

The Impact of “General-Vocational Education Stratification” on Parental Education Anxiety among Chinese Junior High School Students and Strategies Research

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Abstract: *As China enters a new era of reform and development, new industries, new formats, new economies, and new technologies are constantly emerging, and the ecology of vocational education is constantly being reshaped. The country and the people have higher demands and multi-dimensional and multi-level needs for the high-quality development of secondary vocational education. At the same time, the policy of "general and vocational shunt" has also been entering the public's field of vision. However, due to the long-standing misunderstanding of secondary vocational education and other reasons, a large number of parents have concerns or even resistance to this policy, and even occasionally there are calls to cancel the "general and vocational shunt" in society. Vocational education is an important part of the modern education system and the main way to cultivate technical and skilled talents. Abolishing the diversion of general education and vocational education will cause a serious blow to the modern education system. Therefore, based on the analysis and understanding of the theory of general and vocational diversion and education anxiety, this paper analyzes the phenomena and causes of the influence of general and vocational diversion on the education anxiety of parents of junior high school students, and puts forward targeted improvement methods. In order to provide a theoretical basis for promoting the healthy development of secondary vocational education, alleviating parents' educational anxiety and alleviating the obstacles to the implementation of the "double reduction" policy.*

Keywords: *general and vocational diversion; parental education anxiety of junior high school students; influence and Countermeasures*

1. Research background

1.1 Research on the distribution of general and vocational education

The general-vocational education stratification is a key measure for achieving relative educational equality and addressing the contradiction between talent development and societal needs. As parental emphasis and concern for education continue to rise, policies related to general-vocational education stratification are constantly being refined. From the clear directive in the 1985 "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Reforming the Educational System" to implement "three-level stratification" in primary, secondary, and high school education, to the 2010 "National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)" stating the goal of maintaining roughly equal enrollment scales between regular high schools and secondary vocational schools in the foreseeable future, and to the "New Vocational Education Law" implemented on May 1, 2022, emphasizing the need to promote the coordinated development of vocational education and general education at different stages of compulsory education based on local conditions, these policy adjustments over the past 30 years have better adapted to the state of national socioeconomic development.

In the meantime, research within the country on this topic has continued without interruption. For instance, studies like Cao Yan and Tang Shanshan propose deepening the integration of general and vocational education to indirectly change the general-vocational education stratification pattern [1]. He Yangyong and Zhu Qiao suggest that the general-vocational education stratification artificially creates inequality and lacks respect for individuals [2]. Wang Hui advocates for changing the value metaphor

of "high school being superior to vocational school" in the context of the reform of the high school entrance examination [3]. Much of this research focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of policies and their impact on societal and economic development.

1.2 Research on Education Anxiety

In recent years, education anxiety has pervaded the entire process and lifecycle of educational activities, becoming a true reflection of the mindset of Chinese parents. In 2018, Zhi Ke Education and Sina Weibo jointly released the "Chinese Parental Education Anxiety Index Survey Report," which revealed that the "anxiety index" among Chinese parents had reached 67 points. Simultaneously, domestic research on education anxiety has never ceased. For example, Shao Shuang pointed out that the reasons for parents experiencing education anxiety include unrealistic parental educational expectations and the rapid contraction of the training market following the "double reduction" policy [4]. Si Xiaohong and Wang Tong defined education anxiety as an excessive concern and fear on the part of parents and students regarding the learning environment and academic outcomes [5]. Yu Yafeng and Yao Zhen mentioned that terms like "high-end parenting," "crowdsourced private tutoring," "study tours," "tiger moms," "wolf dads," and "motherhood brokers" have long been associated with "Chinese-style education," and education anxiety has become synonymous with Chinese parents [6].

1.3 Research Significance

Currently, scholars both domestically and internationally have begun to explore general-vocational education stratification and education anxiety from various perspectives, achieving some notable results. However, it is evident that many studies have primarily focused on analyzing general-vocational education stratification and parental education anxiety independently, without linking the two for in-depth investigation. Moreover, in 2022, new concepts of "coordinated development of general and vocational education" and "integration of general and vocational education" were introduced, opening up opportunities for further research in this field.

This paper, through its analysis and research on the impact of general-vocational education stratification on the education anxiety of junior high school parents and proposing corresponding strategies, aims to provide a reference point for improving the quality of vocational education, promoting "integration of general and vocational education" and "coordinated development of general and vocational education," alleviating parental education anxiety, and facilitating the smooth implementation of the "double reduction" policy.

2. Manifestations of the Impact of General-Vocational Education Stratification on Education Anxiety among Junior High School Parents

2.1 Educational Competition Internalization

The concept of "educational competition internalization" has gained widespread recognition and quickly become popular, indicating its ability to accurately reflect a current reality in China's educational environment. In a situation where academic competition is increasingly intense, parents exert greater efforts to secure limited educational resources, which has become a common phenomenon.

Parents are particularly concerned and sensitive about their children's academic performance. However, due to the necessity of "catching up" and the psychological need to conform, other parents also adopt similar competitive strategies to ensure their children keep pace with their peers, leading to the "internalization" and "prisoner's dilemma" of academic competition.

2.2 Hindrances to the Implementation of the "Double Reduction" Policy

The general-vocational education stratification in the high school entrance examination diverts nearly half of junior high school graduates to secondary

vocational schools. However, in comparison to regular high schools, secondary vocational schools have various shortcomings. As a result, both parents and students strive to perform well in the high school entrance examination ("zhongkao") and are unwilling to enroll in secondary vocational schools. This reluctance to choose vocational education is one of the reasons why the "double reduction" policy

is challenging to implement in secondary education. If this issue is not fundamentally resolved, extracurricular training will only shift from the surface to underground, and the heavy burden within schools will be difficult to alleviate. As long as parental anxiety about the high school entrance examination persists, there will inevitably be diminishing returns associated with the "double reduction" policy, greatly reducing its effectiveness.

2.3 Parental Resistance to "Educational Stratification"

In China's educational community, there is widespread acknowledgment that vocational education and general education are like the "two wings of a bird" and "two wheels of a cart," both of which are indispensable. However, over the past few decades, vocational education has not completely shed its identity as a "derivative" or "subsidiary" product. Currently, secondary vocational education credentials still suffer from characteristics such as lower educational returns, susceptibility to societal invisible discrimination, and an unsmooth development path. Parents often hold a "better to avoid it" attitude towards secondary vocational education, and there have been occasional calls in society to abolish "general-vocational education stratification."

3. Reasons for the Impact of General-Vocational Education Stratification on Education Anxiety among Junior High School Parents

3.1 Widespread Misunderstandings and Biases among Parents Towards Vocational Education

The "diverting students into general or vocational education tracks" policy has consistently been a subject of extensive concern among parents of middle school students. In the minds of many parents, vocational education is often perceived as a "lesser" option compared to general education. Some parents go even further, considering vocational education as second-rate, associating it with a negative reputation regarding study culture, outdated school facilities, inadequate teaching staff, low teaching management standards, and a fear that their children might be labeled as "inferior students" if they opt for vocational education, potentially impacting their future prospects.

Additionally, the rapid development of the internet and new technologies has heightened parental anxieties about general and vocational education diversion. The internet provides people with access to a vast array of information, but it has also contributed to the generalization of reference groups. Phenomena such as "Tiger Moms" and the relentless pursuit of high-end domestic services have become prevalent [7]. Faced with peer and societal pressures, parents find themselves compelled to immerse in the competitive world of education for the sake of their children's future.

This growing anxiety among parents highlights the need for a comprehensive shift in societal perceptions and an emphasis on the value and opportunities that vocational education can provide. It underscores the importance of creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment where each student's unique talents and potential are acknowledged and nurtured, irrespective of their chosen educational path. It is crucial to promote a holistic understanding of education, ensuring that the choice between general and vocational education is not a divisive one but rather a personalized journey that serves the best interests of every student.

3.2 The Need for Improvement in the Quality of Secondary Vocational Education

3.2.1 Insufficient High-Quality Educational Resources and Lack of Distinctive Features

In recent years, the scale of secondary vocational education in China has expanded rapidly, yet substantial progress in reforming its content remains elusive. This situation underscores several critical areas that require attention and improvement. Firstly, there is a pressing need to enhance the management level of secondary vocational education institutions [8]. Unfortunately, when secondary vocational students are mentioned, some parents still harbor preconceived notions of issues like unruly behavior, smoking, drinking, and academic underachievement. This negative perception persists, leading to parental concerns that their children might be influenced negatively by the culture associated with secondary vocational schools. Addressing this stereotype is crucial to reposition secondary vocational education as a legitimate and valuable choice for students.

Secondly, the government's investment in educational resources for secondary vocational education remains relatively inadequate. Secondary vocational schools often grapple with limitations in teaching

staff, equipment, and practical training opportunities when compared to regular high schools. Without the necessary support and resources, these institutions find it challenging to develop and offer high-quality vocational programs independently. Government prioritization and increased funding are essential to bridge this resource gap and uplift secondary vocational education.

Lastly, China's secondary vocational education system is plagued by issues of uniformity and a standardized, exam-oriented approach. This rigid and one-size-fits-all model fails to adapt to the evolving socioeconomic landscape and the unique characteristics of students. Embracing a more diversified and skill-oriented approach, which aligns with the dynamic demands of the job market, is vital for enhancing the appeal and effectiveness of secondary vocational education.

The transformation of secondary vocational education necessitates a shift in perception, increased investment, and a commitment to adapt and evolve the educational approach. By addressing these challenges, we can reposition vocational education as a credible and attractive option for students, better aligning it with the demands of the modern workforce and promoting inclusive and effective educational practices.

3.2.2 Emphasis on General Teaching Approaches Unsuitable for the Development of Secondary Vocational Education

Yue Dongping, the Director of the Vocational Education Professional Committee of the Beijing Education Society, astutely pointed out, "Vocational education has its own unique rules and characteristics, setting it apart from general education. Consequently, research in this field should be approached with a vocational education perspective, rather than attempting to fit it into the mold of exam-oriented general education management methods." Despite this sound advice, a considerable number of vocational institutions, particularly many secondary vocational schools, continue to operate within the framework of general education.

The prevalent and ingrained notion of a subject-oriented curriculum often takes precedence, leading to the unintended transformation of high-level skills education into tedious, theory-driven lectures. In this teaching paradigm, instructors tend to adopt a "top-down" approach, delivering information to students who are relegated to passively receiving knowledge through listening, reading, and observation. This approach imposes substantial challenges on secondary vocational school students

The reluctance to embrace a more dynamic and skills-oriented educational model in secondary vocational schools not only hinders students' engagement and growth but also fails to align with the distinct nature and purpose of vocational education. To address this, it is crucial to shift the pedagogical focus from a predominantly theoretical approach to a more hands-on, practical, and skills-driven curriculum. By doing so, we can equip students with the expertise and competencies needed in their chosen vocational fields, making vocational education more appealing, relevant, and effective. This transformation can unlock the true potential of vocational education, preparing students for successful careers and enriching the workforce with skilled professionals.

3.2.3 Narrow Pathways for Further Education and Employment for Secondary Vocational Graduates

In a context where traditional high schools often contend with a shortage of available student positions, secondary vocational schools encounter significant challenges in attracting students, leading to low admission rates and high dropout rates. This multifaceted issue is influenced by a combination of factors stemming from both students and parents. However, its primary cause can be attributed to the limited job opportunities available to secondary vocational graduates.

Secondary vocational schools may occasionally boast about their ability to send a small number of students to universities. Nevertheless, the stark reality is that, upon graduation, these students only tend to have promising prospects if they choose to embark on entrepreneurial ventures. When compared to conventional high schools, it's not surprising that secondary vocational schools can evoke considerable anxiety among parents.

The dearth of job opportunities for secondary vocational graduates contributes significantly to the prevailing parental apprehension. This underlines the importance of not only improving the image of secondary vocational education but also enhancing the employment prospects for its graduates. By equipping these students with the necessary skills, promoting entrepreneurship, and expanding the range of job opportunities, we can alleviate these concerns and foster a more positive perception of secondary vocational education. This, in turn, can encourage students and parents to consider it as a viable and attractive educational pathway.

3.3 Inadequate Stratification Criteria

Currently, in China's middle school stage, the "diverting students into general or vocational education tracks" policy primarily relies on test scores as the basis, without adequately considering the individual abilities and characteristics of the examinees. In practice, it adopts a "one exam determines a lifetime" model for educational choices. While this system formally guarantees that every student has the opportunity to continue their education, it effectively makes a choice between "selecting elites" and "eliminating the disadvantaged."

Students who seek societal recognition usually have to transfer to higher-quality general classes during the diversion process. This single-score-based diversion mechanism places significant psychological pressure on both parents and students and imposes a considerable financial burden on families. Students and parents face intense competition, believing that only by obtaining better scores can they stand out, or they may risk being marginalized.

This situation emphasizes the need to fundamentally reevaluate the diversion policy to ensure that it is not solely based on superficial standards but rather on a diversified assessment system that takes into account the potential and interests of each student. This helps alleviate educational pressure and reduce the economic burden on families while encouraging students to pursue diverse career and educational opportunities, rather than relying solely on test scores to determine their future. It also contributes to establishing a fairer and more inclusive educational environment, ensuring that every student can fully realize their potential and contribute to the diversity and innovation of society.

4. Strategies to Alleviate the Impact of General-Vocational Education Stratification on Education Anxiety among Junior High School Parents

4.1 Strengthen Public Education and Change the Inherent Perceptions of Secondary Vocational Education among Junior High School Parents

Parental education anxiety stemming from general-vocational education stratification is largely due to the perception that vocational education and general education are fundamentally different and significantly unequal. Therefore, there is a need to enhance parental education and change societal preconceptions about secondary vocational education. Firstly, the government should refine and enforce relevant laws and regulations. The new "Vocational Education Law" explicitly states that "vocational education is an education type of equal importance to general education." A correct understanding of the relationship between vocational education and general education is essential, recognizing that there is no hierarchy between them; they merely serve different purposes. Secondly, schools should educate parents about the distinctions between vocational and general education [9], their respective advantages, and national development policies during parent-teacher meetings or school events. This will help parents form a correct educational value system and aid students in selecting schools that align better with their development needs. Lastly, there should be an increased focus on media promotion and the guidance of online discussions. The development of the internet has made information readily accessible to parents, but it has also heightened their anxiety regarding general-vocational education stratification. When students are about to face this stratification, anxious parents often turn to the internet for help. However, the online information can be chaotic, and some for-profit tutoring institutions may impersonate parents to promote their self-serving content. The internet is filled with negative information about secondary vocational education and discussions related to "enrolling in tutoring classes," "improving grades," and "striving for regular high schools." This continuous stream of negative content increases parental anxiety about general-vocational education stratification, compelling parents to join the rat race of "educational competition" [10]. Therefore, it is imperative to guide online discussions and prevent profit-oriented organizations and those seeking chaos from spreading harmful content that obstructs the implementation of the "double reduction" and general-vocational education stratification policies. Simultaneously, there should be timely and objective explanations of these policies on the internet, promoting the necessity of vocational education and providing interpretations of relevant educational policies. For instance, the new "Vocational Education Law" that was implemented in 2022 mentions the coordination of general and vocational education. Without timely interpretations, some people mistakenly believed that this law aimed to abolish general-vocational education stratification, sparking extensive online debates.

4.2 Improve the Quality of Vocational Education and Consolidate the Fundamental Status of Secondary Vocational Education.

4.2.1 Tailor Education to Local Conditions and Individual Abilities.

The latest "Vocational Education Law" clearly states that at different stages of compulsory education, a regionally tailored approach should be adopted to comprehensively promote the coordinated development of vocational education and general education. When it comes to the issue of "diverting students into general or vocational education tracks," it is crucial to emphasize flexibility and regional differences, avoiding a one-size-fits-all policy [11]. Different regions should set different ratios of general and vocational education based on specific circumstances to better meet the local needs.

Vocational students have unique intellectual inclinations. Therefore, in addition to fundamental subjects such as language, mathematics, and English, various practical courses should be offered to them. Such an arrangement better caters to the specific needs of vocational students, highlighting their learning characteristics and regularities. By providing customized course options, we not only meet the unique requirements of vocational students but also ensure they receive education that aligns more closely with real-life and career needs, comprehensively promoting their personal and professional development. This personalized education model helps cultivate innovative thinking and problem-solving skills among vocational students, better preparing them for their future careers.

4.2.2 Establish a Seamless Integration of General and Vocational Education and Facilitate Pathways to Secondary Vocational Education.

The concept of "diverting students into general or vocational education tracks" should not be misunderstood as a simple division between general and vocational education. Instead, it should be regarded as a "multilevel interchange bridge" carrying the principles of integration [12], mutual accessibility, and mutual support. The purpose of this bridge is to provide students with more opportunities to choose their educational paths, allowing them to flow naturally and autonomously between the realms of general and vocational education. This means that students should decide their educational trajectory based on their interests, abilities, and goals rather than being constrained by rigid system arrangements.

Furthermore, the new "Vocational Education Law" explicitly stipulates that vocational school students should have equal opportunities in aspects such as further education, employment, and career development compared to students at the same educational level in general schools [13]. This signifies that vocational students should have equal opportunities to access higher education and pursue advanced degrees. To realize this goal, it is essential to establish pathways for vocational graduates to enter higher education, improve the vocational school entrance examination system, and increase the number of vocational school students admitted to vocational and applied bachelor's programs. This way, vocational students will have the opportunity to access higher-level education, explore a broader range of career options, and lay a solid foundation for their future careers.

Parents should clearly see that the path to success through secondary vocational education is just as wide as that through general high school education. Vocational students should have access to the same opportunities and rights as general students, and their career prospects are equally promising. This helps dispel any misconceptions about vocational education, encouraging more students and parents to actively choose vocational education and contributing to the mutual development of individuals and society.

5. Conclusions

In the process of "diverting students into general or vocational education tracks," it is essential to dismantle the utilitarian "Five Only" evaluation system and establish a new comprehensive assessment approach. From an individual perspective, when formulating policies, we should prioritize the holistic development of individuals, placing personal growth at the forefront. We should continuously cultivate students' intrinsic rational motivation and stimulate their self-respect and self-reflection.

This necessitates assisting students in making targeted educational choices based on their abilities, levels, interests, and personalities, so that the process of educational diversion becomes their autonomous decision rather than a passive elimination mechanism. This approach helps nurture students' self-awareness and autonomy, emphasizing their central role in shaping their education and career paths. The new comprehensive assessment method should be based on multiple criteria, including academic performance, skills, interests, and individual potential, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of each student's needs and potential.

Through this approach, we can establish a more human-centered and diverse educational environment, encouraging students to actively participate in shaping their educational journeys. It also enables them to adapt better to various educational and career opportunities. This benefits not only individual student growth but also contributes to social progress and innovation because everyone can leverage their unique talents and potential to enrich societal diversity and prosperity.

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