The Relationship between Parents’ Social Comparison Orientation and Educational Anxiety of Preschool Children Aged 2-5 Years Old in A District of Jilin Province, China: The Mediating Role of Parental Educational Expectations

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Abstract

Educational involution is a major concern in the field of education in China and needs to be solved urgently. In this study, we investigated the effect of parents’ social comparison orientation on educational anxiety in preschool children aged 2-5 years old. A mediation model was constructed from “social comparison orientation” to “parental educational anxiety” with “parental educational expectation” as the mediator through structural equation modeling. The results of the study found that: (1) parents’ social comparison orientation significantly and positively predicted their level of educational anxiety; (2) parental educational expectations could partially mediate the relationship between social comparison orientation and parental educational anxiety. The results of this study suggest that parents’ individual factors, such as social comparison orientation, are also important factors that can catalyze educational involution. Parents could make changes in themselves to reduce the negative effects of involution on their children.

Keywords: educational involution, social comparison orientation, parental educational expectations, parental educational anxiety

1. Introduction

China is in the midst of an involutional social environment. The term “involution” was first coined by the anthropologist Geertz (1965) to refer to the extreme refinement of farming practices in the agricultural sector, although the original mode of production has remained unchanged and per capita productivity has not been substantially increased. As the field of study has expanded, sociologists have defined similar phenomena occurring in society in terms of “involution” as growth without development (Huang, 2002). In recent years, the structural transformation of Chinese society has had an impact on socio-cultural development, leading to increasingly intense competition among individuals and triggering a shift in people’s social mentality (Tan & Dai, 2022). Therefore, research on this social mentality of involution has begun in the field of psychology. Psychologists believe that involution is an irrational competitive behavior, which is caused by the scarcity of resources in the surrounding environment. It appears when an individual submits to social norms and pressures from various sources, which can trigger undesirable psychological states in the individual (Zhang et al., 2024). Involution manifests itself in all aspects of society, with educational involution being an area of great concern (Wang, 2023; Zeng, 2023). Educational involution has many negative consequences, making learning blind and inefficient and creating a spurious boom in education field. Therefore, it is important to explore the causes of educational involution. The “involution” in education is not only reflected in the students themselves, but also in the parents who are often involved in the competition for involution. Parents’ educational anxiety and expectations for their children can reflect the extent to which they participate in involutional competition (Chen, 2023; Marsh et al., 2023). Higher levels of parents’ educational anxiety as well as educational expectations confirm that they are more influenced by the involutional environment and are more likely to participate in it. Since involution is a form of irrational competition, it is essentially a competition. Competition is a psychological need and behavioral activity that is motivated to win by self-interest, with the goal of outperforming others (Van Damme et al., 2017). People who want to outperform others implies that they need to...
make social comparisons with others in competition. The intensity of the willingness to make social comparisons varies from parents to parents, and can be influenced by certain traits of parents, that is, social comparison orientations (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Therefore, parents’ social comparison orientations may be an important factor influencing their involvement in educational involution. Current research on involution in psychology is not plentiful and research on children’s parental involution in early childhood also needs to be supplemented. The purpose of this study was to explore whether social comparison orientations can influence the educational anxiety and educational expectations of parents of young children, as well as to explore whether a mediation model can be constructed among social comparison orientation, parental educational anxiety and expectations. By exploring the relationship between the above three, important factors could be found that may trigger parental educational involution in early childhood.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Comparison Orientation

Festinger (1954) proposed the concept and theory of social comparison for the first time, arguing that people always have a drive to obtain information from others to evaluate and judge their own abilities and opinions. In short, individuals have a drive to compare themselves with others. Later, Gibbons and Buunk (1999) proposed the concept of “social comparison orientation” which refers to the fact that because different individuals have different sensitivities and concerns about different aspects of the problem, making them have different level of willingness to participate in comparisons. This indicates that individuals have different degrees of orientation to make social comparisons, which is a personality trait. According to the degree of orientation, social comparison orientation can be divided into high social comparison orientation and low social comparison orientation. According to Guo and Huang (2010), the level of the trait of social comparison orientation varies from person to person. Individuals with high social comparison orientation are more interested in and rely on other people’s relevant information to make evaluations and judgments. They are more likely to activate bad selves because of their higher levels of negative affect and self-uncertainty. The opposite is true for people with low social comparison orientation. Buunk and Gibbons (2006) found that individuals high in social comparison orientation are more susceptible to comparative information because they tend to relate those things that happen to others to themselves when making comparisons and take into account their own successes or failures in competition when making social comparisons. Individuals with high social comparison orientations are thus more likely to have higher levels of involvement in a setting of involution, to have greater expectations for their children’s academic achievement, but also to exhibit higher levels of educational anxiety (Yang et al., 2021).

2.2 Parental Educational Anxiety

There is no unified concept of parental educational anxiety. By synthesizing previous studies, it can be understood as the negative emotions such as tension, uneasiness, worry, annoyance, and panic that parents will experience in the process of educating their children, which is caused by the uncertainty of educational outcomes (Jin, 2015; Sapin et al., 2024). There are many factors that influence parental educational anxiety, including parents’ economic level, parents’ personal traits and social environment (Zhou, 2023). Previous research has confirmed that individuals who make frequent social comparisons have higher levels of anxiety (Jung & Kim, 2023; McCarthy & Morina, 2020; Okano & Nomura, 2023). It remains to be tested whether parents with a high orientation for social comparison have higher levels of anxiety in their children’s education in the broader context of educational involution.

2.3 Parental Educational Expectations

Educational expectations are predictions and expectations about the future educational achievement of the expected person (Wang & Benner, 2014). Expectors can be parents, teachers and students themselves, and expected people are often students. Parental educational expectation means parents’ judgment and expectation of their children’s future educational achievement based on their own cultural level and experience, their children’s developmental characteristics and social reality. Educational expectations affect students’ future academic achievement (Jacob & Wilder, 2010). There are many factors that influence parents’ educational expectations, such as parents’ occupation, level of education, family residence, family income level and the era and environment in which they live (Fang et al., 2023; He & Zhan, 2023; Rasool et al., 2023).

In the current education system in China, the evaluation and judgment of one’s child’s learning level can only be obtained by comparing and ranking with others, making parents often tend to compare their own children with other children. Parental social comparison can be described as a kind of psychological control exerted by parents on their children (Le et al., 2023). Parents with a higher orientation to make social comparisons compare their own children to others more frequently. One of the individual’s drives to make social comparisons is the
expectation that they can outperform in competition (Festinger, 1954). In the broader context of educational involution, parents place this expectation of winning on their children, expecting them to achieve higher levels of educational attainment, triggering higher levels of educational expectations. And with high expectations comes higher levels of anxiety, worrying about their children’s achievements and all other aspects of their development. Therefore, it can be seen that parents’ high social comparison orientations may lead to higher levels of educational anxiety through their higher educational expectations for their children (Chen et al., 2022), which means that social comparison orientations may influence their educational anxiety mediated by parents’ educational expectations.

Many previous studies have explored the causes of educational involution formation from a sociological and pedagogical perspective. There are fewer empirical studies that validate the factors of educational involution’s formation from a psychological perspective. According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, there are interactions and mutual influences among environmental, behavioral and personal factors (Bandura, 1985). Previous studies have not explored whether parents’ personal factors (social comparison orientations) contribute to educational involution in China’s fierce competition in education. In addition, more previous studies have mostly focused on elementary and middle school students. The phenomenon of involution, which has also been presented in the early childhood stage, needs to be further explored. Therefore, the following two questions are posed in this study:

Question 1: Does the social comparison orientations of parents of young children significantly and positively predict their level of educational anxiety?

Question 2: Can the social comparison orientations of parents of young children mediate parental educational expectations to influence their educational anxiety?

Based on the above two questions, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: The social comparison orientations of parents of young children can significantly and positively predict their educational anxiety.

Hypothesis 2: Parents’ social comparison orientations can be mediated by educational expectations to influence educational anxiety.

3. Research Design

3.1 Subjects

In this study, questionnaires were distributed randomly in three kindergartens in a region of Jilin Province, China. Three kindergartens in the neighborhood of the researcher’s area were selected for this study using convenience sampling survey method. All three kindergartens are medium sized with around 300 students in Changchun city in Jilin Province. The questionnaires were distributed during the first week of the spring semester of 2024. Parents of children aged 2-5 years were asked to fill in the questionnaires, and 208 valid questionnaires were finally collected, with the age of the parents ranging from 26-34 years old (M=29.89, SD=2.621). The number of males was 101 (48.6%), and that of females was 107 (51.4%). The number of people living in urban areas was 102 (49%) and 107 (51.4%) in rural areas. The standardized score for objective socio-economic status of parents of young children had a minimum value of -10.262 and a maximum value of 6.667 (M=0.000028, SD=3.254); the standardized score for subjective socio-economic status had a minimum value of -2.131 and a maximum value of 1.903 (M=0.000, SD=1.000).

3.2 Research Instruments

3.2.1 Social Comparative Orientation Scale

The Chinese version of the Social Comparative Orientation Scale revised by Wang et al. (2006) was used. The scale has 11 items and is divided into two dimensions: ability and concept. This scale was used in this study to measure the social comparison orientations of parents of young children. After validation analysis, in this study, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s α) of the scale was 0.910, and the internal consistency coefficients of the dimensions were: α = 0.757 for the concept dimension and α = 0.875 for the ability dimension.

3.2.2 Parental Educational Anxiety Scale

The first three dimensions were selected for this study from the Parental Educational Anxiety Questionnaire for Kindergarten-Primary Transition developed by (Lai, 2022). It involves studying quality preparation anxiety, life preparation anxiety and physical and mental preparation anxiety. This scale was used in this study to measure parents’ levels of educational anxiety about their young children. This scale was developed to measure the level of parental anxiety about the education of pre-school children specifically and was administered to their parents.
Therefore, it is appropriate for the subjects in this study, that is, parents of children aged 2-5 years. In this study, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s α) of the scale was 0.923, and the validated factor analysis model fit index was good ($\lambda^2/df=0.961; \text{GFI}=0.950, \text{RMR}=0.036<0.08, \text{TLI}=0.929>0.9, \text{RMSEA}=0<0.08$). The internal consistency coefficients for each dimension were: studying quality preparation anxiety $\alpha=0.877$, life preparation anxiety $\alpha=0.735$ and physical and mental preparation anxiety $\alpha=0.682$.

### 3.2.3 Parental Education Expectation Scale

The Family Education Expectations Questionnaire developed by Lai (2022) was used, which consists of 15 items with three dimensions: studying quality preparation expectations, life preparation expectations and physical and mental preparation expectations. This scale was used in this study to measure parents’ levels of educational expectation about their young children. Same as the Parental Educational Anxiety Scale, it developed for parents of pre-school children. In this study, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s α) of the scale was 0.923, the validated factor analysis model fit index was good ($\lambda^2/df=1.224; \text{GFI}=0.939, \text{RMR}=0.035<0.08, \text{TLI}=0.982>0.9, \text{RMSEA}=0.033<0.08$). The internal consistency coefficients for each dimension were: studying quality preparation expectation $\alpha=0.844$, life preparation expectation $\alpha=0.776$ and physical and mental preparation expectation $\alpha=0.743$.

### 3.3 Research Procedures and Data Processing

This study randomized the questionnaire online in three kindergartens in Jilin Province in China. The questionnaire begins with a survey of some basic demographic information, including age, gender, number of children, objective socioeconomic status, and so on. Then Social Comparative Orientation Scale, Parental Educational Expectation Scale and the Parental Educational Anxiety Scale were presented in turn. Finally, the subjects were thanked for their active participation and subject fee was distributed. Data from validly returned questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 25.0, including standardizing data and making descriptive and correlation analyses. SPSS process v3.3 was used to conduct mediation effect tests. AMOS 21.0 was used to test reliability and validity of scales, construct structural equation model and test the mediation model.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Analysis of Variance for each Variable

#### 4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the three variables of social comparison orientation, parental education expectation and parental education anxiety were conducted and the results are shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCO</td>
<td>34.827</td>
<td>8.296</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>-0.634</td>
<td>-0.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expectation</td>
<td>47.043</td>
<td>10.371</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>-0.656</td>
<td>-0.493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxiety</td>
<td>46.981</td>
<td>10.487</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-0.680</td>
<td>-0.500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SCO indicates social comparison orientation; expectation indicates parental educational expectation; anxiety indicates parental educational anxiety. The same below.

#### 4.1.2 Analyses of Variance

Using gender as a grouping variable, an independent samples t test was conducted on the subjects’ social comparison orientation, parenting expectations, and parenting anxiety, and it was found that the differences in the levels of the three variables were not significant between males and females (fathers and mothers).

Independent samples t test of social comparison orientation, parenting expectations and parenting anxiety for subjects whose place of residence was urban or rural revealed that the levels of all three variables did not differ significantly between urban and rural subjects.

A one-way ANOVA with age (2-5 years) of the young children as the grouping variable was conducted on their father’s or mother’s educational anxiety and educational expectations. It was found that for parental educational anxiety, $F(3, 204)=3.138, p=0.026<0.05$ and for parental educational expectations, $F(3, 204)=3.242, p=0.023<0.05$, which were both significant at the 0.05 level of significance. The changing values of parents’ educational anxiety and educational expectation levels for 2-5 year olds are shown below:
Figure 1. Parents’ levels of educational anxiety and educational expectations for 2-5 year olds

Figure 2. Comparison of differences in parents’ levels of educational anxiety and educational expectations for 2-5 year olds

The post hoc test indicates that in terms of parental education anxiety, the level of parental education anxiety for 3-year-olds is significantly greater than that for 2-year-olds, with a difference of 6.029; and in terms of parental
education expectation, the level of parental education expectations for 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds are significantly greater than that for 2-year-olds, with a difference of 6.000, 4.040 and 4.820 respectively. The results are shown in the following figure:

4.2 Correlation Analysis of Variables

Pearson correlation analysis was used to analyze the total scores of the three variables of social comparison orientation, parental educational expectations and parental educational anxiety, showing positive correlations of varying degrees between the three variables. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 2. Correlations between social comparison tendencies, parental educational expectations, and parental educational anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>SCO expectation</th>
<th>anxiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCO expectation</td>
<td>0.914**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxiety</td>
<td>0.919**</td>
<td>0.927**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** indicates \( p<0.01 \).

From the above table, it can be seen that there is a two-by-two significant positive correlation between the three variables of social comparison orientation, parental educational expectation and parental educational anxiety. To further understand the relationship between the sub-dimensions of the variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to analyze the scores of the three variables. The results showed that the two sub-dimensions of the variable of social comparison orientation, the three sub-dimensions of parental educational expectation and the three sub-dimensions of parental educational anxiety were positively correlated at the 0.01 level. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 3. Correlations between the sub-dimensions of the variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.818**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.811**</td>
<td>0.861**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.779**</td>
<td>0.820**</td>
<td>0.818**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.742**</td>
<td>0.784**</td>
<td>0.752**</td>
<td>0.715**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.804**</td>
<td>0.864**</td>
<td>0.866**</td>
<td>0.791**</td>
<td>0.772**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.760**</td>
<td>0.825**</td>
<td>0.840**</td>
<td>0.773**</td>
<td>0.741**</td>
<td>0.821**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.777**</td>
<td>0.806**</td>
<td>0.810**</td>
<td>0.764**</td>
<td>0.711**</td>
<td>0.811**</td>
<td>0.775**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **indicates \( p<0.01 \).

1=concept dimension; 2=ability dimension; 3=studying quality preparation anxiety; 4=life preparation anxiety; 5=physical and mental preparation anxiety; 6=studying quality preparation expectations; 7=life preparation expectations; 8=physical and mental preparation expectations.

4.3 Structural Equation Modelling and Mediation Effect Analysis

In this study, the great likelihood method of covariance structural modeling was used for the estimation of relevant parameters to establish a structural equation model with social comparison orientation as the independent variable, parental educational anxiety as the dependent variable and parental educational expectations as the mediator variable (Figure 3). The results of model fitting and estimation showed that each fitting index of the model roughly reached the desired level, including \( \chi^2/df =0.637 \); NFI=0.994>0.9; CFI=1>0.9; RMSEA=0<0.08.
Figure 3. Standardized fitted mediation model

Note: SCO indicates social comparison orientation; PEE indicates parental educational expectation; PEA indicates parental educational anxiety; SE indicates studying preparation expectations; LE indicates life preparation expectations; P&ME indicates physical and mental preparation expectations; SA indicates studying quality preparation anxiety; LA indicates life preparation anxiety; P&MA indicates physical and mental preparation anxiety.

A bias-corrected Bootstrap test (5000 samples) was used to examine the effect sizes of each pathway in the model sequentially. The results showed that the effect sizes of all paths in the model reached the significant level, indicating that social comparison orientation could significantly predict parental educational anxiety through the mediation of parental education expectations, in addition to the direct significant prediction of parental educational anxiety. The data show that the effect value of the direct path “social comparison orientation to parental education anxiety” is 0.640, which indicates that under the condition that other variables remain unchanged, every 1-unit increase in the social comparison orientation of the parents of young children increases their education anxiety by 0.640 units. The mediating path of “social comparison orientation→parental educational expectation→parental educational anxiety” has an effect value of 0.366, indicating that through the indirect effect of “parental education expectation”, for every one unit increase in the social comparison orientation of the parents of young children, their educational anxiety will increase by 0.366 units accordingly. The total effect size of “social comparison orientation→parental educational anxiety” is 1.006, which means that under the combined effect of the direct and indirect effects, for every unit increase in parents’ social comparison orientation, their educational anxiety increases by 1.006 units. In addition, the mediation model of the three variables was tested using SPSS process v3.3, and the results showed that the upper and lower limits of the confidence intervals of the direct path test of the mediation effect were 0.420 and 0.712, which did not contain 0, meaning that the direct effect was significant. The upper and lower limits of the confidence intervals of the indirect path test of the standardized mediation effect were 0.047 and 0.075, which did not contain 0 either, meaning that the indirect effect was significant. The above results show that the partial mediation effect of “social comparison orientation→parental educational expectation→parental educational anxiety” is valid.

5. Discussion

5.1 Differences in Parental Educational Anxiety and Expectation for Young Children of Different Ages

The results of this study show that there are differences in the level of parental educational anxiety and educational expectations for young children of different ages. In terms of parental educational anxiety, the level
of parental educational anxiety for 3-year-olds was significantly greater than that for 2-year-olds, and the difference was not significant for other ages. In terms of parental educational expectations, the level of parental educational expectations for 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds, and 5-year-olds was significantly greater than that for 2-year-olds. Previous surveys have shown that parents’ educational anxiety about their children is widespread. 18,000 questionnaires collected online by the New Oriental Data Research Center in 2020 surveyed parents in primary and secondary schools in municipalities, provincial capitals, prefectures, counties and cities across the country (The survey is from the New Oriental Family Education Center. http://www.199it.com/archives/1151099.html). The results of the survey showed that at all stages of their children’s learning, parents are anxious about their children’s education in different ways, such as educational methods, emotions, time and energy. As a matter of fact, Chinese parents’ educational anxiety about their children’s education as well as high educational expectations start to show at the early childhood stage. A study conducted a questionnaire survey of parents in 17 cities and counties in China and collected 3,638 valid questionnaires, which found that more than 90% of parents of young children expect their children’s future achievements to exceed their own, and more than 60% of parents expect their children’s future minimum education level to be a bachelor’s degree. In this survey, more than 80% of parents of young children were anxious about their children’s education(Fan et al., 2024). Children in early childhood develop rapidly in cognitive, emotional and social skills (Bhavnani et al., 2021; Brodin & Renblad, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020; Şenol et al., 2023). As children approach the age of entering elementary school, parents have increasingly high expectations of their children in terms of their learning, life, physical and mental preparations. The age of 3 is a critical time in life. Many aspects of young children’s development related to learning, such as executive functioning, are qualitatively enhanced after the age of 3 (Beaucage et al., 2019; Schröer et al., 2023; White & Carlson, 2021). For young children after the age of 3, parents begin to have academic expectations. This kind of expectation also brings about parental educational anxiety about their children’s development not keeping up with the normal pace of education. Therefore, a critical change in parental educational anxiety levels can be seen to exist at the age of 3.

5.2 The Relationship between Social Comparison Orientation and Parental Educational Anxiety

The results of this study show that parents’ social comparison orientation is significantly and positively related to their parental educational anxiety. Two dimensions of social comparison orientation and three dimensions of parental educational anxiety are significantly and positively correlated. Social comparison orientation can significantly and positively predict their level of educational anxiety. The results of this study are generally consistent with those of previous studies. Previous research in other domains has found that making social comparisons is strongly related to individuals’ anxiety (Chen et al., 2023; Jung & Kim, 2023; Okano & Nomura, 2023; Ruan et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Parental social comparison was found to be significantly related to parental anxiety (Yang et al., 2021). One of the key reasons for the strong correlation between social comparison orientation and parental educational anxiety is the involuntional environment of education and employment in China currently (C. Li, 2022; R. Li, 2022). In recent years, the Chinese Government has implemented a “double reduction” policy to promote equality in education, restricting extracurricular tuition. However, extracurricular tutorials in primary and secondary schools have increased in recent years. This is fundamentally due to China’s employment environment. According to the “Survey on Employment Opportunities for the Online Class Generation” published by the well-known HR platform 51 JOB in 2023, 68% of state-owned enterprises, 65% of multinationals, and 56% of private enterprises indicated that they would reduce the number of staff they hired in their surveys on the demand for graduates in 2023 (Data source, China’s leading HR platform. https://wenku.51job.com/article458112/). According to the current survey on employment demand by major platforms, most companies are downsizing their hiring. The brutal employment status quo and fierce competition in education have given rise to many cram schools. According to the report provided by Bose Data Research Center, China’s education and training market size has exceeded three trillion RMB in 2023, with a growth rate of about 14%. The future development trend report points out that there is still strong momentum for this trend in the future (Data source, Bose Data Research Center. https://www.bosidata.com/report/O628531TPJ.html). The increased involvement of education and employment has made studying increasingly competitive. Since the level of education is closely related to children’s future development, parents want their children to win the competition. On the one hand, educational resources are limited and unevenly distributed in different regions (Tang et al., 2022; Zhu, 2023). Parents with high social comparison orientations could be more worry that their children do not have access to high-quality educational resources, which could affect their competitive advantage, thus generating educational anxiety. On the other hand, parents are forced by the external environment to generate educational anxiety because they do not want to let their children lag behind at the very beginning (Le et al., 2023). They will intervene in their children’s study when nearly all other parents around them send their
children to participate in tutoring courses and strictly supervise their children’s study. This kind of educational anxiety is in fact a specific manifestation of the educational involution in China.

5.3 The Mediating Role of Parental Education Expectations

Examining the pathways of social comparison orientation, the results suggest that social comparison orientation partially mediates the effect of parental educational anxiety through parental educational expectations. First, parents’ social comparison orientation significantly predicted their level of educational expectations, which may be due to the environment of educational and employment involution. Due to the intense competition in education and employment in China (Chen, 2024; Su, 2023), parents worry that their children will not be competitive enough, will fail in the future competition and their academic achievement and development will be affected. Parents with high social comparison orientation are more susceptible to the interference of the environment of educational involution (Guo & Huang, 2010). Therefore, they will expect their children to be more advantageous in all aspects and to win in the competition. Second, parents’ educational expectations significantly predicted their level of educational anxiety. Parents’ high expectations for their children cannot be achieved without the efforts of all parties, for example, children themselves, their families, their schools and the whole society (Fibria Nugrahani et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2024; Liu & Li, 2023; Sun, 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Wang, 2000; Zhang, 2023; Zhao & Zhao, 2022). However, there are too many uncertainties involved, resulting in more educational anxiety for parents in the process.

Based on the above discussion, it can be seen that the educational expectations and educational anxiety triggered by the social comparison orientations of the parents of young children themselves are an important factor contributing to China’s involutional educational environment. The implication of this is that future educational policies should emphasize respect for the children’s own wishes and focus on the children’s own growth and development, rather than imposing the willingness and demands from parents, schools and the whole society on children.

6. Conclusion

Firstly, this study constructed a mediation model of “social comparison orientation predicts parental educational anxiety”. It was found that: (1) parents’ social comparison orientation significantly and positively predicted their parental educational anxiety; (2) parental educational expectations partially mediated the relationship between social comparison orientation and parental educational anxiety. Secondly, this study also found that parents have different levels of educational anxiety and expectations for young children of different ages. Specifically, there is a significant turning point in parents’ level of educational anxiety at the age of three for young children. Plus, parents’ educational expectations were significantly higher at ages 3, 4 and 5 than at age 2.

The present study examined the mediating role of personal trait factors (social comparison orientation) and educational expectations in influencing educational anxiety of parents of young children and explored the mechanism of influencing educational expectations and anxiety of parents of young children and the important factors that may lead to educational involution. The study inspires us that high parental educational expectations and anxiety brought about by high parental social comparison orientation may be an important factor in the development of the environment of educational involution. However, there are several weakness in this study. Firstly, since this study only focused on the level of parental educational anxiety and educational expectations in the early childhood stage, it only provided predictive value for actual behavior in the educational involution. This is because specific behaviors of parents’ involvement in their children’s learning process are the driving forces that exacerbate educational involution after young children enter the primary school. Secondly, the study was conducted through a convenience sampling method by randomly selecting parents of children in three kindergartens in researcher’s locality. Whether the study is also credible outside the area needs to be further investigated. In the future, we can continue to pay attention to the development of young children, conducting longitudinal comparative studies on the specific manifestations of parents’ behaviors in the early childhood stage with those in the primary and secondary school, in order to shed light on the adjustment of educational strategies. Meanwhile, the study could also be investigated in more regions and countries to compare the similarities and differences in the results, allowing us to find out more useful information.

References


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