

Self-Expectations, Socially Prescribed Expectations, and Wellness in 14- to 15-Year-Old Athletes, Ballet, and Music Students in Norwegian Talent Schools—An Interview Study

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Talent-school settings may generate stress via demanding expectations. To investigate students representing Norway's growing phenomenon of early adolescent talent schools, we interviewed twenty-seven 14- to 15-year-old boys and girls about their experiences with self- and socially imposed expectations. Students were recruited from two sports schools ($n = 14$) and one school each with talent classes for ballet ($n = 7$) and music ($n = 6$). Using reflexive thematic analysis, we found four main themes representing the performers' accounts of (a) self-oriented expectations of persistent hard work, evoking self-doubts, and never-give-up attitudes; (b) coaches'/teachers' socially prescribed expectations, stimulating hard work, and pursuit of approval and opportunities; (c) parental expectations, reflected as helpful support, concerns of letting parents down, and negotiating independence; and (d) struggles with balancing expectations, reflected by demanding workloads, difficulties with prioritizing recovery, and ill-being. Early interventions targeting unhealthy self- and socially imposed expectations in high-expectation settings may be required to safeguard youth performers' healthy development.

Keywords: coaching, mental health, parenting, perfectionism, youth sports, well-being

The ideals of striving for ever-higher achievements are deeply rooted in sports and the performing arts, and it is suggested that such ideals are pursued at ever-younger ages (Bergeron et al., 2015). For example, early specialization, youth talent schools, and professionalization of youth sports have proliferated in recent years, including in countries traditionally organizing competitive leisure-time activities outside the academic school system (Ferry et al., 2013; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2022). Although participation in youth sports, music, and dance is associated with beneficial outcomes such as well-being and enjoyment (Eime et al., 2013; McCrary et al., 2021), it can also generate mental and physical strains as a result of competitive environments, high training volumes, and demanding performance expectations (Brenner et al., 2019; Quinn et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2021). In the present

study, we explored personal accounts of expectations and well/ill-being among young Norwegian athletes, ballet, and music students.

Expectations and Perfectionism Among Young High-Ability Performers

An individual's expectations involve attitudes toward oneself or others developed through previous experiences and knowledge that may be used to anticipate an outcome (Heaviside et al., 2021). An imbalance between one's expectations and lack of ability to meet those expectations may increase performers' distress, exhaustion, and other health issues (Nordin-Bates & Abrahamsen, 2016; Patston & Osborne, 2016). Importantly, demanding competitive environments may foster young performers' need to continually strive to meet high expectations and to achieve flawless performances to perceive success and satisfaction and to secure approval and opportunities. However, such continual striving with elevated and rigid expectations are key characteristics of perfectionism, which is a well-established predictor of ill-being, including mental health problems (Flett & Hewitt, 2022, 2014).

A healthy and successful developmental pathway for young athletes and performing artists depends on their motives for participation, including how expectations are perceived, imposed, and adapted (Haraldsen et al., 2020; Nordin-Bates & Kuytser, 2021). To date, studies into very young student performers' subjective experiences with expectations are scarce. However, expectations are an important component of perfectionism, which has been extensively studied in performance domains; as a result, we employed a perfectionism framework to study expectations. Two forms of perfectionism are self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) and socially


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prescribed perfectionism (SPP; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). An individual with SOP typically has immense self-directed expectations, worries about living up to the expectations, and consistently engages in negative self-talk and criticism. Obtaining success and avoiding failure is critical to perceiving a sense of worth; hence, for self-oriented perfectionists, it is imperative to fulfill their excessive expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). SPP characterizes individuals who believe that perfection is expected of them by others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). It involves the pursuit of perfection to secure approval or avoid disapproval from others, such as coaches and parents, but also the perception that these others will never be satisfied, as their expectations will increase if success is accomplished (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). SPP is the most detrimental of these dimensions, showing a consistent relationship with ill-being, such as psychological distress, hopelessness, and burnout (Flett et al., 2022). SOP tends to show weaker associations with adverse outcomes like distress than SPP (Hill et al., 2018), but it has been linked to adolescent anxiety symptoms and worry (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). However, SOP has also been associated with positive outcomes for well-being and performance, like higher levels of passion (Curran et al., 2014) and satisfaction with goal progress (Hill et al., 2008). Such discrepant findings have made it a popular topic among researchers trying to understand the factors that facilitate versus debilitate performance and well-being among performers.

Most perfectionism research in performance domains has relied on closed-ended questionnaires (Hill et al., 2018). More recently, an increase in qualitative studies has provided in-depth descriptions of performers' lived experiences with perfectionistic expectations in sports, dance, and music. However, a majority of these studies included adult performers at the upper extreme of the perfectionism distribution (e.g., Gotwals & Tamminen, 2022; Hill et al., 2015; Sellars et al., 2016). Only two studies included adolescents: these were lower level community-based athletes (Mallinson-Howard et al., 2018) and high-level dancers (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021) strategically recruited from both the top of the perfectionism distribution (i.e., highly perfectionistic) and the bottom (i.e., nonperfectionistic). Across these studies, the performers generally perceived their expectations to help them progress while also contributing to strains and exhaustion (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021), concerns over not meeting expectations, and worries about letting others down (Mallinson-Howard et al., 2018).

The increased number of qualitative studies has contributed to our understanding of performers' experiences with perfectionism. However, limiting recruitment to performers from the extremes of the distribution may exclude important views of adolescent performers' experiences with expectations in broader terms. That is, younger performers who may not strive for perfection per se may experience varying degrees of self- and socially imposed expectations, which can nevertheless have important implications for their well-being and development as performers.

Expectations of Youth Student-Performers in Talent School Settings

How self- and socially imposed expectations are experienced and managed are inherently connected to contexts, and talent development (TD) schools are identified as high-expectation environments (Haraldsen et al., 2020). Hence, a specific focus on expectations in such performance settings is relevant, considering that the performers are often expected to put in large amounts of time both in their activities at and after school as well as academically. Rigorous schedules and requirements of working equally hard in sports and

academic studies can be demanding and a source of stress and ill-being (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2016; Stambulova et al., 2015). For example, in Swedish 16-year-old first-year elite sports school students, a constant equal focus on sports and academic performances was experienced as an untenable path to follow when realizing the adverse impact it had on their well-being, health, and private life (Stambulova et al., 2015).

A year prior to this qualitative study, we conducted a larger quantitative study on perfectionism and mental health among 832 young student performers and mainstream students (Stornæs et al., 2019). Correlation analysis of SOP and SPP showed positive associations with symptoms of anxiety and depression, weight-shape concerns, and negative associations with self-worth, while resilience was only negatively associated with SPP. In the current qualitative study, we sought to explore in-depth the accounts of the young students' experiences of expectations, and quantitative data were not used for explaining or interpreting the qualitative interviews. The present study explores the experiences of young students in Norwegian TD schools, a relatively new and increasing phenomenon at the junior high school level (12–16 years old). Thus, to provide knowledge that may help inform those who run talent schools, we need studies that explore these young student performers' experiences. A qualitative study has the potential to contribute to a further understanding of the views and experiences of young student performers' expectations which, together with past studies, may help tailor recommendations for practices and facilitate positive experiences for future young student performers. In this study, a well-established perfectionism framework was employed to study expectations. We deliberately used a broad perspective with *expectations* as a more general term because words like *perfectionism*, *perfection*, or *perfectionist* might have specific connotations for young performers. Hence, we designed a study using qualitative methods with two main research questions: (a) How do student performers experience self-oriented and socially prescribed expectations? and (b) How do student performers perceive that expectations influence their well-being in sports, ballet, music, and everyday life?

Method

Paradigmatic Positioning

We position this study in critical realism (CR; Bhaskar, 2008/1975). Accordingly, it is situated within perspectives of ontological realism (objective reality) and epistemological constructionism (subjective; Fletcher, 2017; Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018; Wiltshire, 2018). Consistent with CR, we acknowledge that real events (i.e., expectations) exist and are experienced by young performers independent of our study, while our qualitative study may increase access to the nuances of the experienced expectations. However, the knowledge accessed through the participants' described experiences and the authors' interpretations is socially constructed (Ryba et al., 2022). CR is not linked to any particular theoretical framework or method, but they have a central function in knowledge production (Fletcher, 2017; Ryba et al., 2022). Positioning this research within CR allowed us to explore the participants' subjective experiences and use established methods and theories. Hence, we used established methods (i.e., Braun & Clarke, 2019: reflexive thematic analysis) and theoretical concepts (i.e., Flett et al., 2016: perfectionism) to produce knowledge and for interpretation and explaining findings while accepting our knowledge production was influenced by and cocreated in the interaction with the participants and is fallible (Ryba et al., 2022; Wiltshire, 2018).

Study Context

Student performers from four Norwegian schools were included: Two sports TD schools and one school each with specialized talent classes for classical ballet and classical music. They were chosen explicitly to represent Norway's relatively new and growing phenomenon of specialized talent schools. Sports schools are for students pursuing specialized training in a specific sport (e.g., football, alpine skiing). The ballet dancers and music students attend specific classes facilitated at two mainstream public schools (one each for music and ballet). These TD classes for ballet students were established in 2008, while for classical music students, they were established in 2015. The two first private sports schools at the junior high school level were established in the mid-2000s. Ten years later, a third school was established, and in 2022, there were more than 20 private sports schools in Norway. The schools' vision is to offer customized and integrated academic education and TD in sports, music, or classical ballet, aiming to develop and prepare students to qualify for further opportunities within their respective activities. The Norwegian sports schools are private and charge tuition fees, while the ballet and music schools do not because they are within the public school system. None of the schools provide boarding, meaning all students live at home and practice and train daily during and after school hours.

Students can apply for ballet and sports schools from age 12 to 13 (i.e., eighth grade) and classical music from age 9 to 10 years (fifth grade). The sport and ballet students may attend their schools for 3 years (eighth- to 10th-grade junior high school in Norway) and music students for 6 years (fifth to 10th grade). Only a few students are accepted into the program. Therefore, the applicants undergo a selection process, making the selected students among the top performers within their age cohorts. A written application is followed by a selection process, where students are evaluated on their skills and motivation. For athletes, the tests involve physical, coordinative, and motor exercises and sport-specific abilities. Dancers are evaluated on dance abilities, technique, and musicality. For music students, tests are on musicality, competence in their instrument, potential, and motivation.

Recruitment and Participants

Twenty-seven students aged 14–15 years were recruited, including athletes ($n = 14$, eight of whom were girls; eight and six athlete-students from each school) and performing arts students ($n = 13$, 10 of whom were girls; six classical music students; and seven classical ballet students).

Especially because interviews were to be conducted at schools and training facilities, we wanted to reduce the chance of anyone feeling singled out. Hence, athletes were randomly drawn from their class list, leading to the initial invitation of 16 students (eight per school). Four boys declined participation; hence, two other athlete boys were invited and consented to participate. Classical music students were initially randomly drawn from their class list, leading to the invitation of eight music students. Because four did not respond within the final deadline and two declined, all music students ($n = 23$) were informed about the study during school. Six music students volunteered and consented to participate. All nine ballet students from the ballet class were invited, of which seven consented to participate.

Ethical Considerations and Data Handling

All eligible students received written and oral information about the study, which included voluntary participation and their right to

withdraw at any time without stating any reason. We obtained written informed consent from parents/legal guardians, as well as from students. Data were de-identified and stored in accordance with data protection regulations. The Regional Committee for Medical and Health Science Research Ethics in Southern Norway approved the study (project number: 2015/1358).

Data Generation

Interviews were performed by the first author face-to-face at the schools and training facilities during the spring semester of the performers' second year in junior high school, that is, ninth grade. Two pilot interviews with one former gymnast and a young football player helped evaluate the relevance and comprehensiveness of the interview guide for young performers, leading to adjustments in the language (see the [Appendix](#)).

The development of the interview guide was partly based on the research group's academic and practical experiences with youth athletes and performing artists. It was also inspired by theory and related literature, including perfectionism research, because expectations are central features of perfectionism. Questions targeted the performers' expectations from themselves, coaches/teachers, and parents and how those expectations influenced the students in their activity and everyday lives.

The interviews had a conversational form using opening statements related to the aims of the study, such as: Can you tell me about; the expectations you set for yourself in dance/music/sports? ... How you perceive your expectations? ... Your expectations for yourself when you compete/perform/hold concerts? ... Your experiences with others' expectations of you (e.g., from the coaches or parents)? ... Yours/others' expectations for your future? The interviewer probed for more elaborate descriptions or nuances through follow-up questions, for example, Can you tell me more about how you perceived that situation or those instances?

Participants were also asked about weekly training/practice hours and age when they first started practicing ballet, music, and sports (see [Table 1](#)). Interviews lasted 30–70 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 300 pages of transcriptions.

Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a six-phase reflexive thematic analysis to explore patterns and develop meaningful themes across the data set ([Braun & Clarke, 2019](#); [Braun et al., 2019](#)). The software program MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019) was used during the analytical process.

We engaged with the data reflexively and recursively, that is, moving “forwards–backward–forwards” between the six phases to enhance the possibility that the developed themes reflected relevant perspectives and meaning with respect to our research questions. The analytical approach involved familiarization with data, systematic coding, theme development, theme refinement, theme naming, and writing up ([Braun et al., 2019](#)). Familiarization included listening to the interview recordings before and during the transcription process and was further achieved by thoroughly reading all transcripts to obtain an overview of the data. Notes were taken to form first impressions and ideas, for which transcriptions and notes were shared and discussed with the second and third authors to enhance reflexivity. To keep theme development relevant to the research questions, the systematic coding process

Table 1 Description of the Participants, All 14–15 Years Old

	Sports	Music	Ballet
Performing in	Football Handball Basketball Alpine skiing Cross-country skiing Rowing Tennis	Violin Piano Double bass	Classical ballet
Weekly practice/training hours ^a (range)	16–20	9–27	14–20
Age started to practice (range)	5–12 years mode: 7	3–10 years mode: 7	3–10 years mode: 4
Perfectionism scores ^b			
CAPS-SOP, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	39.4 (8.3)	38.8 (16.1)	41.3 (8.2)
CAPS-SPP, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	22.5 (8.0)	25.0 (13.1)	18.8 (4.7)

Note. CAPS scoring: a 5-point scale from 1 to 5 with higher scores reflecting greater perfectionism: SOP minimum score = 12, maximum score = 60; SPP minimum score = 10, maximum score = 50. CAPS = Child–Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (Flett et al., 2016); SOP = self-oriented perfectionism; SPP = socially prescribed perfectionism.

^aWeekly practice/training hours during school and after school hours, not including, for example, matches, competitions, ballet performances, or concerts. ^bA year before conducting the qualitative interviews, at ages 13–14 years, 25 of the interviewees in the qualitative study were part of a quantitative study on perfectionism.

involved closely reading and marking each text extract with first-impression code labels. Analytical Phases 3–5 were a recursive process of refinements, involving theme development of organizing the coded data into broader candidate themes and clustering the candidate themes with similar underlying meanings around a shared concept into main themes and subthemes. Ongoingly, we reread data, initial codings, and candidate themes to evaluate if the themes captured the initial codes’ features and nuances and adequately covered the interview data to represent the performers across the sample (Braun et al., 2019). The fifth phase involved further evaluations of the content of the candidate themes and defining the final themes and subthemes. The sixth phase involved further restructuring the final themes and organizing the results to present the final findings. Also, consistent with the CR paradigm, plausible explanations of the findings were discussed related to theory and previous findings (Vincent & O’Mahoney, 2018).

In the “Results” section, themes are illustrated by quotes, which are provided with pseudonyms and students’ affiliations to sports, ballet, or music, respectively. How common it was for adolescents to describe certain themes/aspects was approached using “fuzzy quantifiers” illustrated by words instead of numbers (Hanrahan & Vergeer, 2001). Hence, in the text, “some/few” refers to 1–9, “many” refers to 10–17, “most/typical” refers to 18–26, and “all” refers to 27. The purpose of this study was to explore instead of quantify the adolescent performers’ experiences. Hence, the “fuzzy quantifiers” approach was used as an intermediary to strike a balance between the purely qualitative and the quantitative (e.g., counting the exact numbers of people who said a particular thing). Also, to avoid any emphasis on frequencies that could blur the importance of accounts from some performers and inadequately give assumptions of the importance of other themes.

Rigor and Quality

Positioned within the CR paradigm, we adopted several strategies to assess and enhance the credibility and quality of our study (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019; Smith & McGannon, 2018). The authors’ academic and practical experience within sports (first author) and sports and performing arts (all other authors) were essential for bridging theory and the performers’ accounts.

Specifically, the senior researchers (Authors 2–5) have a long-lasting research engagement, including publications on adolescent athletes and dancers, and the second and last authors act as applied consultants for young performers. All have experience as participants in sports (Authors 1, 2, and 5), dance (5), and music (3 and 4). Importantly, our ongoing reflexive discussions on how the authors’ preconceptions and proximity to the field could challenge openness to alternative questions and interpretations helped enhance the study’s confirmability (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). “Critical friends” outside the research team offered critical feedback that enhanced reflexivity and challenged our perspectives and interpretations of the study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The continual dialogs in the research group during all study phases (i.e., interviewing, analysis, writing) encouraged reflexive open-mindedness to alternative interpretations by discussing various views, nuances in the data, and concepts that could illuminate the study aims. Consistency was provided by having the first author conduct all interviews. Although the interviewer had proximity to the field, she was an outsider to the participants. Reflecting on power relations was an important part of preparing for and conducting the interviews because of the inherent influence the power relation may create between the participant and researcher in these settings (Dodgson, 2019). The interviewer (first author) has a background as a youth (gymnastics) and senior elite athlete (Taekwon-Do). Shared performer experiences became an asset in the interview setting, which helped develop rapport and enhanced trust between participant and researcher (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The interviewer also invited the participants to reflect on their interviews, including how they experienced the interview setting. The approach and development of rapport in the interview setting worked well to gain mutual understanding and enhance the sharing of information. Finally, reflections and acknowledgments on the authors’ positionality were important in all phases of the study to enhance the trustworthiness of both process and findings (Berger, 2015).

Results

As part of the reflexive thematic analysis, we organized the results into four main themes, with subthemes, which reflected the main

aspects and content of the student performers' experiences as follows: (1) self-oriented expectations: (a) persistent work and (b) self-doubts and never-give-up attitudes; (2) socially prescribed coach/teacher expectations: (a) stimulating hard work and (b) pursuit of approval and opportunities; (3) socially prescribed parental expectations: (a) parental support and (b) negotiating independence; and (4) balancing expectations: workloads and perceived consequences of expectations.

Self-Oriented Expectations

The first main theme describes how the adolescent performers perceived their self-oriented expectations. Perceiving purposeful and manageable self-oriented expectations was common. The theme also illustrates the experiences related to fulfilling and failing own expectations, which include self-doubts, disappointments, negative self-talk about one's abilities, as well as reorientations involving never-give-up attitudes. The theme was structured into two subthemes.

Persistent Work

Most young performers described their expectations as purposeful, manageable, and as an impetus that helped them work persistently to progress and improve performances in the pursuit of "(always) doing one's best," which was a typical expression. As athlete Ashley exemplified, "I expect to do the best I can, I expect to have fun at training, and I should continue improving every week." For most students, the expectations implied diligent practice and making sure every training session brought about performance improvements, as dancer Cameron expressed:

After each ballet class, I should feel that NOW I live the dream! I should feel that if I continue to practice as well as I do now, I will be a good dancer. It is really the only expectation I have for myself; that I shall improve.

Some also expressed that too high expectations and practice that got too serious gave them a feeling of less enjoyment and decreased motivation. In the words of athlete Avery: "I get a feeling of mastery if I don't set too many long-term goals. If not, I can become demotivated and feel that I don't achieve much." On the other hand, many perceived that fulfilling expectations and reaching higher performance levels could nurture higher self-oriented expectations, inspire one to practice harder, increase pressure, and elevate expectations. In the words of dancer Sarah:

I have always wanted to dance. Now that I have reached this level, I want to get even better because it's a little sad to stop now when I have already spent so much time and energy to be this good. So now I am aiming for those ballet schools next year.

The quote from Sarah illustrates a performer's high and self-oriented striving that was perceived as helpful in reaching higher performance levels and goals, though also illustrating disappointment if the performance striving would not continue.

Self-Doubts and Never-Give-Up Attitudes

Although most students experienced working with appropriate and manageable self-oriented expectations, many also described feelings of self-doubt and negative self-talk. In the words of dancer

Sam: "I feel pretty bad about everything when I cannot achieve what I want, and then I get disappointed in myself." Further, for some students, the emphasis on performing well at competitions and performances/concerts could trigger both cognitive and somatic anxiety. Music student Jayden exemplified:

I get nervous when I play concerts because I want to play the best I can. Before concerts, thoughts often appear about how I should have practiced more or about sections that did not go well the last time, and the section may neither go well this time I play. During concerts, I can get the feeling that my whole body is shaking.

While most student performers acknowledged that it was impossible to practice or perform at their best every day, negative moods and changes in behavior were experienced when self-oriented expectations were not met. Failing at training and rehearsals also raised concerns about "losing" practice time, as some performers felt they could not regain the session another time. In turn, this could trigger worries about insufficient progress or ability, as illustrated by dancer Sarah:

I often do poorly in class, which is very demotivating. I also get a bit sad because I am afraid I am not good enough and cannot be good enough. I think I'm lousy if I have performed poorly for a week, or two or three, as I sometimes do, and then I lose the motivation.

Although adjusting to negative experiences could be challenging, it was common for most performers to try to reorient themselves, think ahead, and return to hard work with a never-give-up attitude, which nurtured determination. As exemplified by dancer Cameron:

When I was younger, it was a problem for me when I did not perform as I expected and did not achieve what I wanted straight away. Now I know; if I fail, I fail, and I have to make mistakes to rise again and become stronger, you know. (. . .) If I get an injury, I will go through that too. I am never giving up—I won't.

Most performers had a never-give-up attitude, as illustrated by the athlete Jordan: "I expect to do my best no matter the situation," and some expressed overly persistent or rigid training. When describing such situations, some performers talked about how their eagerness to fulfill their expectations and standards could elicit rigid training sessions or fuel self-critique regarding the effort put into accomplishing their goals. As athlete Madison expressed: "Even when I know I have given everything, I can start to think I should have pushed a bit harder and should have continued until I began vomiting." For many performers, failed performances or feelings of not progressing as expected could raise doubts about performance abilities and concerns about further opportunities, such as whether one could keep the spot on a team or be selected for a well-known music or ballet school. Music student Cailyn exemplified such concerns with not meeting performance expectations and the tough competition within classical music:

I expect a lot from myself. I expect to be the best. I expect to reach the highest level. If I do not reach the top level, I think I will be quite devastated. However, it is such a risky career path, and the fact is, it scares and worries me a lot.

Most students recognized both the benefits of setting expectations for themselves as a source of performance enhancement and

the downsides of putting too much pressure on themselves. In the words of young musician Jayden:

It is very positive to have expectations, but you may push yourself a bit too hard if you set the standards and expectations too high. That's no good, and many other things may not work for you any longer, and you get exhausted, or you may get stress "attacks," or a lot may go wrong if you push yourself too hard.

Socially Prescribed Coach/Teacher Expectations

This theme describes the students' perceived expectations from their coaches and teachers. Most students regarded the expectations as important for performance development and perceived that meeting those expectations was needed for future opportunities. The theme was structured into two subthemes.

Stimulating Hard Work

Supportive and caring were typical descriptions of the coaches/teachers. Most adolescents emphasized that they only expected them to perform to the best of their ability and generally perceived their expectations as achievable. For example, athlete Avery said, "I like that the coaches want us to be as good as we can be and to do our best." Although some performers used the term "pressure" from coaches/teachers, it was mainly expressed as a positive source stimulating hard work and progress, as athlete Madison expressed:

I appreciate their expectations because it makes me perform better. I like to feel such pressure put on me—without any pressure, I could just take it as it comes. Then I had not felt any pressure to achieve well and had not pushed myself.

When pressures from high expectations were experienced, some described it as leading to worries and doubts about one's abilities. For instance, dancer Sam said, "if someone expects too much, then I'll become very disappointed in myself because I cannot achieve what they [teachers] want." Further, meeting coaches'/teachers' expectations were expressed by some as a means of repaying them for their efforts and investments and making them proud.

Pursuit of Approval and Opportunities

Perceiving that the coaches/teachers set expectations, and fulfilling them, was seen as a pathway to approval and recognition by many and implied that the coaches/teachers had faith in the performers. As exemplified by athlete Amelia:

I appreciate that someone sets standards for me because I feel it indicates that they [coaches] pay attention to me, see me, support me, and expect something from me. I don't think they expect more than I can manage, but then I know they know how good I am.

The coaches stimulated the performers to work hard and strive for enhanced performances, and gaining the coaches'/teachers' approval was described by many as critical for future opportunities. As athlete Harper put it:

I want to perform the best I can because then the coaches can see me, and I may eventually be selected for the regional team. If I cannot show them my abilities or perform poorly, I'll get a

bit angry with myself because I finally had the chance to show the coaches that I am good enough.

Although few expressed actual disappointment from coaches/teachers, many reported that failing to meet socially prescribed expectations evoked disappointment in the self and worries about letting coaches/teachers down. In turn, the latter raised concerns about future opportunities, as exemplified by dancer Alex:

The fact that she [ballet teacher] has hopes for me to be accepted to a ballet school helps me get her attention and corrections, which helps me reach my goals. At the same time, if I can't make it when she has helped me that much and spent a lot of time making sure I can, then it is not fine for me to tell her if I don't.

There were many examples of high and pressurizing socially prescribed expectations that often were related to failing or underperforming in front of others who could have a say in future opportunities and careers. Underperforming could then be perceived as having implications for future goals, which for many were experienced as they could lose the opportunities to be selected for a TD program or team at a higher level. Like athlete Taylor experienced how failing with performances could lead to implications from the coach: "I have to avoid making mistakes because I will just be pulled down [by the coach] and left out of the team if I perform poorly. So, it is critical not to let down the coaches." Further examples of perceived implications included challenges to retaining equipment provided by their sports clubs. In the words of athlete Madison:

I feel that I have to perform well because that's how it is—how the arrangements are in the club. You have to deserve the boat. You must be practicing and be on the regattas because if you do it halfway during training and don't show respect for your boat, you'd suddenly lose it the next season.

It was striking how most ballet and music students spoke about the tough competition in a performance career while most athletes did not. Ballet students appeared to be under particular pressure to prove themselves to others, with most feeling dependent on recognition and approval by their current teachers in order to secure future opportunities, as exemplified by dancer Alex:

It can be negative for me to think about who's watching my performances. If I am nervous in the first place and start to think about the choreographers who may be present and who may have a say in my future, then, if I do poorly, I don't think I have a good chance at anything. On the other hand, it can be positive if important people are watching when I feel I am in control over what I do.

Socially Prescribed Parental Expectations

This theme describes the young performers' experiences with their parents' expectations and involvement in their activity. Generally, most performers experienced parental expectations as helpful and appropriate, but many also described that parents should give them more independence. The theme was structured into two subthemes.

Parental Support

Most performers experienced parental expectations as helpful and appropriate and described their parents as supportive. The

following quote of athlete Ryan was typical: “They support me as much as they can, but it is not my parents who push me.” Notably, most performers emphasized that their self-oriented expectations and standards were higher than their parent’s expectations. The sense of support from parents who showed interest and offered helpful advice was the most important for the adolescents. In the words of dancer Cameron:

My parents support me a lot and have been the best support team. They have pushed me, but they haven’t pushed too hard. They have been at competitions, watched my ballet performances, and given corrections. One of my parents was a professional ballet dancer, having a great deal of knowledge, knowing the right words to say, knowing what is correct to do and how I could improve as a dancer. It has been incredibly useful. I think I have been fortunate to have engaged parents who care about what I do.

Parents were rarely described as being disappointed or critically evaluating the adolescents for mistakes. Although experiencing supportive parents, some young performers expressed worries about letting their parents down and felt that their parents had sacrificed a lot. That is, they had spent time, money, and other resources to enable the adolescents to attend TD schools. It was particularly important for performers who described such concerns to give back to their parents by performing at their very best and showing progress, as exemplified by dancer Riley:

I think a lot about how much my family has sacrificed. I want to show my parents I can make it and show them I am doing my best because of the opportunity I have been given. We have moved away from family and friends, so I feel it is nice if I can show them I can seize this opportunity—and my parents can see that I am grateful.

Negotiating Independence

Although most young performers expressed appreciation for their parents’ supportive and engaged involvement, they appeared to prefer more independence than they were given. They spoke of disagreements as well as annoyance with parents, and how too much interference from “pushy” or overprotective parents could decrease their motivation for training. As athlete Hanna said:

Sometimes, I feel Dad wants to push me. He probably doesn’t mean to put unnecessary pressure on me, but when he nags about training and says—maybe you should go practice now! Then I answer, “yes, I probably can!” However, when he continues to ask several times, I get irritated. I feel I do my training for him. I think it is important not to get too much pressure because the motivation may disappear, and I get reluctant about training. Then I feel the motivation no longer comes from me and what I want to do.

Conversely, perceiving more autonomy over one’s decisions was described as positively changing the motivation to practice by some, as illustrated by music student Chloe:

I practice more music now than I did half a year ago because they [the parents] have stopped nagging and being concerned about it, which makes me feel more willing to practice on my initiative instead of my parents forcing me. But, I understand why they were concerned because attending this talent class

means the music teachers expect me to practice more, so I progress.

Balancing Expectations: Workloads and Perceived Consequences of Expectations

The final theme describes how the adolescents’ self-oriented and socially prescribed expectations influenced their health and well-being. Balancing all expectations and workloads and finding time to rest were important issues described as challenging by the student performers.

Although most performers described their expectations as helpful most of the time, many described it as challenging to properly balance the high workloads, tight schedules, and performance expectations related to practice, training, and school. For instance, athlete Amelia said:

Sometimes, there are too many tests and presentations at school. At the same time, it can be a regatta coming up, and I have to go and practice for the regatta, so I don’t lose the sparkle, but I have to go to school as well. Every day continues like “home-eat-school-training-school-sleep.” I can be very mentally and physically tired when I have tough weeks like that.

The quote from Amelia illustrates how prioritizing could be challenging for a young performer who is eager to do well academically and as a performer. Despite high workloads, many performers expected themselves to maintain high training loads and performance levels. Also, many performers talked about having challenges in making time for social life with friends and family outside school and sports/performing arts; for instance, athlete Harper illustrated:

When I had races every weekend and one game a week in addition to football and cross-country training and training at school, I noticed that I didn’t have the energy to be with friends after school. Actually, I didn’t really get the time either.

Many reported a physically and mentally demanding everyday life, which they related to having high expectations. Most expressed awareness of how high expectations and workloads could become a source of ill-being, including injury, anxiety, irritation, headaches, and concentration difficulties. Dancer Sam gave the following example:

I have struggled with anxiety attacks when it is a lot at both school and ballet. Then I get very stressed, scared, and sad because so many things are going on at the same time—then anxiety attacks may happen to me. That is not very fun, really.

Most participants voiced the need for rest, but making room for rest was often challenging due to their desire to fulfill expectations and eagerness to reach their goals. Also, their schedules often limited their possibility for rest and recovery. Still, most knew the consequences for their health and development as performers if they did not prioritize rest; as dancer Cameron put it:

Sometimes, I feel exhausted, and I can’t take it anymore, but then I get rid of those feelings by thinking of how fun ballet is. I also feel that I am doing a lot, and ballet can take a toll on the body, but with the proper treatment, if I relax occasionally and take good care of my body, I know it is going well. But, of course, it’s tough. (. . .) I try as best I can [to take time off], and

I usually relax entirely on Sundays, which is the only day I have complete time off. After all, I do put in breaks and rest.

Experiences with physical pain also contributed to realizing the need for rest for some, as illustrated by music student Cailyn:

Sometimes my shoulders hurt. Then I know I need a bit of time off, and I can't keep on going. I practice every single day, and I know I may go on the wrong path without noticing. It is important to make room for some rest, so I occasionally have vacations, but only when I go abroad.

Furthermore, some performers described challenges of talking to their coaches about the fact that they needed time for rest and described problems with inadequate communication between coaches. In the words of athlete Taylor:

The school coaches and club coaches do not talk much together even though my coach knows I am a student at this sports school and have physical training every day. I have suggested that I probably need to skip a match when I feel very tired because I may get overtrained or injured. Then it is no longer like they (school coach and club coach) talk together, but I need to talk in-between.

In sum, the study findings illustrated a fine line between performers' experiences of working with appropriate and desirable expectations as a source that helped them progress as performers; on the other hand, high strivings and expectations could negatively influence their well-being and everyday life.

Discussion

In this study, we explored expectations and how they were perceived to influence the well-being of young Norwegian adolescents selected to talent schools in sports, classical ballet, and classical music. The four main themes from the interview data illustrated the complexities of experiences with self-oriented and socially prescribed expectations and struggles with balancing expectations. The self-oriented expectations served as an impetus to work persistently and evoked self-doubts and never-give-up attitudes. Coaches'/teachers' socially prescribed expectations stimulated hard work and the pursuit of approval and opportunities. Parental expectations were perceived as helpful support but could also lead to concerns about letting parents down and negotiating independence. Balancing expectations and sustaining the demanding workloads were perceived to have consequences, such as difficulties with prioritizing recovery and ill-being. The three groups of performers' experiences revealed many general and similar expectations. Although the qualitative design does not allow for direct comparisons, there were also striking differences, which warrants a follow-up in a larger scale quantitative study. The notable difference was how ballet and music students, compared to athletes, tended to perceive their domains as tough and competitive.

The young performers recognized the benefits of having purposeful self-oriented expectations and socially prescribed expectations from coaches/teachers as well as parents, which stimulated them to work hard for performance enhancements and future opportunities. However, there was a fine line between perceiving purposeful and manageable expectations—and a relentless strive for enhanced achievements and future opportunities, which could evoke worry and doubts about abilities. Constantly striving for performance enhancement while trying to meet expectations in

more than one arena was a source of highly demanding workloads and strains that influenced their well-being and everyday lives. Consistent with the literature on perfectionism in children and adolescents (Flett & Hewitt, 2022), such pressure to perform may consequently lead to mental and physical exhaustion that further hinder instead of promoting the performers' potential. Such experiences may further generate self-doubts, criticism, and overtraining to compensate for not progressing as expected (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). Although the findings partly mirror previous literature, they are novel in that they represent the voices of very young TD students. As such, they highlight the need for heightened awareness within talent school contexts about how and why expectations can influence performers.

Self-Oriented Expectations

This theme concerned the young performers' self-oriented expectations, with most reporting a clear sense of how their expectations benefitted performance progress. Their perceptions of working with manageable expectations of "doing one's best" contrasted with their subsequent descriptions involving rigidity, self-doubts, and negative self-talk, which resembled self-oriented perfectionistic tendencies of endless strivings for enhanced performances despite experiencing strains (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). However, most student performers expressed awareness of the cost of putting too much pressure on themselves. Still, to avoid self-disappointments and worries of not progressing as performers, it was necessary to attain demanding standards and hard to lower their expectations when required.

Student performers will meet obstacles during the development and process of attaining their goals and expectations. Hence, the ability to regulate and adjust goals and expectations related to the context plays a critical role in performers' development and well-being (Nicholls et al., 2016; Wrosch et al., 2003). Individuals with elevated expectations may have developed such self-regulatory capacities to help them avoid increased burdens when required (Nicholls et al., 2016; Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). However, others may not have developed such capacities to adopt flexible expectations, and alternative goals and expectations may not be available to them (Wrosch et al., 2003). Accordingly, our findings are a concern, considering that young performers who adopt increasingly high self-oriented expectations may succumb to the mounting pressure it can create, especially when experiencing setbacks (Flett & Hewitt, 2014, 2022).

The findings may further illustrate that the self-oriented expectations within this age group are complex and partly paradoxical. Consistent with previous writings (Burton, 1989), most students felt they set manageable expectations, yet, many struggled to appropriately lower their standards even when understanding the problems that could occur if continuing on the same path. In real-life settings, it may not be easy to discern those who adopt desirable expectations from the extreme or perfectionistic. Notwithstanding, coaches, teachers, and others close to adolescent performers play an essential role in recognizing signs of excessive and unhealthy self-oriented expectations and in facilitating sustainable expectations for healthy development (Bergeron et al., 2015; LaPrade et al., 2016).

Socially Prescribed Coach/Teacher Expectations

The young student performers experienced that most coaches/teachers facilitated positive expectations and support, which

elicited an impetus to work hard. They were seen as highly influential in the performers' continued participation, progress, and future opportunities. Although our participants were as young as 14–15 years, their perceptions of coaches and teachers as gatekeepers are already similar to those of older performers (Haraldsen et al., 2020; Jarvin, 2017). Accordingly, securing acknowledgment and avoiding letting coaches and teachers down was perceived to be critical to getting opportunities. While this may work well in the short term, awareness is important because it can change to become problematic. Indeed, pursuing approval and the need to meet others' expectations to avoid disappointments are known to contribute to the development of perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). Specifically, such dependency may result from SPP, which is a well-known contributor to ill-being (Flett & Hewitt, 2022; Hill, 2016). The dependent relationships reflected in adolescents' sense of obligation to repay their coaches/teachers for investing in them may develop into an unhealthy coach–athlete relationship where coaches gain excessive power over young performers (Rylander, 2015). The most prone may be adolescents who constantly evaluate achievements and self-worth according to coaches' feedback and corrections. Dependent relationships may generate a climate where young performers do not dare to speak up when they need help and support because they fear negative evaluation and being passed over for opportunities (Kerr & Stirling, 2017; Rylander, 2015). Instead, young athletes, dancers, and music students may benefit from relying more on their own judgments already from earlier ages, which requires autonomy support from the coaches/teachers and gatekeepers (Nordin-Bates & Kuytser, 2021). As these authors point out, it appears crucial to emphasize awareness regarding young performers who are concerned about meeting external expectations, who display high coach/teacher dependency, and who constantly need external feedback to feel a sense of approval that others have faith in them.

Socially Prescribed Parental Expectations

Most adolescents perceived their parents to facilitate desirable expectations and to be generally caring and supportive. Notably, the young performers stressed their self-oriented expectations as being higher than parental expectations and emphasized that this was how it should be. When considering the age of the performers, it was unsurprising to find inconsistency between how parents were thought of as helpful supporters while concurrently finding that the adolescents desired less parental involvement. Indeed, independence was a source of enhanced motivation for training and practice.

For the young performers, parental support was the most emphasized aspect of parental involvement, which involved social–emotional support, financial support, showing interest, and spending time on the adolescents' activity. These aspects mentioned by the young performers concur with and replicate previous studies on parental involvement on how their supportive role can be positively experienced, and the fine line between experiences of overly pushy parents and a balanced involvement (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1997; Gould et al., 1996, 2006; Lauer et al., 2010). Similar to these previous studies, it is noteworthy how interviewees sometimes expressed that they perceived helpful parental support while also experiencing a sense of duty to repay parents through achievements (Elliott et al., 2018; Lauer et al., 2010). Such perceptions of having a responsibility to repay their parents might increase the pressure to strive for ever-higher levels and avoid mistakes. Notably, greater instrumental support through

financial family investments has previously been linked to athletes' experiences of higher parental pressures and decreased enjoyment and commitment (Dunn et al., 2016). These findings underline the importance of parents being conscious of how children may be influenced by instrumental support (Dunn et al., 2016). It also seems germane to emphasize the need for good dialogs between parents and young aspiring performers to ensure they are “on the same page” (Elliott et al., 2018). Overall, our results concur with previous studies that parents play unique roles that may foster healthy development and well-being by adopting a balanced involvement in high-expectation environments (Elliott et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2015; Knight & Holt, 2014).

Balancing Expectations: Workloads and Perceived Consequences of Expectations

It was challenging for many performers to manage and balance the internal and external expectations they faced in their everyday lives. Previous studies have also reported several negative impacts of excessive expectations, high overall loads, and overscheduling on young performers' well-being and mental and physical health (Bergeron et al., 2015; Walton et al., 2021). Hence, the present findings add to the literature in terms of how young student performers perceive that expectations influence their well-being in sports, ballet, music, and everyday life.

Unsurprisingly, the performers' constant focus on progress and future opportunities made it hard to prioritize and lower expectations when required. Combined with a sense of responsibility to fulfill expectations from several areas, this manifested for most performers in tiredness (sometimes exhaustion), and some described anxiety, irritation, headaches, and concentration difficulties. There was a tendency of needing to experience strains or physical pain before realizing the need for rest. Although most students were aware of the importance of rest and recovery for their health and performance, prioritizing it was challenging. High overall loads combined with insufficient life balance might be a result of performers striving to progress, achieve future opportunities, and compensate for failures or setbacks. In turn, such continual striving may generate undue burden and eventually result in injuries or illnesses (Flett & Hewitt, 2022). Notably, among TD athletes aged 15–16, prevalence rates of perceived ill-being have been reported as high as 43%, with 25% reporting severe health problems and 37% overuse injuries (Moseid et al., 2018). Furthermore, 22% of even younger athletes and performing artists have previously displayed unhealthy perfectionism patterns associated with maladaptive mental health indicators (Stornæs et al., 2019).

In sum, many young performers find their expectations encouraging as it helps them advance in sports, music, and ballet. However, there are evident experiences of elevated expectations and demanding workloads from young ages that can be sources of ill-being if not appropriately addressed with positive support and guidance. Overscheduling might be a structural challenge related to how school days, practice, and free time are organized. Accordingly, further evaluations on the organization of young people's time might be needed (e.g., by involving performers, schools, clubs, parents, and coaches).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

Recruiting a relatively large number of adolescents from top TD schools at the age of 14–15 years is a strength of this study, as there

has been a lack of investigation into the lives of these young performers. Developing and using an interview guide that focused the interviews on expectations (rather than the arguably more extreme construct of perfectionism) gave broad, nuanced data on young performers' experiences, which may help inform future guidelines for school leaders. Our findings reflect athletes, music, and ballet students attending Norwegian talent school settings, and caution in interpreting the findings and their applicability to other contexts (e.g., younger or older students, other cultures) is warranted. Also, a different participant recruitment procedure, for example, recruiting from the ends of a distribution or openly via social media, may well have resulted in slightly different findings. The qualitative design in this study did not allow for direct comparisons between the groups of TD school students, but there were striking trends that we discussed, which warrant follow-up in larger scale quantitative studies. More research that explores how different TD schools facilitate the possibility for student performers to optimize the school-practice-leisure time balance seems required. Such knowledge may help optimize positive experiences, prevent attrition, and reduce potential adverse health effects due to conflicting performance expectations. The high workloads and expectations many aspiring performers experience from a young age requires further exploration over time.

Conclusion

Coaches, teachers, and parents of young high-ability performers need awareness of adolescents' expectations since the nature of those expectations is decisive for healthy development and well-being. How talent schools for very young student performers facilitate guidance to help young performers manage the fine line between healthy and unhealthy expectations needs to be explored further.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Introductory questions and background	Follow-up questions/clarifying questions (relevant during the interviews if they did not elaborate)
How old are you? For athletes: Which sport are you doing? For music students: Which instrument are you playing? Do you remember how old you were when you first became interested in and started; playing music; your sports (e.g., playing football); dancing? Do you remember why you started? Can you tell me a bit about it? Do you know approximately how many hours a week you practice? And how many hours do you spend on your sports; music; dance? Do you participate in competitions? What level would you say you are at compared to others your age?	<i>Are you active in other activities as well?</i> <i>Has someone in your family practiced the same sports; been a musician; dancer? Did they/it mean something to you?</i> <i>Totally on practice and competitions?</i> <i>Can you tell which placements you usually get when participating in competitions?</i>
Main topics	Follow-up questions/clarifying questions (relevant during the interviews if they did not elaborate)
Goals Do you have any goals?	<i>May you describe this/these goals? Why have you set yourself this goal? What possibilities do you have for reaching this/these goals? And can you tell me a little bit about what you think needs to be done to achieve this or these goals? What does it mean to you to achieve this goal?</i>
Performance expectations—Own and others' expectations Own expectations: Do you have any expectations for yourself? Can you describe that/those expectations? Can you tell me a bit about your experiences with concerts; performances; competitions? Can you also tell in as much detail as possible an example from a concert; performance; competition/match/race, and what it is like? Can you say something about what makes the difference for you about whether you feel you have done well or not so well? For instance, when are you satisfied or not satisfied with your own performance/effort? Why do you think you got/have these ideas about what good and poor performances are? How would you say your expectations and goals are, compared to the others at your age that you practice with (e.g., at school; sports club)? Expectations from others: Can you tell a little about how those closest to you are in relation to you and your sports; dance; music? Do they have expectations of you? Can you tell me a bit about what the expectations are from those in your training/practice group/class and the coaches; teachers? Can you tell a little about what those closest to you are like when you participate in competitions; performances; concerts?	<i>How do you feel about having those expectations? Can you describe a typical day at practice? e.g.: your plan for the practice, expectations and goals you may have, what it's like if you don't get to do what you had planned, etc. How do you prepare yourself? For instance: Are there some things that are important for you to do before a concert/competition/performance? How are you prior to starting? How are you during and after a concert; performance; competition/match/race? Can you describe it? What are you thinking about (any particular, e.g., positive/negative thoughts) Do you have examples that you can tell about from competitions; concerts; performances?</i> <i>What do they say about practice? Do they have expectations regarding competitions; concerts? How do you perceive the expectations they have for you? Can you tell me a little about your experiences? What is a typical day at rehearsal/training like? What expectations do they (others, e.g., coaches/teachers/parents/) have, and what is required of you? For instance, what do you think is positive and negative about this?</i>

(continued)

(continued)

Peers

Can you tell me a bit about how you get along with the others you play with?

What is good? What is not good?

Finishing Questions

Generally, what do you think about having expectations? Is there anything in particular that you see as positive or negative? Are there other areas that we have not talked about where you experience that there are expectations for you? If so, can you tell me a little about it?

Final Question

Is there anything else you would like to say?

The last thing I would like to ask; is there something that you think might be good for me to take with me further in my studies? As I study adolescents and your experiences with expectations and of you who are involved in sports; dance; music. Is there anything you think I could take with me further?

Note. Translated interview guide from Norwegian. Participants were ninth-grade (14 and 15 years old) Norwegian talent development school students in sports, ballet, and music.