

From Rigid Tracking to Coordinated Development: Equity Implications and Realistic Scrutiny in China's General-Vocational Education Integration Policy

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Abstract

China's 2022 Vocational Education Law advocates the integration of general vocational education (GVEI) and raises vocational education to an equal status with general academic education. This review aims to explore the equitable impact of this policy change and examine the structural shortcomings in its current implementation. The analysis shows that the GVEI policy has not fostered true two-way coordinated development. On the contrary, the policy largely serves as a one-way channel for vulnerable students to escape the vocational education track. At the same time, under the strong inertia of social reproduction, the tracking system continues to intensify the competition in hierarchical education driven by parents' rational status anxiety and relative risk avoidance. This review concludes that alleviating educational anxiety and achieving real equity cannot rely solely on internal education reform. Meaningful educational equity requires comprehensive structural reforms to reshape the valuation of technical skills in the labor market. Future studies should empirically track the long-term labor market outcomes of students navigating the integrated system to evaluate the policy's effectiveness in practice.

Keywords

general-vocational education integration (GVEI), tracking system, educational anxiety, social reproduction

1. Introduction

The structure of China's secondary education system has always been defined by a rigid and profound stratification mechanism, which has remained one of the most profound drivers of social division in developing countries for decades. Since the implementation of *the Vocational Education Law* in 1996 [1], the state requires that the enrollment ratios of regular high schools and vocational schools should be roughly equal [2,3]. This rigid tracking system was originally used as a macroeconomic lever to provide a large number of technical laborers for the industrialization of the country at the end of the 20th century [3]. However, as the country transitions to a knowledge-based economy, this hierarchical system has caused severe educational anxiety among the entire society, especially among the lower and middle-class families [4]. In May 2022, the comprehensive revision of *the Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China* [5] marked a fundamental paradigm shift in the national educational discourse system and policy framework. The policy clearly proposes to upgrade vocational education to a type of education with the same legal status and social

importance as ordinary academic education, and formally incorporates the concept of parity of esteem and as important into the legal framework of the country, advocating General-Vocational Education Integration (GVEI) and coordinated development [5]. This top-down legislative action aims to break the institutional hierarchy that downgrades vocational education to a secondary position, and theoretically allows greater permeability, credit transfer and integration between academic and technical tracks [5,6]. However, this transformation has encountered sharp conflicts with China's deeply-rooted cultural hierarchy, parents' anxiety about their children's educational status, and the social stigmatization of vocational education. Focusing on the diversion of secondary education and the development of vocational education, although the existing literature has captured the evolution of the theoretical perspective around 2022 and has some case studies, there is still a key research gap: the disconnect between macro-structural analysis and micro-individual psychology. In order to solve this gap, this review has contributed to this field by combining the macro social reproduction theory with the micro parental psychology mechanism (anxiety/stigma). Through this comprehensive perspective, this study analyzes the deep structural reasons for the obstruction of the implementation of GVEI. Furthermore, in the various local pilot programs of comprehensive secondary schools, disadvantaged vocational school students almost exclusively utilized the integrated policies to bypass the vocational track [7]. Therefore, this study aims to explore the following core issues by integrating the Stigma Theory, the theory of social reproduction, and the theory of rational action: 1. How has the 2022 Vocational Education Law influenced public attitudes and cultural stigma toward vocational education? 2. In what ways does the tracking system continue to drive hierarchical educational competition (Neijuan) and parental status anxiety? 3. What gaps remain in the literature regarding the implementation and equity outcomes of GVEI? The significance of this article is to reveal that the internal reform of the education system alone cannot solve class anxiety, and provides theoretical support for the future transfer of education policies to the structural reform of the labor market.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Institutional Declarations vs. Social Stigma

The social marginalization of vocational education students can be deeply understood through the Stigma Theory. In the discourse of pedagogy, the theory involves the application of derogatory labels, which leads to status damage, systemic discrimination and group isolation [8,9]. Thus, in order to understand the stigmatization of vocational education in contemporary society, it is necessary to review the historical background of the evolution of social reputation. During the socialist planned economy era, vocational education students once had a high degree of social recognition, because under the iron rice bowl system, professional qualifications could ensure a stable job allocation [4]. However, with the transformation to a market economy, there has been a serious polarization in China's education choices. Subsequently, driven by the expansion of higher education, the advent of the academic society made vocational education not form an independent system, but directly fell to the bottom of the education hierarchy [10]. Vocational education is overwhelmingly regarded as the last resort for students with poor academic performance. Vocational school graduates are marginalized in the labor market and become the leftovers of society [4,11]. This institutional rigid tracking causes them to suffer from strong social stigmatization and are labeled as bad students [12,13]. To reverse this situation, the revised Vocational Education Law in 2022 explicitly stated that vocational education and general education are of equal importance, attempting to establish the formal equality of vocational education at the level of national legislation [5]. From the perspective of the Modified Labeling Theory [14], the labels associated with vocational education have played a role in actively depleting symbolic capital, significantly restricting students' Capacity to Aspire [15]. The theory believes that individuals internalize society's understanding of the meaning of specific labels, which in turn damages their self-concept and life opportunities [9,13]. Consequently, once individuals are classified into the stigmatized category, for example, they are labeled as academic losers when entering vocational schools, they will begin to internalize these negative social evaluations, which usually trigger defensive reactions such as avoidance, self-doubt and burnout [14,16]. The latest longitudinal study shows that societal stigma marginalizes students and significantly limits their access to opportunities for interaction and leadership development. This structural exclusion is embedded in a passive habitus, a state that internalizes self-doubt, causing students to devalue their personal ambitions and feel anxious when faced with tasks that require confident expression [15]. Furthermore, the modified labeling theory has been further validated in recent career studies. The socio-

economic status (SES) of subjective families has seriously regulated the internalization process of this stigma. The negative impact of students from lower SES backgrounds is more significant, resulting in a decrease in their sense of group identity and study investment in vocational education [14]. As a result, empirical evidence indicates that the societal prejudice regarding the low status of vocational education has been deeply rooted in the cultural hierarchy. This deeply ingrained stigma perfectly explains why in the current practice of GVEI, students primarily utilize it as a unidirectional pathway to shed negative labels and circumvent the vocational route, and cannot achieve real two-way coordinated development.

2.2 Structural Predicaments of Social Reproduction

In educational sociology, tracking (grouping students into different educational paths according to past academic performance) is widely theorized as the main engine of social stratification [17,18]. Based on the framework of a social reproduction theory, the structural challenges faced by GVEI can be clearly understood. The theory points out that the education system is actually maintaining and legitimizing the existing social class inequality, causing the class advantages or disadvantages of the previous generation to be reproduced in the next generation [19,20]. The essence of the education system is to tailor different levels of labor force for the capitalist labor market [21]. According to this paradigm, the educational stratification resulting from the high school entrance examination (Zhongkao) is by no means purely an objective selection of elites. On the contrary, it is a hidden mechanism in which families of different social classes use their accumulated cultural, economic and social capital to transmit generational advantages [12,13]. As revealed by the sample survey of China Institute for Educational Finance Research (CIEFR), although the dominant factor of general vocational diversion is academic performance on the surface, the influence of SES up to 70% is secretly realized through the intermediary variable of high school entrance examination scores [22]. For students from upper-middle-class families, there are resources such as intensive shadow education (out-of-school tutoring) and high-intensity parental participation and collaborative training to ensure that their children have a place in academic higher education [23,24]. On the contrary, students from rural areas or families with lower socioeconomic status lack these capital reserves, so a large proportion of these students enter vocational schools. Research shows that over 70% of vocational school students come from rural families [25]. This means that families of different social classes use their accumulated cultural and economic capital to transform it into their children's academic competitiveness in advance, thus realizing the legalization of generational advantages in a seemingly fair performance appraisal. Accordingly, from this theoretical point of view, any reform that tries to break the orbital barriers through administrative means is bound to encounter structural counter-effects, which will inevitably violate the vested interests of the dominant class to monopolize academic resources. In other words, it is precisely because vocational education has become a "shelter" for disadvantaged groups in terms of structure that any integration policy that tries to open up the two is destined to be treated as a one-way channel for disadvantaged students to escape from vocational education. Recent empirical feedback has accurately demonstrated the existence of this structural predicament. One of the core mechanisms of GVEI reform is the introduction and expansion of comprehensive high schools, which will integrate two curriculum systems: general and vocational. The comprehensive high schools piloted in various localities were originally intended to promote the mutual recognition of credits and the mutual transfer of tracks between general education and vocational education, in order to achieve substantial fairness and multi-dimensional talent training [5,6]. However, the actual implementation of the policies did not lead to the desired two-way integration, but instead exhibited an extreme one-way flow [7]. Because general education has an absolute monopoly in terms of social reputation, civil service qualifications and access to higher education [26], most vocational school students who are at a disadvantage tend to take advantage of the GVEI policy to escape from the vocational path [7,27,28]. Empirical data indicate that for vocational schools that are facing potential survival crises and a decline in student enrollment, they have strategically shifted their focus from the cultivation of professional skills to other areas [29]. They take the preparation for further education (Especially the Spring College Entrance Examination and the 3+4 integrated model of undergraduate education) as their core competitiveness to cater to those vocational school students who express a strong desire to enter undergraduate programs [29,30]. This severe structural imbalance indicates that under the strong inertia of social reproduction, as long as the labor market and social value system continue to punish technical labor, the integration policy not only cannot disintegrate the class separation, but also becomes a tool for different classes to continue competing on the same track. Therefore, this reform still faces significant difficulties at the micro level.

2.3 Stratified Neijuan: Parental Status Anxiety

When the implications of the tracking system extend from students and institutions to parents and family units, it further aggravates the most iconic social and psychological characteristics of contemporary China: severe educational anxiety and Neijuan. Neijuan describes a highly stagnant state, where individuals are required to make exponentially greater financial and emotional efforts merely to maintain their current position, without any overall progress [31,32]. Rational Action Theory can clearly explain the micro-decision-making process of Chinese parents in this highly hierarchical system. This theory holds that educational choices are mainly driven by the desire to avoid risks and maintain one's current social class [33]. Hence, the Neijuan of Chinese parents is not a blind group irrational panic, but an inevitable risk avoidance response after a highly rational cost-benefit calculation in the face of the disastrous class decline risk that may be brought about by diversion. In China's highly competitive social environment, the price of failing to get a place in an ordinary high school is heavy. This track is often accompanied by relatively low economic returns, limited social respect, and restricted career development opportunities [7,34,35]. Historical research also indicates that students on the vocational track are subject to social stigmatization [12,14,34]. In addition, zhongkao determines the track distribution at the extremely young age of 15, and most parents regard it as the ultimate determining factor in determining their children's lifelong social class and marriage ability [29,34,36]. Ultimately, in order to avoid this risk, middle-class parents have internalized this calculation into a Choice Imaginary [37]. They have to aggressively compete for high-quality educational resources to ensure their children's academic success. From the empirical feedback of the implementation of the Double Reduction policy [38], this theoretical position can be further verified. Research shows that although the government has introduced the policy to reduce the burden of students' education, such as restricting shadow education, as long as the punishment mechanism and structural threats of the zhongkao diversion exist, parents' educational anxiety will not disappear, but will be transformed into a highly hierarchical Neijuan with a significant negative correlation with the family's SES [38-40]. This also highlights a serious issue of educational equity: Parental anxiety and their ability to mobilize resources show a class-based pattern. For low SES families, due to insufficient capital, they often bear high-intensity mental pressure and are extremely afraid that their children will be forcibly diverted to vocational education, which promotes the psychological reproduction of intergenerational educational inequality [38,40]. While families with high SES have relatively less initial anxiety, they are fearful of their children experiencing downward social mobility due to their psychological inclination towards Relative Risk Aversion [33]. The final evolution has become a collective irrational blind-following investment in the style of herd effect, leading to an increase in internal consumption within the society's education [39,41]. In addition, a large sample quantitative empirical study shows that due to the widespread cognitive bias of the low status of vocational education in society, the GVEI policy has also directly exacerbated the inner anxiety of parents [42]. Thus, the above research confirms that it is impossible to disintegrate the panic of class decline brought about by the tracking system through the integration or burden reduction fine-tuning within the education system alone. As long as the structural bifurcation in the secondary education stage persists and the wage disparity in the labor market remains unaddressed, parents will rationally continue to engage in the stratified Neijuan to safeguard their social status.

3. Discussion

Based on the above literature, this study reveals a profound structural deadlock in China's secondary education tracking system: the equal respect between general education and vocational education claimed by the legislation is essentially not enough to break the deep-rooted inequality driven by social evaluation and capital operation. Although the 2022 Vocational Education Law attempted to promote equal respect and educational equity through GVEI [5], the investigation found that the mainstream consensus in the academic field believed that this reform had undergone profound compromises in both concept and practice. At the conceptual level, the improvement of the legal status of vocational education cannot eradicate the inherent cultural hierarchy. At the practical level, intervention measures like pilot comprehensive secondary schools and the Double Reduction policy only address the phenomenon of inequality on the surface [7,38]. Due to concerns about a significant decline in social mobility, parents are forced to participate in irrational Neijuan and status anxiety [37,39,41]. Consequently, the GVEI policy does not cultivate real two-way coordinated development. Instead, it is generally regarded by disadvantaged students as a one-way escape route to get rid of negative social labels [7,27,28]. At the same time, this structural division forces families with different SES

to mobilize their economic and cultural capital to protect their status, resulting in the class solidification of social reproduction still taking place. In studying the complexity of the reform of this tracking system, relying solely on a single theoretical perspective is completely insufficient. In the face of the deep-rooted social stratification mechanism, administrative statements are very limited. The interaction between the stigma theory, the theory of social reproduction, and the rational action theory elucidates this structural deadlock. Traditionally, the theory of social reproduction has strongly exposed the essence of education diversion as a macro-class sorting machine. The education system subtly legitimizes the existing inequality by rewarding the cultural and economic capital mainly accumulated by the dominant class [19,20]. Although this perspective is highly persuasive in revealing the role of family capital in determining educational outcomes, it often overlooks the psychological mechanisms at the micro level and the specific cultural context. Hence, this article introduces the theory of rational action to deconstruct the process of China's parents' education Neijuan. However, they often face the risk of treating these educational choices as occurring in the socio-cultural context, and fail to recognize the profound psychological coercion caused by systemic social bias (stigma) on individual decision-making. Thus, the stigma theory (especially the modified labeling theory) serves as the crucial theoretical bridge that connects this macroscopic and microscopic gap. Based on this theory, the research found that it is precisely because society has long labeled vocational education as losers or leftovers that triggers parents' strong relative risk aversion mentality [14,42]. In addition, this avoidance psychology of parents is deeply rooted in the reality of the labor market and economic disparities [34]. Without a deep analysis of policy and market interaction, it is impossible to fully understand the structural dilemma of GVEI policy. The current employment environment continues to show significant differences in social returns, and vocational graduates often face significant wage penalties, lower social benefits, and career development restrictions compared with academic peers [34,35]. Therefore, this structural "skill devaluation" has given rise to a strong negative feedback effect: it not only strengthens cultural stigma and parents' rational risk avoidance psychology, but also directly undermines the goal of equality in the policy. Ultimately, if the labor market still gives too high a premium to academic diplomas and cannot provide matching economic returns and high compensation for technical blue-collar workers, internal education reforms such as GVEI will continue to be neutralized by market forces, eventually reducing the originally envisaged "two-way interoperability" into a springboard for students to "one-way escape" vocational education. The intersection of these theories and the harsh realities of the labor market clearly explains the failure of the GVEI policy in practice. Finally, although the existing literature captures the macro-theoretical evolution and valuable micro-empirical evidence surrounding the 2022 vocational education law, there is still a key gap in research. Current research clearly lacks longitudinal empirical studies that track the long-term labor market performance of these Hybrid graduates (who graduated from the comprehensive high school pilot program). Whether the dual ability of these graduates can get real economic returns in the labor market, or whether the structural culture bias continues to marginalize their existence in recruitment decision-making still needs to be verified in practice.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found that the 2022 Vocational Education Law failed to effectively alleviate the public's cultural prejudice against vocational education, and the tracking system is still promoting parents' anxiety and Neijuan about identity. The transformation of China's secondary education policy from rigid diversion to advocating Coordinated Development marks the country's profound reflection on the limitations and inequalities caused by the current stratification of education. However, based on a comprehensive review of existing literature, this review indicates that true educational equity is still hindered by cultural biases of society, parents' rational educational status anxiety, and structural inequalities, which clearly expose the limitations of internal education reforms. Ultimately, the research has found that policy interventions limited to the education system are unlikely to effectively address the issue of educational inequality. The structural failure of the new policy warns policymakers that policy-making must decisively shift from internal tracking and adjustment to structural reform and value reshaping of the labor market. Educational anxiety cannot be eradicated until the structural threat of early diversion and its accompanying occupational penalties are eliminated. Finally, this study contributes to the existing literature by linking the macro-level class ranking perspective with the micro-psychological mechanism of parental decision-making. To better understand the implications of these results, future studies could address the longitudinal empirical research tracking the long-term labor market performance.

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