that parents' expectations of school choice are principally divided according to whether respondents believe school should fulfil the more traditional role of education or whether they prefer their children to develop their personalities and seek an alternative educational program or school for their offspring.

**Keywords:** *expectations, family, primary school, teacher, quantitative research, questionnaire*

## **Introduction**

Parents' expectations towards school are a key phenomenon that reflects their perceptions and projects them into choosing a "suitable school" for their child. The very phenomenon of this decision-making is evidence of the emancipation of many parents, who want to actively influence the choice of a school and thus direct the educational prospects of their offspring. What do we know about this choice process? Evidently, the education system has differentiated considerably over the last 30 years, and many schools have profiled themselves in specific ways that parents perceive as high-quality, innovative, traditional, preparing children for life, kind, or accommodating children's needs, etc. We could go on and on, but how does parents perceive a 'good school'? Do teachers, the "right" pedagogical approach, the concept behind the school, or its facilities each play a role? Parents have different ideas about what a school should look like, ranging from how accessible it is to the quality of education, the preparation of pupils for further studies, the professional readiness of the teaching staff, cooperation with families, or extracurricular activities. This brief introduction introduces the complexity and diversity of this issue and shows that many factors influence this decision-making process; we will try to approach them through a quantitative investigation. In doing so, we build on previously conducted surveys.

## **Research Problem**

From the research that has dealt with this issue (Wilder, 2014; Greger et al., 2015; Sauhering & Lotze, 2015; Tatlah, 2019; Lindberg & Güven, 2021; Sollars, 2023;), the following findings emerged after analysis:

- parents' expectations towards school are activated before their child starts school,
- such expectations can be broken down into several areas:
  - in relation to school,
  - in relation to the personality of the teacher,
  - in relation to the school's leadership,
- the priorities identified among the parental expectations include:
  - a safe school environment,
  - the competence of the teacher and the quality of the cooperation between the family and the school,
- parental expectations change and evolve in the context of a changing social climate (in relation to the teacher and school management) and in relation

to their children (especially in relation to the skills and knowledge to be acquired by children at school).

It was also evident from the research that parents project ideas onto their expectations of the following:

- educational content (curriculum),
- educational objectives (learning outcomes),
- the teacher's various roles,
- the possibility of pupils' status and their own role in the educational process.

We based our investigation on Bertrand (2003), who defined seven main educational streams. These were compared with the results of the semi-structured interviews that preceded our quantitative research investigation<sup>1</sup>. In their subsequent analysis, it became clear that parents mostly approach school and education either in a traditional way (as an academic concept) or emphasise children developing their personalities (as a personalistic concept). This finding was the basis for the questionnaire used.

## Defining the Concept of Expectations

The concept of an expectation is understood from a psychological perspective as an emotion accompanying a person during a stimulus event associated with a new environment and specific physiological changes (Izard, 2013; Burkitt, 2014). Its aim is, therefore, to prepare a person to orient him/herself in the unknown. If the expectation is fulfilled, we speak of joy or hope. Otherwise, we speak of fear, anger or sadness (Miccelli & Castelfranchi, 2015). Expectations can relate to people, events, and the self and are present in various social interactions (DeLamater et al., 2018; Khmil & Popovych, 2019).

From a sociological perspective, expectations are associated with a social role (Biddle, 2013; Craib, 2015; Mead, 2015), usually defined as a particular mode of behaviour associated with a given social position or social status. For the bearer, it implies certain rights and obligations which, when not fulfilled in accordance with the expectations of the environment, can establish a certain kind of conflict – intra-role conflict, inter-role conflict and self-role conflict (cf. Biddle, 2013; Nadel, 2013; Smith et al., 2014). If the parents' expectations are to be fulfilled (Phillipson et al., 2014), it is also important that the roles and associated expectations of each actor are clearly defined. In a school, this may take the form of, for example, defining the assessment criteria for pupils, clearly describing opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> More at: <https://journals.muni.cz/pedor/article/view/30993/26348>

collaboration, and setting up effective communication, but it could also take the form of how the school presents itself, what it says about itself through various tools, etc.

## **Methodology**

### **General Research Background**

Our research subject was the phenomenon of parental expectations of their children's school, as defined above. We focused mainly on primary education, i.e., parents who had children in the first or second year in a selected primary school in the South Moravian Region. In line with the research problem statement, we defined the research aim, the main research question and specific research questions.

The investigation aimed to answer the main research question: What are parents' expectations in relation to a school at the beginning of their child's compulsory schooling, and which factors condition these expectations?

Based on this question, the following specific research questions were designed:

1. How do parents' attitudes towards education influence their expectations of a school?
2. What factors are involved in selecting an appropriate primary school?
3. What information sources do parents rely on when choosing a suitable primary school?
4. Which characteristics of the school are important to them in making their decision?
5. What should a school develop in their child besides the basic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic)?
6. What should the school enable their child to gain?
7. What key qualities, skills, and abilities do parents expect from their child's teacher?
8. What ways of working do parents expect from their child's teacher?

### **Research Sample**

The sample for the questionnaire survey was drawn from parents of pupils in grades 1 and 2 attending a selected primary school in the South Moravian Region in the 2020/2021 school year. These schools were fully organised (schools that pro-

vide education for children aged 6 to 15), featured small classes, and were either public, private or church-established schools. To ensure the sample's high level of representativeness, we applied the principle of random multi-stage stratified sampling. From the set of all the primary schools for which data were obtained from the publicly available data from the Education Ministry, a set of 32 primary schools from the South Moravian Region, i.e., 18 primary schools in Brno and 14 primary schools outside of Brno, was defined with the help of a random number generator (in Excel). There were 27 public schools, two church-established schools and three private schools. A request was sent to the principals or deputy principals of these schools via e-mail to distribute an electronic version of the questionnaire to teachers of grades 1 and 2 and for them to distribute it to their pupils' parents. Data collection took place from September 2020 to January 2021. 2,966 potential respondents were contacted. 504 respondents responded to the call, with a return rate of 17%. In our analysis sample, 433 were female (86%). The modus age range (335, 66% of respondents) was 31–40 years. The sample included 271 respondents with a university degree (54%). Most lived in a municipality, i.e., a settlement with a population of 1,000 or more, i.e., 456 respondents (91%). Almost 182 (36%) reported having a monthly income of more than 40,000 CZK. 287 parents interviewed were in a situation of choosing a suitable primary school for their child for the first time (57%). 417 respondents had previously chosen a public kindergarten for their child (83%). These curriculum characteristics were also reflected on. In 411 cases, respondents chose a traditional kindergarten educational program for their child (82%). This trend was also reflected in their subsequent choice of primary school. 396 (79%) chose a public primary school, while 407 (81%) chose a classical curriculum. These were mainly fully-organised schools, as indicated by 475 respondents (94%), and catchment-area schools, as indicated by 269 respondents (53%). The respondents were satisfied with the selected schools. Regarding these parents' approaches to education, most preferred a personalistic approach, i.e., 408 respondents (81%). Just 96 respondents favoured the academic approach, i.e., the classical approach to education (19%).

## **Instrument and Procedures**

The research instrument was a self-constructed questionnaire based on findings from the qualitative analysis of the interviews undertaken with parents in the first phase. We incorporated and then operationalised the variables that are part of the research questions (as well as the concept of academic versus personalistic theories) into the sub-items. In terms of content, the first part of the questionnaire

focused on choosing a primary school, parents' expectations of the school, and their opportunities for involvement in school life. The second part focused on mapping parents' attitudes towards schooling in general and their expectations in relation to teachers. It was followed by items relating to the sociological characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, education, size of the municipality in which they live, occupation, etc.). The questionnaire contained both closed and dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions (with the possibility of selecting the three most important) and Likert scales with a five-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree), where respondents expressed their level of (dis)agreement with the items presented. The questionnaire was subjected to expert evaluation and piloted on an available group of 24 parents, then administered electronically online. The data obtained were exported to MS Excel and then to TIBCO STATISTICA 13 software.

## **Research Results**

The investigation has yielded interesting findings that will allow us to understand parents' expectations when choosing a suitable primary school more deeply, and we will approach these through the answers to the sub-research questions. First, let us answer the question (1) related to Bertrand's educational strategies, as mentioned above. Our data confirm that parental attitudes toward the sub-items of our questionnaire, and thus toward the whole issue of school choice, are principally divided according to whether respondents believe a school should play more of a classical (traditional) educational role as per Bertrand's academic stream; in practice, parents often choose a classical educational program. Those who prefer the child to develop their personality (the personalistic stream) look for an alternative educational program or school for their offspring. This grouping of the variable (personalistic versus academic expectations) was subsequently reflected based on the interpretation below.

*Choice of school* (questions 2, 3, 4) – What factors influenced parental decisions in choosing an appropriate school? What information sources did parents rely on when deciding on a suitable primary school for their children?

For the proponents of an academic education and those who chose a traditional curriculum for their child, the main factors were the accessibility of the school, the reputation and environment of the school, and their own experience. Conversely, for advocates of personalist education and those who chose an alternative educa-

tion programme for their child, the school's focus, vision, and openness were the main factors. The most important source of information on which both groups of respondents relied in making their decisions was recommendations from friends (172 respondents, 34%), followed by personal experience (143 respondents, 28%) and public meetings with the school (111 respondents, 22%). As for other sources of information, they were not statistically significant for the respondents.

*Parental expectations of schools and schooling* (questions 5, 6) – What should the school develop and enable the child to acquire in addition to the basic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic)?

In the case of the advocates for academic education and those who chose a classical education programme for their child, the skills were mainly language literacy, financial literacy, and the broad knowledge and skills needed to successfully pass the entrance exam to secondary school. On the other hand, for the respondents who advocated for a personalistic education and chose an alternative education program for their child, these were mainly social skills, cultural knowledge, manual skills, ethical values, freedom to learn and learning for life.

*Parental expectations of teachers* (questions 7, 8) – What key qualities, skills and abilities should their child's teacher have? What ways of working do parents expect their child's teacher to use in the classroom?

In relation to parental expectations of a teacher, we first investigated how important it is for respondents that a teacher has a university degree, pedagogical and psychological training, and particular personal qualities. The importance of a university education was particularly emphasised by proponents of academic education and those who had a child in a primary school with a traditional curriculum. As for the importance of the teacher's pedagogical and psychological professional education, no difference was shown among the respondents in relation to that factor in choosing an educational program for their child and their attitude towards education. No statistically significant difference was found among the respondents as to the importance of teachers' personal backgrounds concerning choosing an educational programme for their child. On the contrary, however, the importance of a teacher's personality was confirmed in relation to parents preferring a personalistic approach to education.

Let us now look at what qualities and abilities parents expect of teachers. A statistically significant divide in the preference for an academic or a personalistic choice is also confirmed. For the proponents of academic education and those who had a child in a primary school with a traditional curriculum, the main points empha-

sised were professionalism, a positive relationship with children, patience, a sense of fairness, interesting teaching methods and up-to-date teaching materials. As for advocates of personalistic education and those who chose an alternative educational program for their child, on the contrary, the main points emphasised were natural authority, the ability to empathise, an individual approach to education, the criteria used to evaluate pupils, open communication with parents, motivation for lifelong learning, promotion of cooperation between pupils, and space for creative ideas.

When analysing the data, an interesting finding for us was the discovery of a link between parental expectations for their children's development in school and parental expectations of teachers. It turned out that in relation to the teacher, some areas were high priority, and some were unimportant. For example, parents who emphasised the development of language, financial skills, computer literacy, or broad knowledge, as well as mastery of the entrance exams to secondary school, chiefly expected the teacher to have a higher education, interesting teaching methods, and up-to-date teaching materials. By contrast, parents who emphasised their child developing social skills, aesthetic sensitivity, ethical values, friendships, or the ability to learn to think independently, expected the teacher to have personal qualities, including support for cooperation among students, the ability to accept criticism, and the ability to provide space for the realisation of students' creative ideas.

These findings represent the testimonies of parents in our selected South Moravian Region. It would be worthwhile to conduct this questionnaire survey in other regions and compare whether the findings are the same or different. Each region has its own specificities, which are reflected in the expectations and requirements of parents towards the school.

## **Discussion**

The research has confirmed that for many parents, the choice of school is a significant turning point in their child's life. Parents are interested in the current school system and show some signs of dissatisfaction with it, which leads to discussions of this subject on the Internet, the development of various web portals, or even the establishment of their own schools. It is evidenced by the growing number of private primary schools, of which there are already 255, with almost 20 000 pupils by the end of the 2020/2021 school year<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The number of pupils is based on the statistical yearbook of the Education Ministry for the 2020/2021 school year. More at: <http://toiler.uiv.cz/rocnka/rocnka.asp>



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As in the research on strategies for choosing a suitable primary school (Simonova, 2017) and parental expectations of schools (see the mentioned studies), we found that accessibility and school size resonated strongly in parents' decision-making. This requirement was also influenced by the school's encounters with the public, parents' friends' recommendations, and parents' personal experiences with the school, either in their own childhood or as mediated through an older sibling. The school's reputation and environment also played a role. Moreover, for parents who preferred a personalistic approach to education, the school's openness, focus, and vision were also important. All of this was related to their expectations.

In relation to the school and teaching, the main requirement was for a safe environment, which was often combined with the requirement that the children feel comfortable, happy and, above all, protected from violence (bullying) or other socially pathological phenomena. These aspects of a safe environment and a favourable school climate were accompanied by the expectation that children should be encouraged to cooperate, that the teaching regime should be appropriate, and that parents should be friendly. The school should stimulate children's interest in learning and link their learning to everyday experiences. Learning should be free and directed towards lifelong learning.

In relation to the teacher, the most important requirement was the teacher's character qualities and didactic skills, in particular, to be a natural authority, to have a positive attitude toward children, to be able to engage children, to approach them individually, and to give them space for creative ideas. In terms of teaching methods, the use of non-traditional teaching methods, up-to-date teaching materials and establishing assessment criteria for the pupils were the most important requirements.

## **Conclusions**

The questionnaire survey showed that the conditions in which education takes place and other educational factors are meaningful to parents. Their demands are not going unheeded and are beginning to be reflected in systemic changes in the education system, particularly in the Czech Republic's Education Policy Strategy 2030+. Its main objectives are: 1) the acquisition of the necessary competencies for life and 2) the reduction of inequality in access to quality education. The

planned changes are divided into several stages and will be gradually implemented in practice. Thus, in the spirit of Delors' formulation of the four pillars (Delors, 2013), schools should pay equal attention to learning to know (tools of cognition, critical and independent thinking, curiosity, attentiveness); learning to act (life skills); learning to live together (self-respect and respect for others, tolerance of difference); and learning to be (self-reflection, self-regulation, responsibility). It should be matched with a meaningful curriculum that develops the pupil in all aspects and is important for further exploration and learning. We would like to agree with Delors and hope that these changes in the education system will soon lead to improvements in the quality of education, teaching, and the schools themselves, in line with parents' expectations.

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