

Navigating the shadows: an exploration of motivations and the impact of shadow education on educational equality in China

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Abstract. A prevailing consensus in education laments the role of shadow education as a significant driver of social inequality, a concern that prompted China's recent regulatory policies aimed at inhibiting its growth. However, this well-intentioned policy exacerbated existing gaps as they grant privileges to families with more economic and cultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's capital theory, this study employs thematic analysis through semi-structured interviews with 17 participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to explore the complex motivations for participating in shadow education in China and its impact on educational equality. The findings reveal the tension between passive conformity with competitive social norms and active pursuit of social mobility, reflecting broader contradiction between elite ideology and structural inequality. Rather than merely suppressing shadow education, the government should emphasize the value of education for the common needs of all stakeholders, thereby alleviating existing structural inequalities.

Keywords: shadow education, educational inequality, socioeconomic status, Bourdieu's capital theory, parentocracy

1. Introduction

In recent decades, shadow education (SE)—the phenomenon of private supplementary tutoring alongside mainstream formal education—has become a prevalent topic of discussion. Often referred to as the “shadow” of formal education, SE mirrors and adapts to the content and structure of formal schooling, creating an educational landscape that both complements and competes with public education systems.

The rise of SE globally prompts questions about the impact of market-driven educational services on social stratification and educational equality [1,2], especially in high-stakes educational environments, where the pressure to excel intensifies demand for supplementary support. In China, SE is fueled by a highly competitive national exam system and a deeply ingrained cultural emphasis on academic achievement. The duality highlights a central paradox in SE: while it serves as a pathway for academic improvement, it also reinforces socioeconomic divides.

Drawing on interviews with students and parents across diverse socioeconomic status (SES), this study aims to understand the nuanced motivations behind SE participation and examine the interplay of educational choices and socioeconomic factors. By illuminating these complex dynamics, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of SE in modern education systems and provides insights into how educational policies might balance the pursuit of academic achievement with the goal of social equality.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of shadow education

Shadow education (SE), commonly known as private supplementary tutoring [3], is a topic that garners extensive discourse nowadays. Emerging in the 1980s [4], SE was coined metaphorically owing to its characteristic of existing on the presence of and mimicking the content in formal schooling: as the curriculum changes in schools, so does it change in the shadows; as a school system grows larger, so do the shadows [5-7].

Stevenson and Baker [8] first proposed this term following a study among Japanese high school students to denote the strong connection between the mainstream education system and widespread out-of-school learning activities, identifying which as “a range of educational activities outside of school to improve academic performance and opportunities to further education.” Bray

[6] further interpreted the concept as comprising profit-oriented, supplementary forms of mainstream formal education that cover exclusively academic subjects taught at schools.

SE mainly exists in five forms, namely private tutoring institutes, home-visit private tutoring, internet-based private tutoring, subscribed learning programs, and after-school programs [9]. Either for remedial or enrichment purposes [10] (p.240), all forms have convergent objectives in enhancing academic performance [4], invariably offering specific subjects or tailored preparation for national exams [11]. This pathway of investments largely determines the future career of a student, which is distinguished by a number of transitions to education [12]. On one hand, most students claim to undergo improvement in academic performance [13], thus enhancing their overall attitude towards life. On the other hand, some families, especially those with low SES, would find it too exorbitant to afford private supplementary tutoring. This circumstance leads to another consideration: exacerbated social stratification and educational inequality [1,2].

2.2. Historical context and current landscape

Since UDHR established the right to education as a basic human right, modern schooling has expanded rapidly in countries worldwide [14,15]. This rise of mass education was characterized as the first wave in modern education [15]. Mainstream formal education opportunities have the essential characteristic of “getting is satisfying”. Hence, the expansion of the supply of educational opportunities indicates the alleviation of opportunity inequality. However, as competitiveness began to intensify, shadow education arose and is becoming increasingly significant in the realm of education.

Traditionally, SE has been prominent primarily in East Asia countries, such as Thailand, China, Japan, Korea [8], and in India [16]. However, with the expansion of the education system, the phenomenon is spreading rapidly across the globe, affecting developed and developing countries alike [17,18]. It has even occurred in Nordic countries, which are long famed for high-quality schooling that emphasizes diversity and where supplementation is often considered unnecessary [19]. Byun et al. [20] showed that approximately one-third of all 15-year-old students in 64 countries across the world used private supplementary tutoring, indicating a trend towards general intensification of out-of-school fee-paying tutoring.

As marketization became more widely accepted in the education sector during the 1990s, there has been growing recognition of this particular phenomenon in China [10], which is known for its highly competitive national entrance examination (NCEE) [21]. In 2021, the Chinese government implemented a national government policy prohibiting SE with the aim of “burden reduction” for schoolchildren [10]. However, this policy overlooks the close link between SE and mainstream education. In a society deeply influenced by Confucian culture, the quality of school education profoundly impacts students’ demand for SE. Thus, following a radical reduction in tutorial centers, some original centers moved underground and revived irremediably within a short period [22].

2.3. Impact

In Merton’s functionalist analysis, unintended consequences that have negative functions for a system are termed “latent negative functions,” which often bring obvious harm to the social system [23]. Accordingly, China’s 2021 policy prohibiting SE exhibits this trait: while student burdens are reduced, phenomena such as rising prices for underground private tutoring have emerged. The close relationship between SES and participation in private tutoring [24], combined with high expenses and perceived positive effects of SE on academic performance, contributes to the exacerbation of societal inequality [25].

Additionally, it is necessary to consider the economic perspective on the marketization of education: rising prices for private tutoring due to a decrease in supply rather than demand further worsen the situation, as parents and other stakeholders see no initial justification for such restrictions [4]. Thus, addressing China’s current educational dilemma can largely be achieved by delving into the motivations behind the demand for SE, rather than simply regulating its supply.

2.4. Motivations for demanding SE

The entrenched emphasis on academic performance throughout Chinese history has profoundly shaped views on education. Moreover, the “Family Planning Policy” limited educational diversification in traditional Chinese society. Thus, people are increasingly aware that educational choices are decisive in determining a student’s position on the social ladder [26]. Furthermore, since formal education is traditionally exam-oriented, whereas private supplementary tutoring is need-oriented, SE is often considered more effective in improving academic achievement. Additionally, purchasing these private services demonstrates parents’ economic resources and willingness to address educational challenges, arguably enhancing children’s self-efficacy as their academic performance improves [27].

2.5. Gaps in the literature

Previous literature on shadow education has primarily focused on its effectiveness in improving academic achievement [28], its relationship with mainstream education [29], and its societal implications [6], while few studies have focused on students' own perceptions. Additionally, concerns about educational inequality have led to government policies prohibiting or regulating private supplementary institutions, which conflict with parental perspectives on SE. This contradiction between parents and children regarding participation in private tutoring, along with their individual aspirations clashing with equity-oriented policies, is crucial for expanding the theoretical scope of current research. Thus, this paper aims to investigate this phenomenon with a focus on China.

3. Research questions (RQs)

1. How do intricate motivations influence individual choices in shadow education?
2. In what ways do parents perceive formal education, and are there SES-oriented differences?
3. What are potential future strategies that meet the common needs of all?

4. Theoretical framework

Under Bourdieu's capital theory, cultural capital can be divided into three forms: embodied form, objective form, and institutional form, in which families and schools are the two core reproduction mechanisms. This paper notes the general tendency for people to transfer economic capital into culture capital to seek "reproduction". Cultural misrecognition occurs when people mistake the essence of a certain capital for symbolic capital [30]. Such symbolic violence overemphasizes the extent of getting higher certification for schooling. "Feel for game" refers to the behavior of planning wisely for the future, considering the internal rules in a certain social space [31], which, in the context of investment in education, is illustrated by parents' decision of sending their children to cram schools, despite the high cost, believing what they have done is worth it since they believe they have done their responsibility to help their children "win the game".

Additionally, I use the term "performance culture" to indicate individuals' universal aspiration to become higher-academic achievers. Symbolic capital and performance culture together, adding to the realization of parentocracy, further aggrandize competitiveness. Parentocracy reflects the dominance of parent in educational decision-making and efforts to provide their children with the best educational resources. This "third wave" in modern education characterizes crucial changes towards higher degree of marketization and free choice for parents of investment. Because of the exclusivity of this behavior, that is, only the middle class participates, it will partly lead to education inequality [15].

5. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research design to understand participants' experiences, expectations, and motivations behind their investment in SE. Aiming for "concrete and complex illustrations" [32] (p. 364) or "thick descriptions" [33] of individual cases, a qualitative design is considered suitable for this research, as it has the potential to uncover the complicated and even paradoxical beliefs about SE among students and parents.

5.1. Sampling and participants

This research involves 17 participants, consisting of 7 students and 10 parents. All participants were drawn from the researcher's own social networks. Arguably, this convenience-based sampling inevitably affects the representativeness of the data. Nevertheless, given time constraints, it was the only feasible method to enable access to participants across a range of social and economic backgrounds. The participants' demographics are presented in Table 1, as shown below.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant_ID	Role	Age	Gender	Address	Previous_Degree	Professional_Experience	Investment_in_SE_percent	SE_Frequency
1	Parent	48	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	ph.D	Professor	0.01	yearly
2	Student	16	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Student	0.05	daily
3	Student	16	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Student	0.6	daily
4	Student	16	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Student	0.1	weekly
5	Student	16	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Student	0.3	weekly
6	Student	16	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Student	0.1	monthly
7	Parent	48	male	Zhengzhou, Henan	BA	Manager	0.01	yearly
8	Parent	52	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Homemaker	0.25	weekly
9	Parent	50	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Sales	0.33	daily
10	Parent	50	male	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Teacher	0.23	weekly
11	Parent	50	male	Zhengzhou, Henan	BA	Engineer	0.01	yearly
12	Parent	50	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Retired	0.01	yearly
13	Student	16	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	senior high school	Student	0.05	weekly
14	Parent	43	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	MA	Engineer	0.05	weekly
15	Parent	41	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	BA	Nurse	0.05	weekly
16	Parent	48	male	Zhengzhou, Henan	BA	Tutor	0.2	yearly
17	Parent	22	female	Zhengzhou, Henan	BA	Intern	0.33	daily

5.2. Data analysis

This study adopts a systematic thematic analysis model, which involves the selection of keywords and quotations, coding, theme development, and interpretation [34]. Interview data were read repeatedly to identify emerging themes, which were then grouped and analyzed. Themes were refined through comparison and iteration to answer the research questions in a structured manner.

6. Analysis and discussion

The process of coding and analysis reveals several important trends. A series of complex, and sometimes contrasting attitudes of the participants towards SE became evident. The following analysis addresses the initial RQs in sequence.

RQ1 How intricate motivations influence individual choices in shadow education?

6.1. Passivity and autonomy

Throughout the interview, participants consistently displayed a paradoxical attitude towards private tutoring (PT), expressing dissatisfaction with the particular pattern of education in China, where credentials are given such crucial importance and educational resources are unequally distributed, despite still choosing to “play the game” as a general conformity of the status quo in the field of education.

The following sections discuss the coexistence of passivity and autonomy towards investing in PT. By analyzing relevant data, the first RQ is explored.

6.1.1. Passivity

To begin with, most of the participants expressed a sense of obligation, indicating heavy investment of education can be a choice under pressure. The following quote vividly illustrates the prevailing atmosphere in China, where participation in PT is closely tied to the intense competition within the education system.

“When watching a movie at the cinema, the people in front stand up, and those behind have to stand up since those in front is blocking their view.” (Participant 14)

As shown above, Participant 14, by using the cinema metaphor—where people stand up, forcing those behind them to do the same to maintain their view—expressed a sense of inevitability, and captures the pressure to participate in PT as a response to the competitive educational environment, illustrating how individuals feel compelled to follow others’ actions in order to keep up. Likewise, a similar feeling is also indicated in Participant 2’s interview data, which further reflects the tendency to passively emulate the behaviors of others.

“I saw that my classmates, who were at a similar level to mine, achieved progress after receiving tutoring, so I naturally imitated them and also participated in the tutoring offered by these institutions.” (Participant 2)

Participant 2 observed that among her academic peers, tutoring was becoming a normative practice, which was the key to their significant progress. This perceived pressure converted into a personal imperative, compelling her to abide by this emerging norm in order to maintain her position within the group.

Overall, similar to the concept of “theater effect” used by Xue and Xu [35] on conformity in shadow education, the above analysis illustrates passivity in their decisions to engage in PT. The obligation to follow the actions of others arises from the competitive educational environment, not merely out of personal preference.

6.1.2. Autonomy

Nevertheless, a seemingly paradoxical trend identified in this paper is the tension between external obligation and personal aspiration. Participants complained that they were compelled to invest in SE because of external pressures, while showing a desire to pursue upward social mobility.

“We definitely want (our children) to achieve upward social mobility.” (Participant 8,9,10,15)

This aligns with Bourdieu’s [36] theory of cultural reproduction, where the proneness to convert economic capital into cultural capital further ignites symbolic power of curriculum institutionalized in mass formal education, paving the way for potential symbolic profit [37].

Likewise, the following quote also indicated a strongly hierarchical education system. The terms: 985 and 211 indicate the corresponding symbolic capital associated with each qualification.

“In middle school and high school, a large number of students can already be filtered out. With the presence of 985 and 211 universities, as well as first-tier and second-tier ones, the competition for credentials intensifies.” (Participant 9)

As indicated above, the diction “filtered out” highlights the exclusionary, hierarchical nature of China’s education system, implying the system’s focus on status and credentials rather than learning itself. Meanwhile, the stated “competition for credentials” makes it appear to be more crucial for people to improve their children’s current status in education, ensuring their promising future and evading mediocrity.

“We hope our children won’t become overly mediocre... Changing one’s destiny through education is a necessary leap forward.” (Participant 7)

As demonstrated, the aspiration for “changing one’s destiny” also influence investing in SE, showing a coexistence of passivity and autonomy.

RQ2 In what ways do parents perceive formal education, and are there SES-oriented differences?

6.2. SES and parental views on schooling

6.2.1. Perception of formal schooling: inadequacy and dissatisfaction

Another significant commonality emerged from my data was the perception of formal schooling as inadequate/insufficient, especially in terms of teaching quality and classroom size, which brings about the necessity to participate in SE. For example, Participant 13 and 12 both mentioned their dissatisfaction with formal schooling.

“To prevent self-study, the textbook is very simple and poorly written.” (Participant 13)

“Most fresh graduates do not have a solid foundation of knowledge to be a teacher. Allowing them to become teachers prematurely will hinder children's learning.”

(Participant 12)

Interestingly, as can be seen from the above data, participants express dissatisfaction with at least two aspects of formal schooling: the textbooks are described as “very simple and poorly written”; concerns towards the teacher training process suggest that insufficiently prepared teachers are affecting the quality of education.

Likewise, another set of concerns is related to the competitiveness of exam systems, and the difficulties in excelling in it with school education only:

“Some teachers focus on imparting limited knowledge in formal schools; only in tutorial classes where they could earn extra income, they talk about certain problem-solving methods crucial for exams.” (Participant 12)

“The questions given in high-stakes testing always include content not taught in formal schooling.” (Participant 17)

Ironically, the universal concern about whether school teachers are truly able to help students excel is rational: for example, teachers in formal schools neglect essential concepts; the extra content in high-stakes exams further intensifying the pressure on students to seek outside help. These gaps in formal education leave people doubting the effectiveness of the school system in preparing students for academic success, particularly in an environment where competition is fierce and stakes are high.

Thus, under these conditions, individuals invariably choose to take PT, to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education. In line with the EMI (effectively maintained inequality) model, the actions of individuals that perpetuate social and economic disparities within a society sustain unequal distribution of resources and opportunities among different groups [38].

6.2.2. SES differences

As the above part notes the pervasive quality concerns of formal education, the following section demonstrates how parentocracy in families of different SES influence their perception and consumption of SE.

By analyzing the data in this study, it can be inferred that the more choices high SES families have outside of the public education system account for their “relaxation”. Conversely, the middle SES parents indicate a strong sense of anxiety: On one hand, they are aware of the severe competition over scarce resources; on the other, going to international schools or jumping out of the formal schooling system might be too costly to them.

The following paragraphs of this section offer a more detailed comparison in terms of the educational goals and choices that families with different SES manifest. For example, Participant 1 discussed the importance of in-depth research skills.

“The success of students is not solely determined by high scores. It also lies in their ability to conduct in-depth research in areas they are passionate about, thereby achieving their own uniqueness.” (Participant 1, high SES)

As indicated in the quote, Participant 1, a high SES parent, values children's ability and willingness more than others do, believing that education that their children receive should be guided by their own interests and passion. This deliberation thus brings about the assumption that parents from high SES families, owing to their ability to provide their children with various forms of learning resources and ways for them to achieve success, tend to care less about the presence or prohibition of cram schools.

Nevertheless, when discussing the perspective of families with a middle SES, the circumstance is distinctively different.

“We are trying to create an opportunity for our child to stand on the same starting line as others.” (Participant 9, middle class)

It can be seen that, the strong sense of insecurity and anxiety imbued in middle SES families like Participant 9 explains why these people are prone to be more reliant on SE, viewing it as the most accessible way to make their children “stand on the same starting line as others.” Likewise, Xue and Xu's [35] study revealed the positive correlation between the participation rate of school peers in SE and the probability of engaging in PT for students whose parents are at a medium economic level.

To summarize, it is the choices available for SES-diverse families that matter: due to their higher economic capital, high SES families usually possess more potential choices for their children. This is where their sense of security originates.

RQ3 What are potential future strategies that meet the common needs of all?

To answer the third RQ, the following two parts will concentrate on identifying the contradiction among different stakeholders, carrying on from which, the potential future strategies that meet the common need of all will be established in the final part of this research.

6.3. Contradiction among different stakeholders

Another trend identified is the conflicting interest among different stakeholders. This includes the contradiction between parents and children, as well as that between recipients and the provider—namely, the government—when integrating parents and children as a unified term. By identifying the two general kinds of contradiction among these three subjects, I determine that an inner unity needs to be established.

6.3.1. Conflicting viewpoints: parents and children

After reviewing several representative quotes, this section suggests that parents and children have different perspectives on shadow education: the former tend to be more utilitarian, while the latter focus more on their own psychological needs.

“Parents send their children to cram schools that have brought out students with good grades, whereas students focus more on whether they enjoy the teaching style and if the vibe is appropriate.” (interview 14)

The above claim reflects a potential conflicting viewpoint between students and parents, which echoes with Yung’s [39] finding, demonstrating students’ propensity for focusing on “immediate psychological needs in the process of learning.”

In the meantime, insecurity, as Entrich [40] asserted, is the underlying cause for parents to continue making investments in supplementary lessons, as the following quotes illustrates this feeling of theirs from the standpoint of a student.

“A substantial portion of parents holds a belief that, as long as children are at (cram) schools, they would be rapt on studying, which, however, would purely console parents themselves. I want to grow up independently.” (Participant 13)

From the quotes above, it is shown that self-comfort manifests parents’ pressure from raising successful and well-adjusted individuals amid an volatile society, fearing that any misstep on their part may negatively impact their children’s prospects. Granted, this profound apprehension stems from a genuine concern for their well-being. They scramble to protect, nurture, and guide their children through uncertainties at crucial stages in their lives [41]. However, a balance between protecting their children and “allowing them to grow up independently” needs to be developed, or controversy may be lifted, making parents’ investment totally counterproductive.

6.3.2. Conflicting interest: recipients and the provider

In addressing the contradiction among different stakeholders, this paper will then focus on analyzing the interest-driven perceptions of education equality and the mutual influence that arises from this differentiation between individuals and the government.

At a societal level, education functions as a social institution and prioritizes accessibility, hoping to realize an egalitarian society, as shown below.

“The benefits of education should benefit all people in a more equitable way, and quality education should be shared by more people.” (The Report to the 20th CPC National Congress)

Individuals, however, tend to maximize their own utility, prioritizing excellence and high-quality educational resources.

“Good universities and good job opportunities are limited. We can only rely on our own efforts to compete for a higher position.” (Participant 9)

“Students with lower learning abilities have the right to have the same level of learning as others by going to cram schools.” (Participant 17)

The seem-to-be idealized educational environment in a meritocratic society that, indicating an exhilarating vision of human agency, goes hand in hand with a morally comforting conclusion: we get what we deserve [42]. However, as meritocracy tends to marginalize those not having the resources or opportunities to excel, the challenge arises in balancing the encouragement of individual excellence with the need to support those who are disadvantaged. This further introduces a fundamental tension in how society defines success and equitable opportunities, not to mention the inverse effects certain policies intended to level the distribution of educational resources can produce [43].

Based on the above analysis, this study identified two core contradictions in SE: internal family contradictions at the micro level and contradictions among social subjects at the macro level. These structural contradictions not only reflect the fundamental differences among various stakeholders regarding educational goals, but also highlight the predicament that a single policy is difficult to reconcile the diverse demands. In this regard, any effective reform plan must ensure that the institutional design guarantees educational equality while providing diversified paths for individual development, thereby seeking the greatest consensus in a dynamic balance.

6.4. Reimagine the future

Based on the discovered contradictions, this section proposes the necessity of a reform approach that goes beyond idealized solutions and provides an operational strategy. These measures include redefining learning goals at the individual level, implementing structural reforms, and particularly emphasizing vocational education and training (VET) to address the main drivers of educational inequality.

6.4.1. Redefine the goals of learning: from credentialism to holistic development

First of all, it is necessary to establish a negative view of today's education in order to achieve the goal of redefining learning objectives.

“Education today is more like a business.” (Participant 14)

“Schools only tell us 'what something is' but not explain 'why it is this'.” (Participant 6)

In the quotes above, participants reported their dissatisfaction with the current education system. They indicate the market-oriented features embedded in the current Chinese public school system. Meanwhile, students are aware of its limitations: for instance, Participant 6 noted that the form of schooling focusing solely on memorizing facts fails to cultivate critical thinking, leaving students confined to dominant sociocultural norms. This observation inspires a more efficient way of learning; as Csapó's [44] argues, “learning with understanding” is the most effective way to enhance the applicability and transferability of knowledge.

“Investment in shadow education is an activity of high cost and low return.” (Participant 1)

The aforementioned inefficiency of cultural reproduction prevails. Indeed, the returns would ultimately hinge on how much students could learn [45].

“It is very difficult to realize upward of social mobility simply through learning... The more important thing is to let children develop freely.” (Participant 14)

The above quote comes from a mother of a child who has encountered certain psychological issues, which led her to gradually realize that education is “not about competition, but rather about better adapting to this society.”

Then, apparently, the pervasive desire for education points to nurturing freely-developed individuals with critical thinking ability, and a strong agency of exerting their own potential in various areas, rather than relentless pursuits of credentials.

6.4.2. Policy changes and reform

Interestingly, the most anticipated transformation is fostering the development of the vocational education system, making the education landscape less hierarchical. For example, Participant 16 and 17 both expressed their concern over the emphasis on higher education qualifications in Chinese universities.

“I actually appreciate the dual education system in Germany. There is no contempt chain, regardless of what kind of education you are receiving. Those who are fit for research and knowledge should choose to go to college, while those not suitable but possess strong practical ability could go to ordinary technical schools. It is commendable as long as we play our part to build the society.” (Participant 17)

Participant 17, a German major graduate college student, clearly expressed her envisioning of a society with “no contempt chain”. This chain, often associated with “excellent learning assures a decent career,” and the underdevelopment of modern industries in China [46], creates a judgmental attitude about technical and vocational education, treating it as a “second choice” alternative to college, increasing the demand for procuring credentials by engaging in SE. As Wu indicates, people often conflate education with degrees to an extent that a degree is the only “acceptable” form of education. This hierarchical view of education is also acutely criticized in Sandel's [47] *The Tyranny of Merit*, where he names credentialism the “last accepted prejudice” in this age. By bringing up the relationship between education and the workplace, Participant 17 expressed her desire for individual roles to be appreciated based on their societal impact rather than perceived prestige.

“The college enrollment rate should not be too high, so that our industry can develop, and the salaries of advanced technicians should be similar to those of knowledgeable innovators.” (Participant 16)

As previous studies that underscore the importance of VET (vocational education and training) in promoting social inclusion and equal education opportunities [48], the above quote emphasizes the need for resolving the contradiction between different social classes, embracing and equalizing VET and academic education. It must be aligned with key national strategies, including establishing partnerships between leading VET colleges and enterprises in cutting-edge fields, thereby reshaping vocational education as a path of innovation rather than merely as a form of consolation.

Additionally, improving the quality and fairness of public education is fundamental. Just as the Participants' dissatisfaction with formal school education reveals, improving teaching quality and ensuring that the curriculum is fully prepared for students to cope with high-risk assessments are crucial for reducing the rigid demand for private tutoring. This can be achieved by

investing in teachers' professional development, promoting small-class teaching to provide personalized support, and ensuring that school curricula comprehensively cover examination content.

Finally, the state must set an example by reforming the recruitment and salary standards of state-owned enterprises, and attach equal importance to certified skills and university degrees. Thus, this will send out a powerful market signal and gradually dismantle the reputation hierarchy system that assists children's education. Compared with the original policy reforms in 2021, a more effective approach would be to establish a "whitelist" system for tutorial institutions to enforce standards for teacher qualifications, course content and pricing transparency. At the same time, non-profit or community-based counseling initiatives should be supported to provide affordable options for middle and low SES families and alleviate the exacerbation of inequality.

To conclude, following an in-depth exploration, adjustments to the dynamics of the intensifying societal competition are called for. For China, feasible solutions must take into account the country's unique social structure, industrial policies, and deeply rooted cultural preferences for academic qualifications. Therefore, a more pragmatic approach should leverage China's institutional advantages to pursue gradual and structural reforms.

7. Conclusion

Overall, the above analysis highlights the paradoxical nature of SE in contemporary Chinese society. As indicated in the analysis of the first RQ, the analysis brings attention to the coexisting passivity and autonomy; for the second, deficiencies of formal education propel SES-diverse families to vie for high-quality education; finally, the government should break down the educational hierarchy and establish an inclusive ecosystem oriented towards social contribution, which could be achieved by equalizing VET and academic education, enhancing the quality and fairness of public education, and reforming the evaluation system.

For the high-SES families involved in this research, echoing Lareau's [49] concept of concerted cultivation—which requires parents to provide crucial support and resources, enabling children to interpret the world distinctively—these participants also reflect a similar trend. However, this concerted cultivation is not enacted seamlessly; rather, financial and time pressures have led to family conflicts and deteriorating mental health. For the relatively low-SES participants, in line with what Sandel discussed in *The Tyranny of Merit*, they increasingly see themselves as "losers" in the meritocratic game, and SE can further disadvantage them in the education market.

Finally, as the sample in this qualitative study is restricted to convenience sampling, the result can be limited and biased. Future research could also adopt a quantitative design, using surveys to quantify the correlation between SES and investment in SE. Moreover, future studies can also incorporate voices of school teachers to inspect the direct tension between private and mainstream education. Thus, researchers may discover the overlooked educational disparities and suggest the need for more inclusive practices.

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