

Analysis of the Causes and Countermeasures of the Involution of Family Education in China

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Abstract

The involution of family education is a significant issue in China's current basic education and has brought certain heavy burdens and negative impacts to both parents and students. Using the desk research method, this paper describes the manifestations of family capital embeddedness in the process of family education involution, analyzes its causes, and explores countermeasures to address it. The study suggests changing traditional social concepts and regulating the governance of out-of-school educational institutions, balancing the allocation of educational resources among schools, reforming the evaluation mechanism of school education, and enhancing parental cognitive levels and abilities to make rational decisions about education.

Keywords: family education, educational involution, family capital embeddedness

1. Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of family education involution has gradually come into view and captured the attention of all walks of life due to the increased educational rivalry in the sphere of China's basic education. In addition to having some detrimental effects on kids' physical and psychological health, the involution of family education also seriously jeopardizes the educational ecosystem's healthy development.

At present, research related to the issue of educational involution mainly focuses on three aspects: definitions, social backgrounds, and solutions. Some scholars defined the concept of involution in a variety of fields. This term was originally coined and applied by Alexander Goldenweiser, an American anthropologist, in sociology to discuss cultural reforms like Gothic Architecture (Hui, 2019) by defining it as a limited cultural development model. Inspired by Goldenweiser, Clifford Greetz (1963) applied this term to analyze rural areas' economic issues in Indonesia and defined it as the stagnation or inability to evolve in a social or cultural context. On the basis of interpreting Greetz's definition, Zongzhi Huang (2000) adopted this concept to illustrate the small peasant economy in North China by introducing the concept of marginal effect, which led to the generalization of concepts. Chenxi Li (2021) defined it as meaningless input without output in education from both the quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Some scholars discussed the social backgrounds of the educational involution. Meng-ying Li (2021) described the influence of China's exam-oriented education on the involution and revealed the stiff competition among Chinese students. Ning Gan (2023) analyzed how China's job market led to academic involution. Chen et al. (2022) put forward that the involution should be attributed to the ecological imbalance between home and school as well as the group anxiety of the middle class.

Other scholars tried to propose solutions to address the educational involution. Zujun Huang (2012) proposed that improving the quality of education and coordinating the relationship between the various subsystems of society might be practical solutions. Yuan and Qi (2021) put forward that home-school corporations could be a breakthrough solution. Long and Zhao (2022) suggested that the implementation of the "Double Reduction" Policy might alleviate the involution.

From the research that has been conducted, it can be seen that certain achievements have been made, especially in the areas of probing social backgrounds of China's educational involution and providing possible solutions. However, there still exists some room for further improvement and exploration. Most of these researches concentrate on analyzing the educational involution from the perspective of schools or societies, ignoring the

perspective of families. Therefore, it is necessary to study China's educational involution from the perspective of families. The aim of this study is to reveal the causes of China's family education involution on the basis of illustrating its manifestation, so as to provide possible countermeasures to alleviate its side effects on children's physical and psychological health.

2. Embeddedness of Family Capital in the Process of Family Education Involution

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital acknowledges three distinct types of family capital that impact students' academic success: economic, cultural, and social. The theory proposes that there exists a significant correlation between the academic disparities among children and the gaps in their family capital. This paper examines the role of three types of family capital in family education involution through Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Ren & Deng, 2021).

2.1 Embeddedness of Family Economic Capital

The role of family economic capital in the involution of family education is mainly demonstrated through excessive investment in education and training and spending on school district housing. On the one hand, many families pay excessive economic costs for education and training. Family economic capital is the material guarantee for parents to provide better quality educational resources and more educational opportunities for their children. Some studies have shown that the higher the annual family income, the more expenditure on education and training the children receive (Zhang et al., 2021). Families with stronger economic capital tend to increase their investment in their children's education and training to provide them with a competitive edge. However, families with relatively weak economic capital are also not willing to let their children be at a disadvantage in the education competition and will do their best to seek opportunities for their children to receive education and training. On the other hand, several families overspend on housing located within affluent school districts. In order to ensure their children have access to the best educational resources and the highest quality of education, many families with greater financial resources will pay exorbitant prices for houses in school districts with top-performing schools. This pattern has caused prices for older houses in school areas to steadily rise, with demand far outstripping supply. The incorporation of family economic capital into the internalization of family education generates unequal educational resources and quality for students from distinct families.

2.2 Embeddedness of Family Cultural Capital

The embedding of family cultural capital within the involution process of family education is primarily demonstrated through varying levels of involvement and impact by parents with different cultural backgrounds on their children's education experience. Many parents with higher levels of education take advantage of their own educational background to plan, guide, and help their children throughout the learning process, while parents with lower levels of education are unable to provide similar help to their children's education. For example, the efforts made by "Haidian Mothers" and "Shunyi Mothers" in Beijing to help their children's academic success in the process of tiger parenting is a typical example. This process facilitates higher education attainment for students with superior family cultural capital. Conversely, students with weaker family cultural capital exhibit lower academic performance and lower likelihood of higher education attainment. The embedding of family cultural capital in the involution of family education increases the gap in academic achievement and educational opportunities among students from different families.

2.3 Embeddedness of Family Social Capital

The embeddedness of family social capital in the process of the involution of family education is mainly manifested in the game played by families with different social status to obtain more quality educational resources for their children. Families with superior social capital tend to have higher social power, social status, and social networks. These families can use their social capital to compete for richer educational resources for their children. On the other hand, families with weaker social capital tend to enroll in schools with relatively fewer educational resources and lower quality of education. The role of family social capital in the involution of family education necessitates that children from disadvantaged families expend greater time and effort to attain higher academic success. This reality ultimately diminishes opportunities for well-rounded development in other areas and may contribute to heightened academic stress and psychological concerns.

3. Causes of Family Education Involution

3.1 Social Causes

3.1.1 The Shackles of Traditional Ideas

The deep-rooted traditional cultural and vocational outlook is one of the social causes of the involution of family

education. On the one hand, the cultural view that “Only the learned rank high, all other trades and occupations are low.” has led parents to invest excessively in their children's education. Deeply influenced by this traditional cultural view, parents generally have high expectations for their children's academic achievements and find it difficult to accept the results of their children's academic failure, so this irrational educational expectation is transformed into the educational decision-making behavior of enrolling their children in various kinds of tutoring classes. For many families, education expenditure has accounted for a large proportion of family consumption and has become an unbearable burden for many families. On the other hand, the traditional view of career has led parents to be overly paranoid about their children's educational choices. Many parents are prejudiced against the choice of vocational colleges and fail to realize that general education and vocational education have the same important status. Therefore, in the process of competition in the examination for higher education, parents tend to ignore their children's talent and interests, and paranoidly choose the general education track for their children, which results in excessive competition in general education and the coldness of the vocational education track. This alienation of vocational outlook has also become an important member of the involution of family education to a certain extent (Yang et al., 2022).

3.1.2 The Need for Educational Capital Expansion

The selling of educational anxiety by capital in the field of education for the sake of profit-seeking and expansion is another social cause of the internalization of family education. In order to pursue higher profits and capital expansion, capital often brainwashes parents and sells them educational anxiety through various means. For example, spreading slogans such as "Don't let your child lose at the starting line" and "If you come, we will train your child; if you don't come, we will train your child's competitors" is a disguised form of commercial marketing and brainwashing. In addition, capital will also make use of the theory of consumer psychology to spread the false determinism of educational competition through various new media platforms and teachers of tutoring institutions, exaggerating the role of extracurricular tuition and tutoring and inducing parents to develop a sense of deficiency and guilt, so as to pay for the educational products they advertise. The educational panic created by capital for the sake of profit is also an important cause of irrational educational consumption and family involution for some parents (Yang et al., 2022).

3.2 School Causes

3.2.1 Imbalanced Allocation of Educational Resources

The imbalance in the allocation of educational resources is one of the school causes of the involution of family education. At the basic education stage, although China has made world-renowned achievements, the phenomenon of imbalance in the distribution of educational resources still exists. First, the imbalance in the distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas is very prominent. Most of the high-quality educational resources are concentrated in the urban areas, while the educational resources in the rural areas are very weak. There is a big gap between rural and urban areas in terms of hardware conditions such as teaching facilities and software conditions such as teachers' strength. Secondly, the allocation of educational resources between different regions is also unbalanced. Advanced teaching facilities, abundant educational resources, and highly qualified and specialized teachers are concentrated in developed regions, while students in poorer regions are less likely to enjoy the same teaching conditions in their education. Finally, there are also large differences in the allocation of educational resources among schools. Prestigious schools enjoy top teachers and the best educational resources, while weaker schools are unable to compete with them in terms of teacher strength and teaching resources. Although China has implemented the policy of nearby schooling during the compulsory education stage, which legally guarantees the fairness of education opportunities for school-age children, the imbalance in the allocation of education resources has, to a certain extent, resulted in huge differences in the quality of education between different regions and schools, which has led to an educational "Arms Race" among different families in order for their children to enjoy better education resources and a higher quality of education (Chen & Bao, 2022).

3.2.2 Single Education Evaluation Mechanism

The single educational evaluation mechanism oriented towards test-taking is also another school reason for the involution of family education. Although China has carried out many reforms and explorations in the education evaluation system, the current education evaluation mechanism for the secondary and higher education examinations, which is oriented towards promotion and talent selection, still has a profound impact on the teaching mode of basic education. Regardless of the adjustments made to the subjects and types of questions in the entrance exams, the educational evaluation mechanism, with the promotion examination as its tool and the ranking of scores as its measure, still impacts parents' decisions and behaviors regarding education. Although

parents may support the state's education policy that aims to improve students' overall quality and reduce schoolwork burden, many feel compelled to invest significant amounts of time, money, and energy into improving their children's exam scores to prevent them from failing entrance exams, which creates the "Theater Effect" of education, intensifying the trend of education involution.

3.3 Family Causes

3.3.1 Limitations of Parents' Cognition

The limitations of parents' perceptions of education are one of the family causes of the involution of family education. Caught in the constraints of pre-existing stereotypes and levels of understanding, parents view education as a tool for class mobility and an investment in and guarantee of their children's future work and educational opportunities, while ignoring the challenges and impacts of social change on education and the redefinition of the function of education by the phenomenon of devaluation of educational qualifications. In order to increase their children's chances of winning in the fierce competition for education, parents do everything they can to obtain more educational resources and opportunities for their children and send them to more after-school tutoring classes thus extending their study time in anticipation of the child getting better grades in different subjects, which undoubtedly aggravates the degree of involution of family education.

3.3.2 Influence of Parents' Social Relationships

The influence of relationships is also another family cause of the involution of family education. Being in a certain social relationship network, parents' educational decision-making behaviors are also inevitably influenced by perceptions and behaviors from other causes in the relationship network. After obtaining more information about educational resources from other members of the relational network and seeing the human resources, financial resources, material resources, energy, and time that other members put into their children's education, parents also develop a certain amount of peer pressure and anxiety as well as begin to identify with and emulate the similar educational decision-making behaviors of other members. The homogenized educational decisions and behaviors of parents who have been in a specific social relationship network for a long time are also important factors contributing to the phenomenon of family education involution (Wang & Wei, 2022, p. 68).

4. Countermeasures of the Involution of Family Education

4.1 Social Dimension

4.1.1 Breaking the Shackles of Traditional Cultural and Professional Views

Changing traditional cultural and vocational views is an important strategy for reducing the involution of family education. First of all, the relevant government departments should publicize and guide people to establish a correct view of culture and talents through various new media platforms and help people redefine the functions and roles of education, so as to prevent parents from narrowing down education to a tool for educational mobility and social class leapfrogging, which would put more academic and mental pressure on their children. Secondly, the relevant government departments should step up their efforts to develop vocational education and publicize parents to recognize the employment competitiveness in the market of the applied and skilled personnel trained by vocational colleges and universities and change their prejudices against vocational education.

4.1.2 Strengthening the Regulation of Out-of-school Education and Training Institutions

Strengthening the regulation of the unregulated operation of off-campus education and training institutions is an important measure to alleviate the involution of family education. In order to put an end to false propaganda and the creation of trafficking in educational anxiety by educational capital for the purpose of selling educational products, which jeopardizes the healthy physical and mental development of minors, the education sector should join forces with other authorities and law-enforcement agencies to strengthen the regulation of the schooling practices of off-campus education and training institutions. First, supervision of the teaching facilities should be strengthened, and training organizations that do not meet safety standards should be banned or ordered to make corrections. Secondly, the supervision of the teaching staff should be strengthened, and those without teaching qualifications should be prohibited from engaging in education and training. Thirdly, supervision of the teaching content should be strengthened to eliminate content that jeopardizes national cultural security and falsely packaged teaching content from entering the classroom. Finally, supervision of the quality of teaching should be strengthened, a sound mechanism for evaluating the quality of off-campus education and training should be established, and education and training institutions with unqualified quality of education should be banned, so as to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of parents and students.

4.2 School Dimension

4.2.1 Ensuring the Equalization of the Allocation of Educational Resources

The balanced allocation of educational resources is an effective measure to alleviate the involution of family education. One of the reasons for the involution of family education is the unbalanced allocation of quality educational resources, which makes it necessary for students from disadvantaged families to increase their educational inputs and extend their study time in order to achieve higher levels of academic achievement and gain more access to education. In order to increase the supply and balanced allocation of quality education resources, the following measures should be taken. First, promote the model of group schooling to realize the sharing of educational resources among schools within educational groups. Second, improve the mobility system of principals and teachers, promote the mobility of excellent teachers in the region, and improve the quality of weak schools. Third, exploring the application of modern network technology and new media technology in the teaching and learning process, promoting the network construction of high-quality classes, and narrowing the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of teaching resources and teacher strength.

4.2.2 Building a Scientific Evaluation Mechanism for Education

The construction of a scientific education evaluation mechanism is conducive to guiding parents to reduce their educational involutorial behaviors. First, with the goal of promoting moral integrity, we should improve and refine the evaluation indicators of education and abandon the evaluation orientation of score-based assessment. Secondly, we should explore the combination of process evaluation and outcome evaluation, and strive to reflect the real situation of students at all stages of the learning process. Thirdly, promote a meta-evaluation of the educational evaluation mechanism to ensure the scientific nature of the conceptual objectives, indicator system, and evaluation methods of educational evaluation.

4.3 Family Dimension

4.3.1 Enhancing the Cognitive Abilities

Parents should fully understand the future development trends of society and the individual differences of their children, and correctly recognize the limited function and role of education. Parents should not take extreme ways to force their children to over-study which negatively affects their physical and mental health development. They could help their children to make good education planning and guide them to enhance their internal drive and learning power by changing the family education concepts and ways of upbringing.

4.3.2 Enhancing Capacities for Rational Educational Decision-making

Although parents in a certain social network will inevitably be influenced by the ideas and behaviors of other members, parents should still avoid irrational educational inputs and educational decision-making behaviors due to blind obedience, and in particular, they should not excessively deplete the family's capital and overdraw the children's physical and mental health, but should instead help the children to move towards a healthy and happy path of self-development (Yan, 2023).

5. Conclusion

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the research above, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the involution of family education not only consumes a great deal of families' economic, cultural, and social capital but also triggers parents' educational anxiety and impairs children's physical and mental health. Second, family education involution may derive from three main factors. The first is related to social factors like people's cultural and vocational ideas and the capital expansion in the area of education. The second is owing to school factors like the imbalance allocation of education resources among different schools and the single education evaluation mechanism. The third is attributed to family factors like limitation of parents' cognition and influence of parents' social relationship. Last, only through the coordinated and joint efforts of society, schools and families can the problem be effectively solved in order to realize the benign development of family education and promote the all-round healthy growth of students.

In summary, although a number of researches concerning educational involution have been done in China and abroad, there are still some aspects that need to be explored in depth and breadth. Possible future research may include the relationship between family education involution and children's mental health, the adoption of the cross-disciplinary method and case study method, so as to deepen the understanding of its essence and offer more scientific guidance for family education.

Competing Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

Informed consent

Obtained.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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