

Parents' Educational Expectations and their Social–Psychological Patterning

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ABSTRACT *This study set out to examine the ways in which the educational position of parents organizes the associations between their assessments of the competence of their children and their educational expectations for their children. The subjects represented two contrasting groups in terms of their post-primary education: academically educated (n = 126) and vocationally educated (n = 375) parents. They were asked to assess their child's abilities and school success and to estimate the probability of their child's entering gymnasium (upper secondary school). The results indicated that for the academically educated parents their child's entering gymnasium was almost self-evident, whereas for the vocationally educated parents it was a choice situation. The educational expectations of the vocationally educated parents were more strongly and in more ways patterned according to the competence estimations than were those of the academically educated parents. The expectations of the academically educated parents were organized by a dualistic differentiation between the cognitive and the practical abilities, while those of the vocationally educated parents were organized by their assessments of the child's cognitive competence and school orientation. The findings suggest that the interpretations parents make of their children's competence can be regarded as social representations of educability: they organize educational expectations socially, contain an evaluative hierarchy of abilities and their use varies according to the educational position of the parent.*

Key words: *parental expectations; social representations of intelligence; social class*

INTRODUCTION

Notions of ability are constitutive to any school system. The pupil's educability, his/her educational potential, is customarily defined in terms of his/her assessed competencies, i.e. his/her school success and the abilities attributed to him/her: who is entitled to what kind of education. Our focus in the present study was the question whether parents' assessments of their children's competencies are connected with

the educational expectations placed on the child, which expectations may have crucial consequences for the child's future educational career.

Theoretically, we examined parents' assessments as social representations (Moscovici, 1988). What this means is that notions are examined as group notions, as constructions anchored onto group membership (Doise *et al.*, 1994). In the present context, the groups were defined in relation to the school system, i.e. in terms of the parents' position in the educational hierarchy. Furthermore, the school system can be seen as a major social institution, whose ideology and practices adhere to the predominant view of educability. According to this view, educability is considered an individual and mainly cognitive ability, i.e. the highest educational value is ascribed to cognitive-theoretical competencies and such education as fosters them (Danziger, 1997).

When the carrier system of the social representations is included in the analysis of social interpretations, attention is also paid to the relationship of the group to the representation, often hegemonic in nature, endorsed by the institution. From this perspective, the higher up the group is situated in the educational hierarchy, the closer to the predominant notion are its expectations and notions, and vice versa. Consequently, in this study we examined parents as groups defined by education. Our research question was how the connections between the assessments of the child's competence and the educational expectations are organized among parents of different educational positions. Through this comparison we seek to obtain social-psychological knowledge of the process of selection in education.

In the present study the parents' educational expectations were operationalized into an estimate they were asked to give about the likelihood of their 3rd or 6th grade children continuing his/her education in upper secondary school ('gymnasium'). This choice is very consequential for the child's further education and future social position. Although educational opportunities in Finland have become more versatile, the 3 year gymnasium following the 9 year obligatory comprehensive school is still the main avenue to university studies. Traditionally, the all-round educational 3 year course of the gymnasium, an alternative to the various vocational/practical schools, has been regarded as the gateway to higher theoretical studies. This basic two-fold division of educational routes manifests the stratification of knowledge contained in the syllabus, which includes such assumptions as the superiority of academic/theoretical knowledge and the undervaluing of practical knowledge (Young, 1998). The estimation asked of the parents was targeted, then, at the juncture of the symbolic and the social distinctions in the system of education, so that their choices presumably accentuated the parents' considerations of their children's competencies precisely along the theory-praxis dimension.

Academically educated parents are close to the school system and its verbal/cognitive definition of educability. Cognitive capability is in accord with the very definition of the kind of education, i.e. 'theoretical' education, which these parents have successfully accomplished. Likewise, the children of highly educated parents succeed better at school than others and the expectations of these parents for their children's education are aimed at an academic education (Bynner, 1972). The pupils who succeed at school are precisely those who possess the verbal/cognitive

skills emphasized and required by the school routines. There is empirical evidence to show that highly educated parents are indeed inclined to support a differential-cognitive view of intellectual abilities (Räty & Snellman, 1998). Presumably, in the conceptions of lower education parents, the group which is further away from the school, cognitive skills are not so central because these parents may regard themselves as less proficient in the academic skills required at school (Brantlinger, 1985). In particular, vocationally educated parents, in accord with their vocational training and identity, may well highlight and value practical skills in their views of ability.

The educational expectations that parents place on their children have been noted to be tied up with their own education: parents hope that their child will get an education at least to the level they accomplished (Smith, 1989; for Finland, see Kivinen & Rinne 1995), which is then also reflected in the children's own expectations (Ahola & Nurmi, 1997). On the other hand, education is an avenue to social rise, especially if the educational system is seen to offer the same opportunities for all, regardless of their social background, to progress according to their individual abilities and efforts, as promised by the post-World War II meritocratic ideology of the comprehensive school (Brown, 1990).

Even so, parents' different positions in the educational hierarchy, along with different educational experiences, lead them to make different choices for their children's education. According to a recent study conducted in Finland (Havén, 1999), out of the 17–18-year-old children of academically educated fathers, 79% were studying at a gymnasium and 11% at a vocational school in 1995. For these parents their child's going to the gymnasium seems a self-evident choice. At the same time, out of the children of vocationally educated fathers, 52% were studying at a gymnasium and 34% at a vocational school. For these parents the situation is more complex. As Seginer (1983) puts it

when lower-class parents say they want their children to go as far as possible in education they evidently define it in terms of what is realistic for a lower-class child rather than in terms of the full range of opportunities existing in their society. (pp. 10–11)

On the other hand, lacking a personal experience of higher education, less educated parents feel uncertain about the chances of their child's doing well in gymnasium (see for example Mehan *et al.*, 1996). It is therefore possible that the feedback given by the school about the child's progress carries a higher significance for the ability assessments and educational expectations of less educated parents than for those of highly educated parents (see for example Entwistle & Hayduk, 1978; Lareau, 1989). Moreover, for vocationally educated parents in particular, a practical education represents a noteworthy, positive choice for their child's course of post-primary education. In other words, the range of expectations may well be wider among the vocationally educated parents than among the academically educated parents (Rodman & Voydanoff, 1978; Gorman, 1998).

To recapitulate, our research aspired to bring forth novel elements in the field of social representations of education. Instead of examining parents' notions at a general level, we focused on the ways in which representations anchored onto social

positions and formed in relation to the institution of the school show up in a particular and consequential activity: how do differently educated parents' competence assessments of their children organize their educational expectations?

Since vocationally educated parents have a more complicated relationship to higher education than academically educated parents, we expected the competencies of the child, i.e. his/her abilities and school success, to play a stronger role in guiding the educational expectations of less educated parents than those of highly educated parents. We further assumed the expectations of highly educated parents to be more influenced than those of vocationally educated parents by the differential representation of ability, which makes a categorical distinction between the highly esteemed cognitive skills and other skills.

Since ability is also a gender-bound educational concept (see for example Caplan *et al.*, 1997), we deemed it reasonable to include the gender of the parent and the child in our analyses, although we formulated no hypotheses pertaining to their effects. Neither did we formulate any hypotheses about the effects of the child's grade level (age), but we still wanted to include the child's grade level in our analyses, as grade level comparisons enable us to explore just how early on the educational expectations are formed and to draw cautious conclusions about the influence of the school on parents' assessments.

METHOD

The subjects were a nationwide and fairly representative sample of parents, both mothers and fathers, who had a child aged 9–10 (3rd grader) or 12–13 (6th grader). The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire dealing with the parents' views on their children's school work. The response rate was 51% for the fathers, 66% for the mothers and 59% for the whole sample. Of the total of 938 respondents, 56% were mothers and 44% fathers.

For the purposes of the present study we selected two groups which contrasted in terms of their post-primary education: academically educated ($n = 126$) and vocationally educated ($n = 375$) parents. The mean age of the academically educated parents was 42 years ($SD = 4.5$). Among them, 46% were mothers and 54% fathers; 39% of them had a daughter and 61% a son; and 48% of the children were 6th graders and 52% 3rd graders. The mean age of the vocationally educated parents was 41 years ($SD = 5.7$). Among them, 54% were mothers and 46% fathers; 40% of them had a daughter and 60% a son; and 54% of the children were 6th graders and 46% 3rd graders.

In the general instructions the parents were asked to give their assessments with regard to the child who was in the 3rd or 6th grade.

Assessment of School Success

In one part of the questionnaire the parents were asked to estimate their child's school success in the different subjects of comprehensive school on a five point rating scale anchored by 'clearly below average' and 'clearly above average'. The

ratings were factor analysed according to the principal axis solution and the factors obtained were rotated to a varimax criterion. The analysis yielded two factors, which together accounted for 34% of the total variance. High loadings on the first factor were evinced by the theoretical-verbal subjects: mathematics, mother tongue, foreign languages and science. The second factor showed high loadings for the practical subjects: handicrafts, art and music. Mean variables were constructed according to these two sets of items. Cronbach's α for these variables were 0.68 for the theoretical subjects and 0.60 for the practical subjects.

Assessment of Abilities

Another part of the questionnaire was labeled 'Description of your child'. Its instruction read as follows:

Having closely observed your child's development, you have formed a clear picture of him/her and his/her distinctive characteristics. We now ask you to assess how well the following statements describe your child.

The task involved 36 short descriptions, which the parents were asked to assess on a five point scale anchored by 'very little' and 'very much'. The attributes were derived from previous studies (for example Rätty & Snellman, 1992; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993) and tested in a pilot study. The ratings were factor analysed according to the principal axis solution and the factors produced were rotated to a varimax criterion. The analysis gave five factors, which accounted for 42% of the total variance. The following dimensions were revealed and corresponding mean scales constructed: problem solving skills (e.g. 'understands things quickly', 'intelligent', 'is able to integrate different things'), prudence and school orientation (e.g. 'goes into problems thoroughly', 'diligent', 'makes definite plans before acting'), social skills (e.g. 'ready to help others', 'friendly', 'adaptive'), reflection (e.g. 'eager to tell stories', 'interested in the world and its phenomena', 'ponders on matters atypical for one's age') and practical creativity (e.g. 'creative', 'artistic', 'dexterous'). The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's α) of these variables were quite satisfactory, with an average of 0.79 and a range of 0.70–0.90. The construction of these measures is reported in more detail in Rätty *et al.* (1999).

Expectation of the Child's Future Education

The parents were requested to estimate the probability of their child's entering 'gymnasium' on a five point scale anchored by 'not at all likely' and 'very likely'. In Finland children normally start gymnasium at age 15, after completing the 9 year comprehensive school. The parents were asked to give their estimation about 3 or 6 years before the actual choice was to be made.

We started the examination of our data by comparing the assessments of the academically educated and the vocationally educated parents regarding the probability of their child entering gymnasium and the child's school success and abilities. We then examined, by means of analyses of variance, the associations of the parents'

assessments of their children's abilities and school success with their educational expectations for the child.

RESULTS

Estimated Probabilities of Entering Gymnasium

A clear statistically significant difference was noted between the academically and the vocationally educated parents in their ratings of the likelihood of their child entering gymnasium [$\chi^2(4) = 62.58, P < 0.0001$; see Table I]. Almost all academically educated subjects (92%) assumed that their child would eventually enroll in a gymnasium, with the most within-group variation being between the alternatives 'fairly probable' and 'very probable'. Although the majority of the vocationally educated subjects also expected their child to enroll in a gymnasium (61%), many of them (16%) were uncertain and many (23%) considered the probability low rather than high.

Assessments of School Success and Abilities

Comparisons of the means showed that there was no significant difference between the parent groups in their assessment of their child's success in practical school subjects, whereas the academically educated parents attributed more success in theoretical subjects to their children than did the vocationally educated parents (Table II).

As also displayed in Table II, two statistically significant differences were ascertained in the assessments of abilities. The academically educated respondents emphasized problem solving skills in their children, whereas the vocationally educated respondents accentuated their children's practical creativity.

In sum, there appeared a qualitative difference between the academically and the vocationally educated parents in their educational expectations and the way in which they described their children's competencies. It seemed reasonable, then, to examine the patterning of the educational expectations separately in each education group.

TABLE I. Per cent distributions of vocationally and academically educated parents' estimations of the probability of their child's entering 'gymnasium'

Probability	Vocationally educated (<i>N</i> = 358)	Academically educated (<i>N</i> = 123)
Not at all probable	7	1
Not very probable	16	5
Cannot say	16	2
Fairly probable	33	28
Very probable	28	64
Total	100	100

TABLE II. Comparison of the means of vocationally and academically educated parents' assessments of their children's school success and abilities

	Vocationally educated	Adademically educated	t_{494}
Success in theoretical subjects	3.61	4.02	- 6.94 ^a
Success in practical subjects	3.62	3.59	0.54
Problem-solving skills	3.77	3.96	- 2.91 ^b
Prudence	3.69	3.71	- 0.26
Social skills	4.09	4.05	0.53
Reflection	3.78	3.72	1.00
Practical creativity	3.75	3.57	2.05 ^c

^a $P < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

^b $P < 0.01$.

^c $P < 0.05$.

The Patterning of Expectations

Analyses of variance (the general linear model of the SPSS package) were conducted with the estimated probability of the child entering gymnasium as the dependent variable and the assessed abilities and school success, the parent's gender and the child's gender and grade level as the independent variables. The assessments of school success and abilities were dichotomized on the basis of their medians in the total sample. To avoid excessively low frequencies in individual cells, only main effects and two-way interactions were determined.

In respect of our use of analysis of variance, it should be noted that the distribution of the dependent variable was rather skewed, particularly in the group of academically educated parents. However, the error variance of the dependent variable was equal across both groups according to Levene's test ($P > 0.10$). We can therefore estimate that the distribution deviating from the normal does not have a significant effect on the F values.

The Academically Educated Parents

For the academically educated parents the adjusted r^2 of the general linear analysis was 0.32. The analysis did not bring out any statistically significant main effects. Instead, three significant interactions were noticed. The first interaction was between the assessments of success in theoretical and practical subjects [$F(1,106) = 5.72$, $P < 0.02$]. The lowest likelihood of entering gymnasium was attributed to children who were not good at either theoretical or practical subjects, and the highest likelihood, interestingly, to children assessed to be good at theoretical subjects but not good at practical subjects (Figure 1).

The second significant interaction was between the assessments of social and problem solving skills [$F(1,106) = 12.16$, $P < 0.001$]. The lowest expectations were, again, ascribed to children who had neither good problem solving skills nor good social skills and, interestingly, to children who had both good social skills and

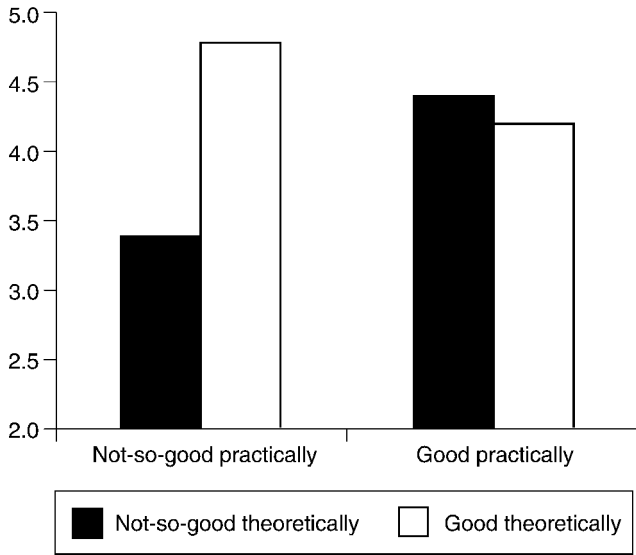


FIG. 1. The interaction between the child’s estimated success in practical and theoretical school subjects with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child’s entering gymnasium: the academically educated parents’ assessments (estimated marginal means).

problem solving skills, and the highest expectations were attributed to children with good social skills coupled with not good problem solving skills and children with good problem solving skills but not good social skills (Figure 2).

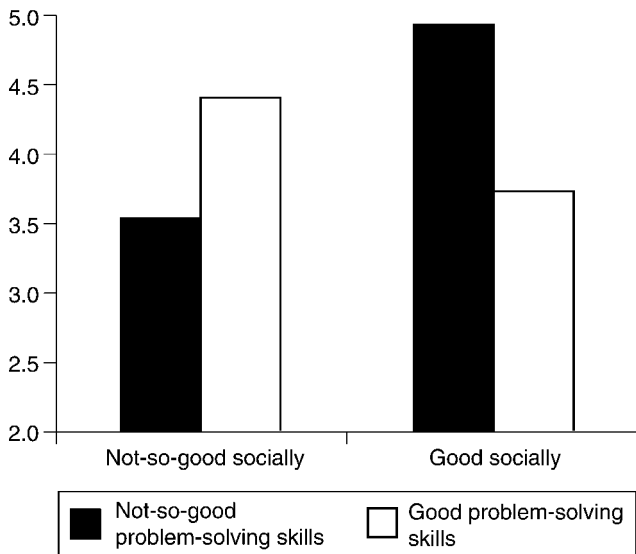


FIG. 2. The interaction between the child’s estimated social and problem-solving skills with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child’s entering gymnasium: the academically educated parents’ assessments (estimated marginal means).

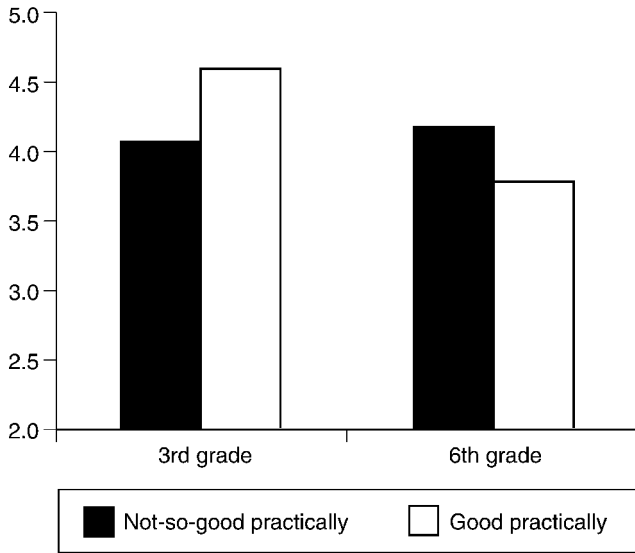


FIG. 3. The interaction between the child's grade level and estimated success in practical school subjects with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child's entering gymnasium: the academically educated parents' assessments (estimated marginal means).

The third significant interaction was between the assessment of success in practical subjects and the child's grade level [$F(1,106) = 4.18, P < 0.05$]. Among children assessed as weak at practical subjects, the child's grade level did not affect the estimated probability of the child entering gymnasium (Figure 3). However, among those assessed as successful practically, the expectations were higher for the 3rd grade than the 6th grade children, i.e. the effect of estimated success in practical subjects tended to lower rather than raise the parents' educational expectations as the child advanced to a higher grade level.

The Vocationally Educated Parents

For the vocationally educated parents the adjusted r^2 of the general linear analysis was 0.43, i.e. the analysis accounted for 11 more per cent of the variance than for the academically educated parents. Five statistically significant main effects were produced, three of which, the child's grade level, success in theoretical subjects and problem solving skills, were further specified by significant interactions. The remaining two main effects concerned the child's gender [$F(1,326) = 5.92, P < 0.02$] and the assessment of social skills [$F(1,326) = 4.71, P < 0.03$]: girls were expected to enter gymnasium with a higher probability ($M = 3.80$) than boys ($M = 3.46$), and so were children with better social skills ($M = 3.78$) as opposed to children with not so good social skills ($M = 3.49$).

As for interactions specifying the main effects observed, the child's grade level had a significant interaction with the assessments of success in theoretical subjects [$F(1,326) = 3.96, P < 0.05$] and of problem solving skills [$F(1,326) = 3.95,$

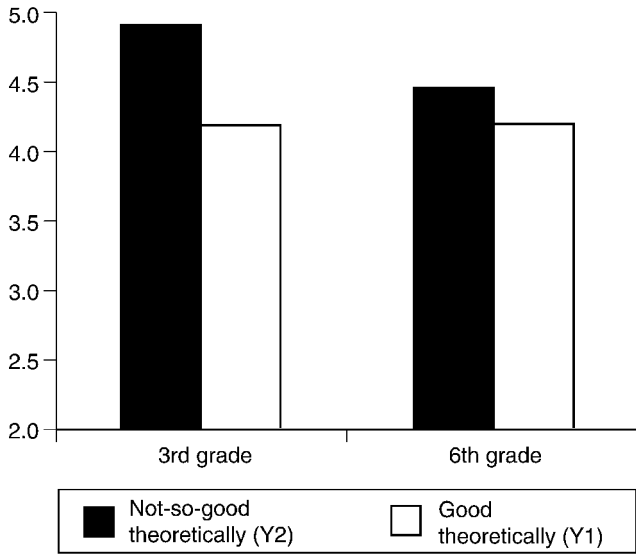


FIG. 4. The interaction between the child's grade level and estimated success in theoretical school subjects with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child's entering gymnasium: the vocationally educated parents' assessments (estimated marginal means).

$P < 0.05$]. With children assessed as successful in theoretical subjects and children with good problem solving skills, grade level did not affect the estimations of the probability of the child entering gymnasium (Figures 4 and 5). However, with

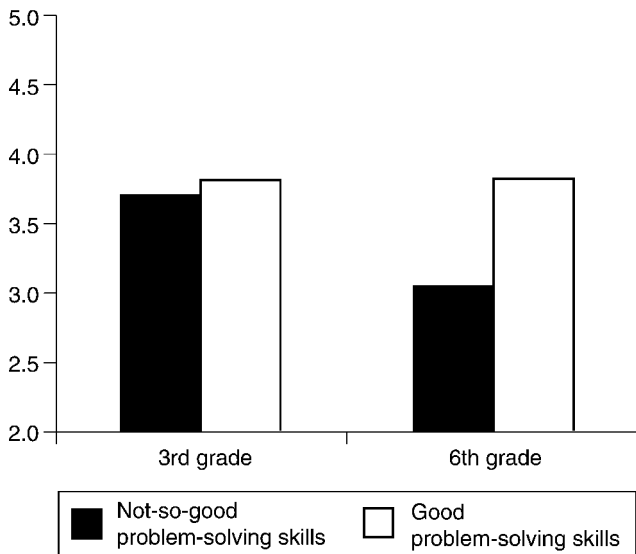


FIG. 5. The interaction between the child's grade level and estimated problem-solving skills with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child's entering gymnasium: the vocationally educated parents' assessments (estimated marginal means).

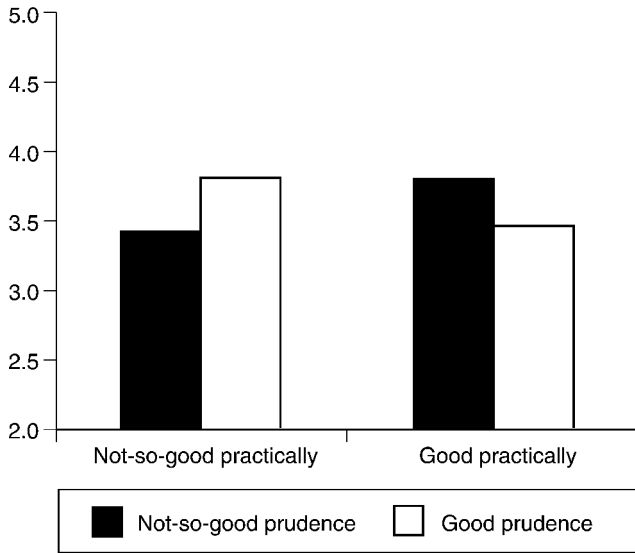


FIG. 6. The interaction between the child's estimated success in practical school subjects and prudence with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child's entering gymnasium: the vocationally educated parents' assessments (estimated marginal means).

children assessed as not successful in theoretical subjects and those assessed as not good at problem solving the expectations were higher for the 3rd grade than the 6th grade children, i.e. the child's weak cognitive competence lowered the parents' educational expectations as the child advanced to a higher grade level.

As for other significant interactions, assessed success in practical subjects had two significant interactions with the child's assessed competence, one with prudence and school orientation [$F(1,326) = 5.08, P < 0.03$] and the other with reflection skills [$F(1,326) = 4.44, P < 0.04$]. Regarding the first interaction, the lowest expectations were placed on children who either were weak at practical subjects and had low prudence assessments or did well in practical subjects and had high prudence assessments, whereas the highest expectations were placed on children who did well in practical subjects but did not have high prudence and school orientation and children who had high prudence and school orientation but did not succeed in practical subjects (Figure 6). Regarding the second interaction, the lowest expectations were placed on children who did well in practical subjects but were weak at reflection skills and the highest expectations were placed on children who did well in practical subjects and had good reflection skills (Figure 7).

The parent's gender also interacted significantly with success in practical subjects [$F(1,326) = 5.86, P < 0.02$]: the expectations of fathers for their children who were successful in practical subjects ($M = 3.72$) were higher than those for their children who were not successful ($M = 3.40$), whereas the expectations of mothers for their children who were not successful in practical subjects ($M = 3.88$) were higher than those for their children who were successful ($M = 3.52$).

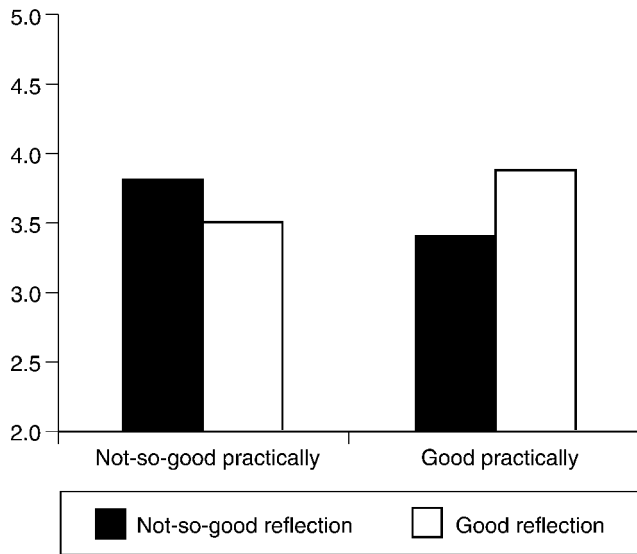


FIG. 7. The interaction between the child's estimated success in the practical school subjects and reflection with respect to the estimations of the probability of the child's entering gymnasium: the vocationally educated parents' assessments.

DISCUSSION

Our first major finding was that parents' expectations for their children's further education, i.e. their estimations of the probability of the child entering gymnasium, were clearly organized by their own educational position. In the light of prior research, this is not surprising (see for example Bynner, 1972). Even so, the finding carries great significance for educational policy, as the expectations expressed by parents are likely to come true. In Finland 80% of the children of academically educated fathers and about 50% of the children of vocationally educated fathers have opted for a gymnasium education in the 1990s (Havén, 1999). In our study 92% of the academically educated and 61% of the vocationally educated parents regarded their child entering gymnasium as very probable or fairly probable. From this vantage point, the parents in both educational groups seem to somewhat overestimate the probability of their child entering gymnasium, but the intergroup difference in the expectations corresponds to the difference in the realized choices.

As regards the parents' assessments of their children's competencies, we found that the academically educated parents attributed more cognitive competencies, i.e. success in theoretical/verbal subjects and problem solving skills, to their children than did the vocationally educated parents, while the latter emphasized their children's practical creativity. In the light of the parents' assessments, then, the children of academically educated parents possess more of the kind of cognitive-verbal competence emphasized in gymnasium education, whereas the children of vocationally educated parents have the kind of practical competence emphasized in vocational education as their strong suit.

It would no doubt be interesting to find out how the parents' assessments of their children's competencies correspond to those of the school, such as report cards and teachers' assessments (cf. Miller *et al.*, 1991). In the theoretical perspective of the present study, the parents' assessments were considered as social constructs, so that we do not have a problem of accuracy here. It is precisely those assessments which are conveyed through the parents' own perspective that organize the parents' expectations. Accordingly, our second major finding in the present study was that competence assessments do indeed organize educational expectations and, what is most interesting, this organization takes a different shape with parents of different educational backgrounds.

As we expected, considerations of the child's competencies and school success organized the educational expectations of the vocationally educated parents more strongly than those of the academically educated ones. In our analyses to clarify the patterning of the expectations, the percentage of variation accounted for by the analysis of variance was higher and the number of significant effects greater with the vocationally educated parents than with the academically educated parents. The approach of the vocationally educated parents to their children's gymnasium education was thus more multifaceted and organized by a greater number of aspects than was the case with the academically educated parents.

The interrelationships between the educational expectations and the competence assessments turned out to be more complex than we had expected. The assessed cognitive competence of the child was associated with expectations of the child entering gymnasium among both parent groups, but the association was differently patterned in the two groups. Among the academically educated subjects, the child's success in theoretical subjects was associated with high expectations provided that the child was *not* successful in practical subjects. This expectation-lowering effect of the child's successfulness in practical subjects emerged in relation to the child's grade level as well: as the child advanced to a higher grade level the effect of estimated success in practical subjects lowered rather than raised the parents' expectations of the child entering gymnasium; similarly, among children with good problem solving skills, good social skills lowered rather than raised the parental expectations.

In the assessments of the academically educated parents, the parental expectations were organized by a dualistic differentiation between cognitive and practical abilities. A child is considered suitable for a gymnasium education if he or she is cognitively competent and has no particular practical aptitudes. Our results show, as expected, that the highly educated parents, a group close to the school system, share the school's notion of educability, in which cognitive-verbal competence is seen and valued as true intelligence. In addition, and importantly, the findings suggest that academic parents indeed consistently employ a differential or dualistic representation of ability in their estimations of their children's educational prospects.

The assessment of the child's social skills provided a special case. The academically educated parents placed high expectations on children whom they estimated to lack problem solving skills but to be socially skilled. The child's social skills raised the expectations of his/her entering gymnasium among the vocationally educated

parents as well. Irrespective of their educational position, it was the social skills that parents ascribed to their children most of all (see Table II) which seems to testify to the social importance and even desirability of these skills. We may speculate that in the parents' minds social skills, or the ability to cooperate and to fit in, are an important prerequisite for doing well not only at school but also in society at large.

With the vocationally educated parents, the assessments of their children's social and cognitive skills were more directly associated with expectations than were those of the academically educated parents. Among the former, a child's good social skills were associated with high expectations and so was a child's high cognitive competence, i.e. problem solving skills and success in theoretical school subjects, while a child's low cognitive competence was correspondingly associated with low expectations, particularly in regard to 6th grade children.

In the vocationally educated parents' representations of ability, practical skills seemed to have a significance partly different from that of the academically educated parents'. The child's success in practical subjects did not necessarily lower the expectations of his/her entering gymnasium. In fact, the vocationally educated parents considered the child entering gymnasium fairly probable in cases where the child was estimated to do well in practical subjects and also to possess reflective skills. In other words, the interpretation of the child's success in practical subjects was moulded by his/her possession of reflective skills, which indicate a general cognitive orientation in the child. The least likely child to enter gymnasium in the vocationally educated parents' estimation was accordingly the one who did well in the practical subjects but was not seen to have reflective skills; such a purely 'practical type' was presumably considered best suited for a vocational education.

Given that a high expectation of entering gymnasium was attributed by the vocationally educated parents to children who were prudent and school-oriented but not good at practical subjects, we may speculate that when forming their educational expectations the vocationally educated parents are apt to pay attention to the requirements of school.

Both of the gender-related effects observed in our study were with the vocationally educated parents. The first was also concerned with the parents' assessment of their children's success in practical subjects: the child's success raised the fathers' expectations but lowered the mothers' expectations of that child's entering gymnasium. Could it be the case that the vocationally educated mothers are closer to the school's dominant notion of ability, for example through following their children's school progress more closely than the fathers, and therefore emphasize the cognitive demands of gymnasium studies more than the fathers do? The second effect, the finding that the vocationally educated parents considered their daughters' likelihood of entering gymnasium higher than their sons' may be due to the vocationally educated parents' being sensitive to their children's school success, which is generally better with girls than boys (cf. Sonuga-Barke & Stevenson, 1996).

Our comparison of the parents of children at different grade levels indicated that even the influence of the school, i.e. the feedback on the child's school progress as interpreted by the parents, on the parents' educational expectations is mediated by the parents' educational position. For vocationally educated parents, the child's

success in theoretical subjects is an important interpretative cue, whereas academically educated parents, operating in their differential approach, pay attention to the 'purity' of the cognitive competencies and therefore monitor the child's success in practical subjects.

To sum up, according to our findings academically educated parents expected their child to enter gymnasium, pure and simple, and this expectation received its subjectively valid justification from their observation that their child possesses such important cognitive abilities as required by gymnasium studies. In contrast, a great many vocationally educated parents were unsure or considered the probability of their child entering gymnasium as low. In the present context, the function of the representations of competence seems different for these two groups. It could be speculated that highly educated parents interpret ability information mainly to 'predict' how well their child will do in gymnasium, whereas less educated parents interpret ability information in order to make the choice between gymnasium and other conceivable (i.e. vocational) education. An interesting question for further research is whether academically educated parents would organize their considerations of their child's abilities in terms of a choice situation and use them in a more versatile fashion if the parents were placed in a different context of assessment, e.g. if they were asked to estimate the academic field of study their child was likely to choose.

Our findings suggest that parents' assessments of their children's competencies can be regarded as social representations of educability: they organize educational expectations socially, contain an evaluative hierarchy of abilities and their use varies according to the educational position of the parent. The social representations of educability offer a window, structured by the school and the group, into the world of education: indeed, as Moscovici (1988, p. 230) puts it

a representation is constructive to the extent that it selects and relates persons, objects in such a way as to meet the stipulation of the group, enabling it to communicate and act in keeping with shared concepts and images.

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