



General High School or Vocational High School: School Choice for Students Near the High School Entrance Examination Score Line

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Abstract

The study focuses on exploring the Chinese students' school choice decisions. In particular, it explores why some students prefer vocational schools over general high schools, even when eligible for the latter. The research also examines how pupils make sense of these dual purposes at the time of choosing. According to this study's results which were based on in-depth interviews with eight vocational school students, most of them chose these schools because they considered the courses offered there as more important than attending prestigious general high schools. Students choose their schools according to personal feelings and understandings about educational equality and achievement in society. Students' choices reflect their subjective experiences and individual interpretations of social signals regarding educational equity and success. The findings emphasized psychological and structural determinants in selecting schools so as to foster equal learning opportunities among all children regardless of their backgrounds. This study contributes to the understanding of how students navigate the complex landscape of educational options, and how their choices are influenced by broader societal forces.

Keywords: School Choice, Vocational Education, Educational Equity

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese government has promulgated a series of policy documents focusing on the development quality of vocational education (General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). As an important foundation for popularizing high school education and building a modern vocational education system with Chinese characteristics, vocational high school education upholds an educational concept that is different from general education and focuses on the core concept of practical education. The positioning of education types plays a certain role in guiding students and parents to establish

diversified views on talent. However, vocational education faces the embarrassing status quo of stratification with general education. Cumulative factors such as insufficient educational resources, lack of educational mechanisms, and social stereotypes affect society's recognition of vocational education and restrict the healthy development of the vocational education system.

School education has dual functions of education and selection (Pillsbury, 1921). The school choice under the preferred selection highlights the selective function. The classification and integration system of general education and vocational education attempts to weaken the selective function of high schools, highlight the educational function, and send a signal to society, parents and students that students can grow and become talents through different paths. The educational function allows parents and students to psychologically accept vocational education, and is more in line with the concept of long-term education and education equality (Hao & Pilz, 2021). The signal of preferred selection is rooted in the examination-oriented education, which makes students gradually develop a mentality of eagerness to win in the exam. Students whose high school entrance examination scores are close to the cut-offs for general high schools and vocational high schools will examine the signals sent by different types of education when choosing a school. Their school choice reflects the current understanding of the educational and selective functions of schools by a wider group of students. Analysing their psychology of school choice helps us understand and reflect on the real signals sent by vocational high school education.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in reshaping students' subjective experiences to explore individual behaviours and thoughts as a breakthrough in structural factors of school choice. Existing school choice theories emphasize the impact of existing social structures, transformed into capital through parents, influencing students' school choice outcomes. These theories, viewing from a structuralist perspective and centring around the core concept of social class reproduction, extract structural factors in student school choice, focusing on the selective function of school education but lacking attention to students' subjective experiences (Phillippo et al., 2021). During the school choice process, students receive information from schools, society, parents, and peers, and behind school choice lies the dynamic thinking gradually perceived by students. This involves a comprehensive consideration of educational and selective functions, giving birth to subjective thinking as a breakthrough in structural factors of school choice.

This study analyses the school choice considerations of students who, despite being eligible for general high schools based on their exam scores, choose to attend vocational high schools. It captures the tension between the educational and selective functions of school education, as well as the symbolic power of structural factors and students' active insights into these structures. The study aims to answer the following questions: 1. How do students identify the educational and selective functions of school education in school choices? 2. How does students' interpretation of these functions influence their school choice? 3. How do students' school choice reflect the connection mechanisms between these functions and educational equity?

2. Literature review

2.1 Factors of school choice

School choice is considered a rational decision-making process, and the school choice process is seen as a game involving various stakeholders (Gross et al., 2015; Krull, 2016). These stakeholders include the government, education departments, schools, students, and parents

(Hill & Jochim, 2009). Centred around these stakeholders, the influencing factors of school choice mainly fall into three categories: (1) External policy, such as national education policies, employment policies, and the localization policies of governments (West, 2006); (2) Students' aspirations, expectations, interests, and individual knowledge and skill levels (Pitre, 2006); (3) Peer influences (Barseghyan et al., 2019); (4) Family and individual information reception and processing capabilities based on family economic status (Levin, 2009). From a rational decision-making perspective, students and parents, as education consumers, consider selecting schools as choosing educational products, making the school choice process a multi-stakeholder game under the guidance of consumer values (Krull, 2016).

The policy-directed goals of individuals are determined based on their position in society and organizations (schools), interpreting the process through which policies reach the individual level from the school level (Ball et al., 2011). The Stage-Environment Fit Theory emphasizes the uniqueness of the psychological development of adolescent students transitioning from junior high to high school. According to Phillipppo et al. (2021), interpreting student decisions solely based on individual objective conditions is insufficient, and the Stage-Environment Fit Theory needs to be introduced to examine the psychological development stages of students, further dissecting the decision-making process. Positional factors include family economic status, academic performance, and psychological development characteristics. Psychological development characteristics encompass cognitive levels, self-awareness development, autonomy, and peer influence. Cognitive levels indicate the student's ability to filter and integrate school choice information, and self-awareness development implies that students will consider the meaning of their existence and developmental needs when making school choices. In this stage, students' autonomy increases, facing a transition from obeying elders to a mixed decision-making approach of obedience and autonomy. Positive adaptation to the outcomes of decision-making implies rationalization of decisions, while negative adaptation suggests the opposite. Peer influence also plays a crucial role during this stage.

2.2 Factors of school choice in general high school or vocational high school

Social information influences the formation and development of public perceptions, including those of students (Zalesny & Ford, 1990). The way students present themselves on social networks and the positive feedback they receive are considered as social support (Mishra, 2020). The receipt of social support, in turn, impacts the life satisfaction of vocational school students. Negative evaluations of vocational education on social networks can have a detrimental effect on student satisfaction, potentially hindering their choice to attend vocational schools (Ling, 2015).

Research has found that vocational high school students, due to academic labelling discrimination, may experience academic fatigue, and vocational identity can moderate the relationship between discrimination and academic fatigue (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). From this, it can be inferred that when deciding whether to attend vocational school, despite facing prevalent societal discrimination, a student's level of vocational identity will influence their school choice (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007).

Parental expectations can influence the academic emotions of vocational high school students (Feng, 2007). Parents with lower educational backgrounds tend to have higher expectations for their children's academics (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). This subgroup of vocational high school students may experience negative heightened learning emotions, which means they have high demands for learning but may feel anxious and ashamed due to poor academic performance. The socioeconomic status of families with vocational high school students is generally lower compared to families with students in high schools (Chu et al., 2015).

Resources invested by families in their children's education are limited. Differences in parenting styles can moderate the impact of parental investment in their children's education (Wang et al., 2022).

Psychological capital includes self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (Çavuş & Gökçen, 2015). It is negatively correlated with stress and positively correlated with subjective well-being (Rabenu et al., 2017). Psychological capital typically plays a positive psychological regulatory role in the learning experiences of vocational high school students. It can indirectly influence the decision of vocational school enrolment, with students possessing higher levels of psychological capital being better equipped to handle negative information about vocational education more positively (Xiaoli, 2020).

2.3 School choice and educational equity

Educational equity means allowing learners the freedom to choose schools (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). This refers to students having the freedom to choose their educational paths for self-development. General high school education and vocational high school education is a form of categorized education where the government provides diverse education to accommodate the differentiated developmental needs of learners, serving as a policy means to achieve educational equity. Existing research on school choice has mainly focused on predicting and explaining the outcomes of school choice, discussing the issues of educational equity implicit in school choice primarily at the level of structural factors. Individuals from higher socio-economic status (SES) are considered to have stronger achievement motivation (Anderson et al., 2020). Students from lower SES are more likely to be deemed suitable for lower-tier schools and academic paths compared to those from higher SES (Wei et al., 2019). Even when academic performance is essentially the same, these biases hidden in SES persist. This bias, triggered by social status, becomes more apparent when the selective function of schools and corresponding academic paths is stronger than their educational function (Batruch et al., 2019).

Family background and cultural capital have a cumulative effect on academic achievement, with negative cumulative effects being more significant than positive ones (Farkas, 2018; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Whether this is due to structural biases or differences in personal competence remains a subject of debate. Overall, the current discussion on the accumulation of advantages/disadvantages in social strata focuses on trend predictions, and the mechanisms behind the generation of educational unfairness issues still need to be further detailed (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006).

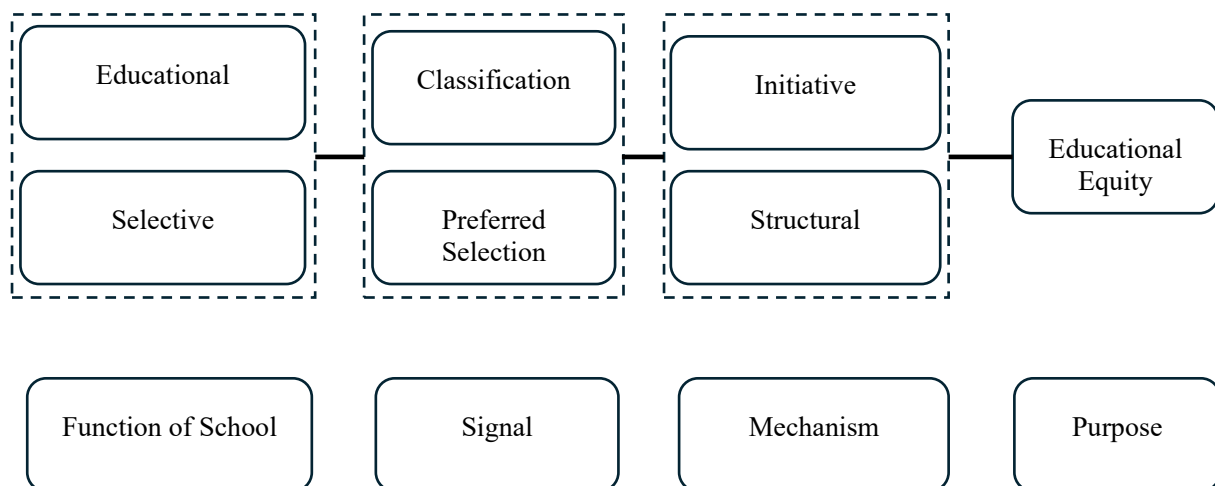
Linking the prediction of learning ability to social strata reflects the reproduction of structural factors (Lin, 2017). General high school education and higher education adhere to traditional academic culture and theoretical learning methods, while vocational high school education has its unique philosophy and approach to nurturing individuals. In the absence of high-quality paths for personal development within vocational education, it has become a tool for the selection of both social strata and learning abilities (Polesel, 2010). Lai et al. (2009) have found that in the transmission of school choice information, there is no distinction in the understanding of basic school choice rules among parents from different social status. Vulnerable groups, due to the lack of cultural capital, can effectively compensate for the lack of educational information through societal information (Johansson & Höjer, 2012). Excluding the impact of class differences on the reception of school choice information, the perception of different social strata regarding the true signals transmitted through the general and vocational education stratification requires further exploration.

3. Theoretical framework

Existing research has revealed to us that students' school choice includes not only motivational factors that are closely related to the educational function of the school, such as recognition of the major they study (Wang, 2013), but also structural factors that reflect the selective function of the school, such as family capital (Reinoso, 2008) and admission policies (Wu, 2012). Due to a lack of research on student subjectivity, there is insufficient exploration of extracting agency factors and exploring optimization strategies for student development mechanisms. The analysis and resolution of initiative factors and the mechanisms triggering them in the context of school choice require further investigation.

This study aims to explore the manifestation and challenges of educational equity in the school choice process from the perspective of agency factors, focusing on students' subjective experiences. By reshaping students' subjectivity, we seek to clarify the signalling processes of both the educational and selective functions of general and vocational high schools within the framework of the shared values of educational equity. We aim to investigate how students interpret these signals, contributing to the realization of educational equity. The theoretical significance of this study lies in breaking away from structural interpretations of student school choice and seeking initiative explanations. We aim to analyse the connection mechanisms at the individual level between school educational functions and educational opportunity equity, providing a subjective interpretation for school choice. The theoretical framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of this study



4. Methodology

This study adopts a post-structuralist perspective and employs qualitative research methods to delve into the subjective experiences of students, aiming to better interpret the mechanisms underlying the school choice process. The corresponding data collection method is semi-structured interviews, with interview questions designed based on the theoretical framework. We randomly selected a research sample consisting of 8 current vocational high school students, achieving a balance in terms of gender and SES backgrounds. The sample includes 5 males and 3 females, hailing from regions with different levels of economic development in a province in East China. They are currently enrolled in three different majors at two vocational middle schools. Their scores in the high school entrance examination are above the admission cut off for high schools but do not meet the criteria for the first batch

admissions. Therefore, they have the option to choose between attending high school or vocational high school. Specific information about the interviewees is detailed in Table 1, where “✓” indicates that the interviewee's high school entrance examination score meets the corresponding admission cut-off for that batch.

Table 1: Information of Participants

Number	Gender	High School Score Line	First Batch	Second Batch	Third Batch	3+4 Segmented Program
A	Female	✓			✓	
B	Female	✓			✓	✓
C	Female	✓			✓	✓
D	Male	✓		✓	✓	✓
E	Male	✓			✓	
F	Male	✓		✓	✓	✓
G	Male	✓			✓	
H	Male	✓		✓	✓	

Note: 1. The scores for each batch in this table refer to the school's unified enrolment scores, and do not include the scores for each school. 2. There are differences in the names of the admission batches in the regions where the interviewees took the high school entrance examination. This table unifies the batch names by comparing the actual enrolment situation in each region. The first batch refers to key high schools, the second batch refers to general high schools whose educational level is lower than that of key high schools, and the third batch refers to general high schools whose admission scores fluctuate above and below the unified admission score line for high schools. 3. Due to differences in the actual admission policies of different cities, the relationship between the scores for the 3+4 segmented program and the scores for different batches varies between cities.

Before commencing the study, researchers conducted a meeting to discuss the design of the research questions and analytical framework. Subsequently, the researchers conducted interviews with eight students. Prior to the interviews, researchers explained the purpose of the interviews, the identity of the interviewers, the research objectives of the interview content, and the anonymous handling of interviewee information to ensure transparency. Throughout the entire interview process, researchers continuously reflected on the potential impact of their identities on the interviewees to ensure the credibility of the responses. After each interview, researchers reviewed and discussed the results, continuously refining and accumulating coded themes.

To maintain reliability, researchers avoided the use of previously applied codes in language during subsequent interviews, preventing potential bias in the interviewees' responses and ensuring the reliability of interview information. Following the conclusion of the interviews, researchers employed NVivo to conduct inductive coding on the interview records, including categories such as scores, family advice, models, professional courses & general courses, career planning, aspirations for further education, peer relationships, and skills competitions. Two researchers independently completed the coding, generating a list of codes and memos, which were then discussed with seven peer researchers.

Subsequently, deductive coding was carried out based on the theoretical framework, comparing and refining the results from inductive coding to create predefined codes (educational function, selective function, classification signals, preferred selection signals, educational equity, structural factors, initiative factors). Researchers, combining the theoretical framework and literature review, repeatedly compared interview content, ultimately ceasing interviews when information saturation was achieved.

5. Results

5.1 Educational function and selective function

Students engaged in a comparative analysis between vocational education and general education, discerning the educational and selective functions based on their career aspirations. Their decision-making process involved evaluating the performance of general and vocational education in both these functions. The consideration for high schools was primarily driven by the selective function, gauging the perceived value based on the likelihood of gaining admission to a prestigious university graduation. In contrast, when contemplating vocational high schools, students directed their attention to the educational function, particularly its alignment with their learning interests, professional content, and future prospects.

Student H: "Thinking between attending a not-so-good high school and attending a better vocational school."

Student D: "My high school entrance examination results can only go to a (very average) general high school. The probability of entering the first batch of universities is too low. It is very troublesome for the second batch of universities to find a job after graduating. I only went to this (vocational) school and felt that this major was good and related to robotics."

Student C: "There are no good high schools for me to choose from. If I choose the business major in a vocational high school, I am actually more interested in business."

Students' perception of the functions of the two types of schools will change. When they regard vocational high school study as the basis for the next stage of study, they will show concern for the selective function of vocational high schools when choosing schools and majors, and strive to find a balance between the two functions.

Student C: "I am more interested in this major. On the other hand, choosing this major will be very helpful for my future undergraduate studies. This major has a high undergraduate enrolment rate."

Students' perception of the relationship between the two functions is not only reflected in their understanding of the education system, but also in their deep thinking about the relationship between the two. They return the screening function to the educational function and pay more attention to the learning content. In the absence of clear personal ideals and development goals, compared to the screening function, what exactly the educational function means for personal development is still relatively vague. Nonetheless, students demonstrated concern for the educational function. Regardless of whether the current school selection results are satisfactory or not, they are trying to think beyond the filtering function to think about the meaning of school education.

Student B: "My peers and I are relatively confused and don't have a clear idea of what I want to do."

Student F: "It's better to get a job if you go to a general high school. A (secondary vocational) diploma may not be as good as them, but there won't be as much learning content."

Student H: "I don't think that the higher the degree, the better. A higher degree is just a by-product. I mainly hope to learn more technical knowledge."

5.2 Signals of classification and preferred selection

The dual functions of school education run through students' thinking about the distinction between high school and vocational high school, and their respective signals of classification and preferred selection are transmitted to students through society, family, peers and school. Students receive more of the latter, which is mainly reflected in the fact that they believe that vocational education is less difficult to learn than general education, and there are no systematic differences in the dimensions of comparison, and no category distinction is reflected.

Student D: "The courses in vocational schools are relatively simple. They are much less stressful than general schools."

Student A: "Physics and chemistry in key high schools are very difficult, and vocational high schools like ours can't get into it."

Student F: "Studying is not as tight as theirs (general high schools), it's a little more relaxed."

In the eyes of students, the two signals are not completely opposite. The perception of the educational function of school triggers them to think more long-term about the process of vocational education. They have insight into the fact that the vocational education system itself also follows the logic of preferred selection. They recognize the effectiveness of highly "valuable" educational activities (vocational skills competitions) in selecting talents with both skills and theory, and they calmly accept competition under the logic of preferred selection. Different from the logic of preferred selection experienced in the high school entrance examination diversion process, this insight contains their deep understanding and recognition of vocational education. For them, preferred selection is not just a selection mechanism, but also an incentive mechanism that is useful for learning.

Student A: "If you win the vocational skills competition, (undergraduate) students don't have to take the exam and can enrol directly. However, those top students have better grades and still have to take the exam and get good grades before entering the school."

Student H: "To be a technician, you must first be more meticulous and reduce errors. Then, you need to learn theoretical knowledge more deeply. If you can't learn the basic courses well, you won't be able to understand and use new machines later."

5.3 Structural factors

The study identified structural factors influencing school choice, primarily encompassing admission policies, family economic capital, and family cultural capital. The impact of structural factors is predominantly reflected in guiding parents and students to focus on the selective function and signals of preferred selection. Parents and students consciously seek to avoid the challenges posed by the high school entrance examination and job-related academic qualifications selection. Once they develop a preference, family cultural capital plays a role in steering their attention toward the educational function, such as professional content and study planning.

The foremost consideration in school choice for students is the high school admission policy. Attaining scores near the admission cutoff implies, theoretically, the option to choose a general high school. However, the lack of opportunity to enter a higher-quality general high school diminishes the perceived return on investment for students reluctantly enrolling in a general high school. Constraints imposed by the family's economic capital inhibit students from opting for general high schools with lower short-term return on investment.

Student F: "My scores in the high school entrance examination are relatively low, so I can barely go to a general high school."

Student E: "My grandma thought it would be over if I entered a vocational high school. ... I also wanted to try a general high school, but my mother owed a lot of money from the bank in the early days and has not yet paid it off. I want to make money and pay it off as soon as possible, otherwise the burden on my family will be too heavy."

Family cultural capital is evident in parents' insights into the societal structure of talent and the symbolic power of educational credentials. Their considerations in school choice reflect complexity, flexibility, and pragmatism. Their reflections on whether to encourage their children to choose vocational schools and select majors are not centred around periodic academic achievements but exhibit a distinct career foresight. Most parents demonstrate a degree of restraint in school choice, making their children aware that attending a vocational school is a choice that offers greater future life security. Parents and children engage in a meticulous comparison of general and vocational schools, different vocational schools, and the educational content of various majors. This comparison aligns with society's generalized standards for talent requirements, assessing how vocational education can contribute to future benefits for the student and the family. The investment of family cultural capital enters into decisions of school choice in a detailed, career-oriented manner, reflecting a unique approach.

Student E: "My mother thinks I will have a better future after graduating from a vocational high school with this score."

Student F: "They want me to go to a vocational high school to study hard and pass the exam from junior college to bachelor so that I can go to university."

Student H: "My father is an engineer in the construction industry, so he recommended this school to me. ... After all, my father also majored in architecture, so it still has certain advantages."

5.4 Initiative factors

The initiative factors of students influence their understanding of dual functions and two types of signals. These initiative factors primarily include autonomous decision-making ability, psychological capital, and scrutiny of vocational education.

The decision-making process of school choice is built upon family power dynamics. During the process, students face a mixed state of increasing autonomy awareness and continued reliance on parents. There exists tension between their own perspectives and discourse authority. Due to students' limited autonomy, when their exam scores lack persuasive strength and there is no clear life goal, they often attempt to comprehend and accept their parents' opinions. In navigating between parental viewpoints and their own, students actively seek points of alignment.

Student H: "My father recommended this school. I am good at science but weak at liberal arts, so I chose this school. It was my father's decision."

Student D: "My mother said that my attitude might be the same as that of junior high school and I wouldn't do anything good when I went to high school. That's what they thought... (I) couldn't help it if I didn't agree."

Student A: "(I want to return classes) After communicating with my parents, they just don't believe me and think I might waste this year."

Student B: "Growing up, I usually make decisions based on my parents' opinions."

The consequences of parental involvement in decision-making are such that, as the child's autonomy awareness further strengthens, and a sense of non-identification emerges, it may elicit feelings of frustration and regret. In retrospect, during the review of the decision-making process, individuals may reconstruct the process as one that was not entirely autonomous. Despite acquiring information about future academic expectations and career planning through communication with parents, students still entertain the idea of reattempting the decision, such as through returning classes or enrolling in a general high school. As learners and exam-takers, they hold a more optimistic attitude towards their academic proficiency and future academic expectations.

Student D: "(If I choose again, I would like to) go to that (third batch of general high schools) and try hard. There are still opportunities, it just depends on you."

Student B: "I feel that I did not do well in the high school entrance exam this time. If I return to class, I will definitely be able to pass into high school."

Student C: "Actually, I also want to return class."

Student F: "When filling out my application form, I filled in all the fields for general high schools. If I really can't pass, I will return class."

For students, listening to their parents' opinions reduces decision-making risks. It not only means weighing the pros and cons at the moment, but also means re-understanding and digesting the results of the trade-off after the psychological cognitive changes in adolescence, and these risks are often unpredictable for them. Although it is difficult to completely predict risks, the ability that students develop to actively resolve the tension between their voice and opinions in school choice is the accumulation and expression of psychological capital. It provides them with unique energy to deeply understand the dual education function and deal with situations where the development path is not clear, and helps them withstand pressure from many aspects, including family pressure, peer pressure, academic pressure, and family financial pressure.

Pressure from relatives: "My mother told me why others, people with the same blood relationship, can do well in the exam, but you can't." (Student A) "(Mom and grandma) had an argument at night (whether to go to a general high school or a vocational high school), and then asked me to make a decision. I was quite confused." (Student E) Some students also showed a reverse insight into not exerting pressure: "My parents didn't go to high school, so they may not have high expectations for me." (Student C)

Financial pressure: "His high school entrance examination scores were not as high as mine, but he went to a self-funded high school." (Student C)

Academic pressure: "My understanding of myself is that I am not good at science. It may be more difficult to go to a general high school." (Student B)

Peer pressure: "I am already preparing to go to a general high school. Because my classmates and I have similar scores, we can go to a general high school together." (Student G)

The strength or weakness of psychological capital may not necessarily alter the school choice decision. This is primarily because students are not yet capable of fully autonomous decision-making, and they hold expectations regarding the educational function of vocational education. Simultaneously, the educational pathways provided by vocational education offer them opportunities for reconsideration from the perspective of the selective function. The students' cognitive differentiation between general and vocational education demonstrates profundity and contemporaneity. They are willing to receive external information and attempt

to make rational decisions, entering the next stage of learning in paths that provide greater assurance for both academic and career pursuits. Their comprehension extends beyond the nominal distinctions between general and vocational education, delving into the profound meanings based on practical needs, surpassing the symbolic significance of different types of education. However, this understanding also carries a contemporary aspect, as their future career choices remain relatively distant, making it challenging for them to be entirely convinced by the current selective function. Students continuously scrutinize the underlying functions of the two signals, and when there is a disparity between the educational function and their expectations, they may experience a certain degree of regret.

5.5 Educational equity

The ambivalence exhibited by students and parents in the school choice reflects their concerns about the loss of educational equity. The selective function and signals of preferred selection exacerbate these concerns, while the educational function and signals of classification have the potential to alleviate them. One of the significant reasons for their choice of vocational education is the existence of a dual pathway (employment and education) in vocational schools, which can ensure that future life still offers a broad space for self-definition.

Student A: "The winners of the professional skills competition are basically going to further their studies and do not go out to work right away."

Student B: "It's better to go to higher education first. I participated in the professional skills competition, and then I got this skill. In the future, I may learn other things in college. I will have more skills and learn more. Anything is possible."

Student C: "(School leaders and teachers) emphasize that learning basic courses and training skills must be paid close attention to, and the support provided (in both aspects) is quite sufficient."

Student E: "I choose to study this major seriously, unlike some people who don't study hard."

When the extension of education years becomes a consensus, because students' life ideals are still unclear, the constant struggle for educational fairness has become the fundamental driving force for their advancement. More study and greater advantages in finding a job have become goals with a clear position but vague connotation.

Student C: "After attending a vocational high school, I can live the life I want through my own efforts."

Student B: "If you try your best, or if you have something you particularly like, those skills, anything is possible."

Student A: "Everyone has their own choice. I think it would be better to continue studying. ... He definitely has more work experience than me, but I have learned a wider range of things."

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the foundational role of vocational education in cultivating applied talents, positioning it as an educational pathway that is increasingly recognized as equal to general education. As students navigate their school choices, they increasingly acknowledge the value of vocational training in achieving their career aspirations and personal development goals. This shift in perception aligns with previous research, such as

that Krull (2016) emphasizes the consumer-like approach students adopt when selecting educational institutions. In this context, students view their educational choices as part of a broader strategy to enhance their employability and skill sets, influenced by family expectations and societal values. Moreover, the application of Stage-Environment Fit Theory provides a critical framework for understanding the psychological development of adolescents during this transitional phase (Phillippo et al., 2021). This theory posits that students' decision-making processes are not solely based on objective conditions, such as academic performance or institutional reputation, but are also significantly shaped by their cognitive levels, self-awareness, and the influence of peers and family dynamics. The current study corroborates these findings, illustrating how students' autonomy evolves as they balance parental expectations with their own aspirations, ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding of their educational choices. Furthermore, Ball et al. (2011) argue that the interpretation of educational policies at the individual level is crucial for understanding the dynamics of school choice. The students' experiences reveal a complex interplay of personal agency and external pressures, suggesting that while vocational education is increasingly recognized as a legitimate and valuable option, the decision-making process remains fraught with challenges. Students often grapple with societal stereotypes regarding vocational education, which can influence their self-perception and confidence in pursuing these pathways.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of educational equity as a driving force behind students' school choices. With the establishment of the foundational role of vocational education in the system for cultivating applied talents, vocational education is gradually being realized as an education type equal to general education. The diversity in educational philosophy and talent perspectives will progressively manifest. Fundamentally, the advancement of this process is oriented towards achieving educational equity. As noted by Hao and Pilz (2021), the educational function of vocational training aligns with the broader concept of long-term education and equality, allowing parents and students to psychologically accept vocational education as a viable alternative. This acceptance is crucial in dismantling the stigma often associated with vocational pathways, thereby fostering a more inclusive educational environment. Through the analysis of school choice considerations among students who have the option to choose between general and vocational education, we observe that educational equity guides the decisions of students and parents. The broadening of educational pathways provides them with institutional conditions to access both forms of equity. Simultaneously, it facilitates students' long-term career planning considerations. The potential of career planning still needs further exploration in the context of updating educational philosophies.

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