Policy-guided Diversion and Anticipated Effects: Educational Choices of Intermediate Students in County-level Schools

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Abstract: China is currently in a critical period of expanding secondary education, crucial for providing qualified candidates for higher education and shaping the overall coherence of talent cultivation through the diversion of students from compulsory education into general or vocational tracks. This empirical study investigates the influence of career planning on educational choices among the 'sandwiched' layer of students in county-level schools, concurrently exploring the moderating role of policy perceptions. The key findings indicate: firstly, career planning positively influences educational choices; secondly, higher policy perceptions amplify the positive relationship between career planning and educational choices; and thirdly, policy perceptions play a guiding role in educational choices. The study suggests that schools should establish and refine corresponding career planning teaching systems. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to enhance the publicity of policies guiding educational choices, aiming to construct a comprehensive and interconnected career planning education system from basic to higher education. This approach ensures the coordinated guidance of society, family, and individuals, facilitating the comprehensive development of career planning education. The study aims to provide a basis for optimizing education diversion policies, offering practical suggestions for career planning education in junior high schools, and contributing empirical research results to the further improvement of China's career planning education system.

Keywords: Career Planning; Anticipated Effects; Policy Perception; Educational Choice; Intermediate Students

1. INTRODUCTION

In China, secondary education plays a pivotal role, acting as a bridge for delivering qualified candidates to higher education and as a crucial stage for diverting students from compulsory education into general or vocational tracks. This directly impacts the overall and coherent cultivation of talents in China, contributing significantly to the construction of a strong nation in terms of human resources and overcoming the middle-income trap[1]. In February 2019, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Implementation Plan for Accelerating the Modernization of Education (2018-2022),"[2] proposing a comprehensive plan for the popularization of secondary education. The intention behind the massification of secondary education is to meet the diverse needs of societal development and individual growth[3]. Therefore, the decision of whether junior high school students pursue secondary education, enter general high schools, vocational schools, or choose not to continue their studies should be an individual educational choice. Junior high school students, in this stage of transitioning from childhood to adolescence, face contradictions of self-identity and role confusion, with their self-adjustment abilities still developing[4]. Confronting the first significant choice in their educational journey, they are influenced by various factors from family, school, and society. How they make these choices will significantly shape their future career development and life trajectory.

Reviewing the literature on the educational choices and influencing factors of junior high school students, existing studies have analyzed factors affecting graduation diversion intentions and educational choices in urban and rural areas from four aspects[5]: academic performance, gender, family capital, and ethnicity. However, existing literature often lacks targeted approaches, primarily stemming from the development perspective of the educational system. Academic performance is the most critical factor influencing the educational choices of junior high school graduates[6]. Students with intermediate academic performance often hover around the score lines of general and vocational high schools, referred to as the "sandwiched layer." Due to the contradiction in the supply of educational resources, the plight of these "sandwiched layer" students is more pronounced in county-level middle schools located between urban and rural areas[7]. Faced with graduation choices, what are the intentions of the "sandwiched layer" students in county schools? Have they formed clear career plans and self-awareness? Do they make appropriate educational choices based on their career planning? How do national policies and local government supporting policies influence the process of students planning their personal careers and making educational

choices? This paper focuses on the "sandwiched layer" students in county schools, analyzing individual choices regarding secondary education. On one hand, it clarifies the current issues in the supply of secondary education in China from the perspective of educational demand, providing a basis for government policy formulation. On the other hand, by analyzing the factors and mechanisms influencing students' educational choices, it broadens the application scope of career planning theories, raises awareness of school importance in student career planning education, and further enriches the content and implementation methods of career planning education in schools.

2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Von Neumann and Morgenstern's Expected Utility Theory posits that rational individuals exhibit different value tendencies when making decisions. These include "risk-averse," where decisions tend to follow conservative types under deterministic conditions; "risk-loving," where decisions lean towards uncertain situations; and "risk-neutral," where decisions are relatively prudent, neither leaning towards conservatism nor aggression[8-10]. In the context of this study, junior high school graduates, when making choices about further education, carefully weigh the expected benefits and hidden risks of their chosen secondary education. Simultaneously, junior high school is a transitional period of rapid development, where individuals are progressing from immaturity to maturity, dependence to independence, blindness to self-awareness. The inherent inclination for risk-taking during this period is evident[11]. However, the post-junior high school choice of further education is the first significant decision they face, one that can impact their future development. Therefore, making prudent and rational decisions becomes crucial.

Based on existing research, academic performance is a crucial indicator influencing the choices of junior high school graduates regarding school selection[12,13]. The "sandwiched layer" students, facing difficulty in making choices for further education, tend to be more risk-averse and seek to avoid risks through various means.

2.1. The impact of individual vocational career planning on further education choices

According to the expected utility theory, diversification is a measure to reduce risk — allocating consumers' decision-making time and goals among two or more products to share individual energy and eliminate some risks[14]. In recent years, the country has coordinated the development of general high school education and secondary vocational education, ensuring that the enrollment scale is roughly equal. In areas with a lower proportion of vocational education, the focus is on expanding secondary vocational education resources. At the same time, efforts continue to support the improvement of conditions for general high schools, revising and improving the standards for school building construction and equipment allocation[15]. Donald E. Super proposed the theory of career stages, dividing a career into growth stage (0-14 years old), exploration stage (14-25 years old), establishment stage (25-44 years old), maintenance stage (45-65 years old), and decline stage (over 65 years old). At different career stages, individuals have different career development tasks and gradually form clear self-awareness, leading to mature career choices. Around the age of 15, junior high school graduates are in the exploration stage, a period when their career ideals are just forming[16]. During this stage, students consciously explore potential careers based on their own circumstances and choose education related to their future careers[17]. Therefore, starting from vocational career planning of "sandwiched layer" students and exploring the relationship between students' vocational career planning and further education choices is conducive to students selecting suitable types of further education based on their future career aspirations and developing personalized action plans under the guidance of parents, schools, and other stakeholders.

Based on the current status of vocational career planning among "sandwiched layer" students, this study focuses on their anticipated further education choices and proposes the following research hypothesis:

H_1: Vocational career planning among students has a facilitating effect on further education choices.

2.2. The impact of policy perception on further education choices

Diversification is not the sole measure to mitigate decision-making risks. The more information individuals possess, the higher their level of rational decision-making, leading to a decrease in expected risks[18]. For junior high school graduates, providing more comprehensive information about high school education and reducing the cost of obtaining information can also mitigate the risks associated with educational choices to a certain extent. For example, in 2021, the Ministry of Education's *"Guidelines for the Implementation of Middle Vocational School Enrollment in 2021"* clearly stated: "Localities should intensify comprehensive publicity efforts, fully utilize powerful policies such as the expansion of enrollment in higher vocational schools, pilot projects for undergraduate-level vocational education, and the expansion of enrollment in regular higher education institutions for upgrading to undergraduate programs, actively guiding students to accept middle vocational education." At the same time, the country has adopted a series of measures to ensure enrollment in secondary vocational education, including tuition waivers, providing scholarships, and other forms of financial aid. The coverage rate of the policy of free tuition for secondary vocational education exceeds 90%, breaking through the threshold of high fees for vocational education[19]. The provision of accurate further education information and the establishment of

a financial aid system to a certain extent reduce the risks associated with students' further education choices.

Based on the various preferential policies issued by the government regarding secondary vocational education, this study proposes the following hypotheses regarding the perception of these policies among "sandwiched layer" students:

H_2: Policy perception moderates the relationship between vocational career planning and further education choices. Higher policy perception leads to a more pronounced positive relationship between vocational career planning and further education choices.

H_3: Policy perception guides the outcomes of further education choices.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Analytical framework

This study starts from the observation and reflection on the actual implementation of the policies regarding the division between general and vocational education and the further education choices of junior high school students. It establishes the "sandwiched layer" group of junior high school students in rural towns as the research subjects, utilizing a path analysis model to explore the extent to which vocational career planning among junior high "sandwiched layer" students influences their further education choices, as well as the moderating effect of policy perception between the two. The aim is to clarify the relationship between further education choices of junior high "sandwiched layer" students and their policy perception and vocational career planning. Based on the data results, suggestions and countermeasures are proposed, followed by reflection on the research.

3.2. Data source

Two county-level schools in central and southwestern provinces were selected for the questionnaire survey on the "Current Status of Vocational Career Planning and Further Education Choices among Junior High School Students," referencing Liu Hui's "*Questionnaire on Career Maturity of Middle School Students*.[20]" The reason for choosing the central and southwestern regions is that the economic industrial structure in these areas tends to lean towards labor-intensive industries, with vocational education development lagging behind that of the southeastern coastal areas. Therefore, the selection of research subjects is representative and typical. The questionnaire survey targeted "sandwiched layer" students in junior high schools. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, with 598 returned, and 588 were deemed valid. Among the respondents, there were 267 male students, accounting for 45.4%, and 321 female students, accounting for 54.6%. The questionnaire's effective rate was 98%.

3.3. Research variable

The independent variable is the current status of vocational career planning among junior high "sandwiched layer" students. The questionnaire measures students' understanding of careers and self-awareness by asking about their interests, understanding of the entry requirements for future careers (such as education level, gender, appearance, abilities, etc.), and understanding of the career development prospects (salary increase, promotion, self-realization, etc.) with seven questions.

The dependent variable is the further education choices of junior high "sandwiched layer" students, including the direction of choices and the level of initiative in making choices.

The moderating variable is the policy perception of junior high "sandwiched layer" students, measured by asking about their understanding of the policies related to the high school entrance examination.

Considering that there are many factors influencing students' further education choices, such as family capital, parents' education level, household registration distribution, etc., five variables were selected as control variables: gender, household registration type, parents' education level, annual income, and whether they are only children. This helps to analyze the relationship between students' personal vocational career planning, policy perception, and further education choices more accurately. The specific variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic information

Variate	Options	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	267	45.40
	Female	321	54.60
Registration	Urban	129	21.94
	Rural	459	78.06
The only child	Yes	36	6.12
	No	552	93.88
Education level of father	Junior high school and below	357	60.71
	High school (including technical secondary school)	201	34.18
	University and above	30	5.10
Education level of mother	Junior high school and below	423	71.94
	High school (including technical secondary school)	141	23.98
	University and above	24	4.08
Annual income	Below ten thousand	147	25.00
	Ten to thirty thousand	264	44.90
	More than fifty thousand	177	30.10
Sum		588	100.0

Among the students who completed the questionnaire, the proportion of females was relatively high at 54%, while males accounted for 46%. Due to the focus of this survey on junior high schools at the county level, the proportion of students with rural household registration was much higher than those with urban household registration, approximately in an 8:2 ratio. The large number of rural household registrations also explains the high proportion of non-only children, reaching 93% among the surveyed students. Furthermore, the educational level of fathers was mostly at or below junior high school, accounting for

60.17%, followed by high school at 34.18%, and the least with a college degree or above, accounting for only 5.1%. Similarly, the educational level of mothers also showed a similar trend, with the majority having education at or below junior high school level, accounting for 71.94%, followed by high school at 23.98%, and college or above at the lowest proportion of 4.08%. Family annual income was mainly concentrated in the range of 10,000 to 30,000 RMB, accounting for 44.9%, followed by over 50,000 RMB, accounting for 30.1%, while the lowest proportion was for annual income below 10,000 RMB, at 25%.

Based on these results, it can be inferred that the parents of the surveyed students have lower educational levels, and their family income is also relatively moderate to low. Additionally, with a large proportion of non-only children, it can be speculated that if a student's scores in the junior high school entrance examination are slightly below the admission cutoff for regular high schools, families of this kind may be more inclined to choose vocational schools.

3.4. The reliability and validity test

In the attitude questions of this questionnaire, the most commonly used Cronbach's alpha coefficient method was employed to calculate the internal consistency of the questionnaire. A higher alpha coefficient indicates greater reliability of the scores obtained. The results, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the overall alpha reliability coefficient of the questionnaire is 0.907, which is greater than 0.8, indicating excellent overall reliability of the scale. The consistency coefficients of the three-dimensional component scales are all greater than 0.7, indicating acceptable reliability for each component scale.

Table 2 The Cronbach's alpha values for the questionnaire and each subscale

Questionnaire	**Perception of policies**	**choices in higher education**	**career planning**
0.907	0.871	0.787	0.925

The validity of the questionnaire was verified using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test. From Table 3, it can be observed that the KMO value is 0.907, which is greater than 0.8. This indicates that the research data is highly suitable for information extraction.

Table 3 Questionnaire validity

KMO		0.907
Bartlett's test	Approximate chi-square value.	6862.775
	df	105
	p	0.000

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Career planning and educational choices

4.1.1 Overview of career planning and educational choices

The average score for the vocational career planning status among junior high "sandwiched layer" students is 3.75, slightly higher than the moderate intensity score of 3. The specific scores for each item are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Details of career planning subtopics

Question	**Sample**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
I have a clear understanding of my interests and know what suits me best	588	3.724	1.039
I understand my existing knowledge and abilities, and know what I can do	588	3.750	0.993
I understand the entry requirements for the future careers I am considering (such as education level, gender, appearance, and abilities)	588	3.628	1.021
I understand the career development prospects for the professions I intend to pursue (such as salary increase, promotion opportunities, and self-fulfillment)	588	3.597	1.029
I have already planned my short-term career goals	588	3.383	1.188
I have developed a study plan based on my career goals	588	3.520	1.177
I have already planned my long-term career goals	588	3.388	1.197

As shown in Table 4, the item "I understand my existing knowledge and abilities and know what I can do" scored the highest with an average of 3.75, while the item "I have already planned my short-term career goals" scored the lowest with an average of 3.52. This indicates that the surveyed students have a relatively clear self-awareness and can clearly recognize their knowledge and abilities. However, clear self-awareness does not necessarily lead to clear short-term career planning. The same situation is reflected in the results for long-term career planning, with only a slight difference of 0.05 between the two. This suggests that the surveyed students have a relatively low level of career planning and lack clear and definite plans.

As shown in Table 5, in terms of further education choices, the overall average score is 3.8, which is higher than the moderate intensity score of 3. Looking at specific items, "I have a clear choice for future further education" scored the highest with an average of 3.96, and "The school I chose is my own choice, in line with my plans and interests" had a similar average score, at 3.95. From these two options, it can be seen that, unlike career planning, the surveyed students have clearer expectations for their future further education choices, and most choices are based on their own plans and interests. Due to the instability of academic performance among junior high "sandwiched layer" students and the scarcity of high school education resources in county-level areas, the questionnaire included an item "If my grades are not ideal, I would actively choose a vocational school instead of paying a high price to enter a regular high school." The purpose was to investigate preferences for regular high schools or vocational schools. The specific results, as shown in Figure 1, indicate that 50% of students still have a

strong preference for vocational schools. Only 22% of students are more willing to choose expensive regular high schools instead of vocational schools if their grades are not ideal. These students are more confident and determined about their grades and plans. However, the influence of factors such as parental expectations and income levels cannot be ruled out, and these factors will be analyzed as control variables in subsequent regression analysis.

Table 5 Details of subtopics related to educational choices

Question	Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation
I have a clear choice for future further education	588	3.969	0.909
The school I chose is my own choice, in line with my plans and interests	588	3.954	1.104
The school I have chosen is based on my current academic performance	588	3.857	0.975
If my grades are not ideal, I would actively choose a vocational school instead of paying a high price to enter a regular high school	588	3.423	1.341

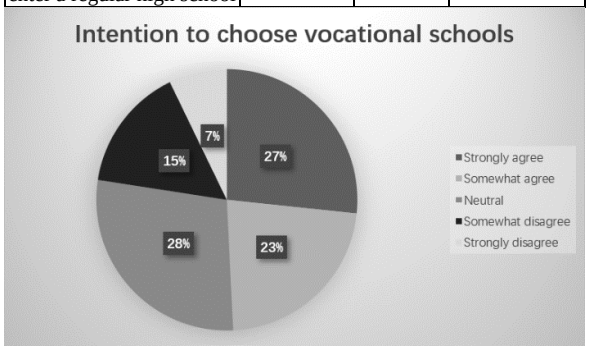

Figure 1 Intention to choose vocational schools

4.1.2 The facilitating role of career planning on educational choices

The results of the variable correlation analysis, as shown in Table 6, indicate a significant correlation between vocational career planning and further education choices (β=0.659, p<0.01), with a correlation coefficient of 0.659, demonstrating significance at the 0.01 level. This provides preliminary validation for hypothesis H_1.

Regression analysis was conducted on the sub-items of vocational career planning and the dependent variable further education choices to verify the extent of the impact of vocational career planning on further education choices. From Table 7, the model's R-squared value is 0.380. Analyzing specific options reveals that the regression coefficient for "I understand my interests and hobbies, and know what I am suitable for" is 0.200 (t=2.194, p=0.029<0.05), indicating a significant positive impact on further education choices. The regression coefficient for "I have already formulated a study plan based on my career goals" is 0.186 (t=2.008, p=0.046<0.05), suggesting a significant positive impact on further education choices. Similarly, the regression coefficient for "I understand the future career development direction (salary increase, promotion, self-realization, etc.)" is 0.222 (t=2.181, p=0.030<0.05), indicating a significant positive impact on further education choices. The specific model is illustrated in Figure 2.

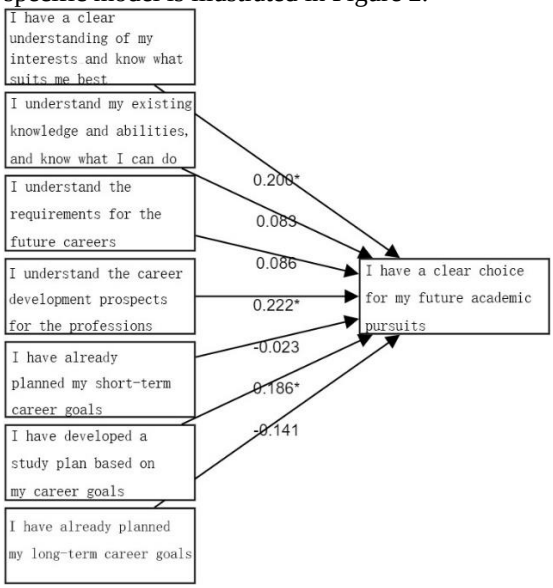

Figure 2 The relationship between career planning and educational choices

Table 6 The correlation between career planning and educational choices

Pearson		
		Educational choices
Career planning	Correlation coefficient.	0.659**
	p	0.000
*p<0.05 **p<0.01		

Table 7 Results of linear regression analysis

Educational choices	Regression coefficients.	95% CI	VIF
I have a clear understanding of my interests and know what suits me best	0.200* (2.194)	0.021 ~ 0.378	3.278
I understand my existing knowledge and abilities, and know what I can do	0.083 (0.823)	-0.114 ~ 0.279	3.626
I understand the entry requirements for the future careers I am considering (such as education level, gender, appearance, and abilities)	0.086 (0.925)	-0.096 ~ 0.268	3.303
I understand the career development prospects for the professions I intend to pursue (such as salary increase, promotion opportunities, and self-fulfillment)	0.222* (2.181)	0.023 ~ 0.422	4.028
I have already planned my short-term career goals	-0.023 (-0.261)	-0.197 ~ 0.150	4.054
I have developed a study plan based on my career goals	0.186* (2.008)	0.004 ~ 0.367	4.333
I have already planned my long-term career goals	-0.141 (-1.350)	-0.347 ~ 0.064	5.761
Sample	588		
R^2	0.380		
Adjusted R^2	0.357		
F	$F(7,188)=16.441$ $p=0.000$		

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

4.2. The moderating effect of policy perception

4.2.1 The moderating role of policy perception in the relationship between career planning and educational choices

This study employed a hierarchical regression method to verify the moderating effect of policy perception on the relationship between vocational career planning and further education choices. Model F_1 tested the influence of control variables on further education choices, Model F_2 verified whether the direct effect of vocational career planning on further education choices existed, and Models F_3 and F_4 were used to examine whether the moderating effect of policy perception was significant. To ensure the robustness of the results, the independent variable vocational career planning, the moderating variable policy perception, and their interaction terms were sequentially added to the model to test the significance of the interaction term regression coefficients, thereby determining whether policy perception played a moderating role in the relationship.

Model F_1 was used to test the influence of control variables on the dependent variable. As shown in Table 8, the gender, household registration, parents' education level, family income, and whether they are only children had non-significant effects on further education choices among junior high "sandwiched layer" students.

Table 8 Results of stratified regression analysis for moderating effects

Variables		**Educational choices**			
		F_1	**F_2**	**F_3**	**F_4**
Control Variables	Gender	-0.015	0.080	0.045	0.081
	Registration	-0.146	-0.063	0.040	0.031
	Whether the participant is an only child.	0.084	-0.008	0.022	-0.019
	Education level of father	-0.088	-0.109	-0.083	-0.079
	Education level of mother	0.154	0.070	0.091	0.036
	Annual income	0.104	0.035	-0.001	-0.023
Independent Variable	Career Planning		0.569**	0.326**	0.315**
Moderating Variable	policy perception			0.339**	0.439**
Interaction Term	Career Planning * policy perception				0.121**
R^2		0.024	0.442	0.518	0.574
Adjusted R^2		-0.007	0.421	0.498	0.553
F		0.784 p=0.583	21.273 p=0.000	25.159 p=0.000	27.804,p=0.000
$\triangle R^2$		0.024	0.418	0.076	0.055

Model F_2 results indicated that vocational career planning significantly positively promoted further education choices (β=0.569, p<0.01), further confirming hypothesis H_1.

In Model F_3, the moderating variable was introduced on the basis of Model F_2. The results showed that the relationship between policy perception and further education choices was significant (β=0.339, p>0.05).

Furthermore, Model F_4 introduced the interaction term. The results revealed that policy perception had a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between vocational career planning and further education choices (β=0.121, p<0.01), indicating that policy perception strengthened the positive relationship between vocational career planning and further education choices, thereby confirming hypothesis H_2.

4.2.2 The relationship between policy perception and educational choices

The results of the variable correlation analysis, as shown in Table 9, indicate a significant correlation between further education choices and policy perception (β=0.665, p<0.01), with a correlation coefficient of 0.665, demonstrating significance at the 0.01 level. Regression analysis was conducted on the sub-items of policy perception and the dependent variable vocational career planning to verify the extent of the impact of policy perception on vocational career planning, as shown in Table 10. Upon specific analysis, the model's R-squared value is 0.48. Examining specific items reveals that the regression coefficient for "I understand the current policies regarding the high school entrance examination and know what choices are available" is 0.352 (t=6.008, p=0.000<0.01), indicating a significant positive impact on further education choices. Similarly, the regression coefficient for "I support the state's incentive policies for vocational schools" is 0.161 (t=2.807, p=0.006<0.01), suggesting a significant positive impact on further education choices. Hypothesis H_3 is thus validated.

Table 9 Correlation analysis of policy perception and educational choices

Pearson		
		Educational Choices
Policy Perception	Correlation coefficient.	0.665**
	p	0.000

*p<0.05 **p<0.01

Based on the data analysis results, it can be inferred that junior high "sandwiched layer" students are well-informed about the policies regarding the high school entrance examination and supportive of the state's incentives for vocational schools. Furthermore, the support for policies regarding vocational schools can explain why 50% of the surveyed students would actively choose vocational schools when their academic performance is not ideal, further confirming hypothesis H_3.

Table 10 Results of linear regression analysis

Educational Choices	Regression coefficients	95% CI	VIF
I understand the current policies regarding the high school entrance examination and know what choices are available	0.352** (6.008)	0.237 ~ 0.466	1.771
I understand the differences between regular high schools and vocational schools, and I have already made my decision	0.079 (1.482)	-0.026 ~ 0.184	2.155
I understand the relevant policies and support measures provided by the government for vocational school	0.031 (0.513)	-0.088 ~ 0.151	2.938
I support the state's incentive policies for vocational schools	0.161** (2.807)	0.049 ~ 0.274	2.574
Sample	588		
R^2	0.480		
Adjusted R^2	0.470		
F	$F(4,191)=44.157$ $p=0.000$		

D-W: 2.099, *p<0.05 **p<0.01

5. CONCLUSION

Currently, China is undergoing a crucial phase in the universalization of high school education. The significance of this educational stage lies not only in providing qualified candidates for higher education but also in the direct impact on the overall coherence and integrity of talent cultivation through the differentiation of students between academic and vocational paths during compulsory education. Against this backdrop, this study starts from the practical observation and contemplation of the universal and vocational education differentiation policies and the choices made by junior high school students. Utilizing survey data from questionnaires on "Junior High School Students' Career Planning and Academic Choices" in the third grade of junior high schools in two county-level schools, one in the central region and the other in the southwest region, the study employs path analysis models to explore the extent to which career planning among junior high "sandwich layer" students influences their academic choices, as well as the moderating effect of policy perception between the two. The main conclusions drawn are as follows:

Firstly, there is a contradiction between the positive role of career planning and the lack of education. According to the research findings, there is a significant correlation between career planning and academic choices. Based on the regression verification of specific options and combined with the overall situation, career planning plays a certain promoting role in the academic choices of junior high "sandwich layer" students in county-level schools. When students engage in career planning, they typically consider their own interests and knowledge abilities, and then adjust their study plans and academic arrangements to enhance their competitiveness for further education. However, the survey results also indicate that students have not established comprehensive and clear career plans, and their planning for the short and long term is relatively vague.

Career planning education in China began to emerge in the early 20th century under the influence of Western countries, but due to the economic system and the level of productivity development since the founding of the country, career planning in China has mainly focused on college students and young adults, with little attention given to junior high school students[21]. From the perspective of junior high school students themselves, they lack basic knowledge of career planning and their understanding of professions is superficial, limited to impressions of salary and benefits without knowledge of the intrinsic requirements such as responsibility, core competencies, leadership, and management skills needed for employment[22]. Additionally, career planning education at the junior high school level in China is almost universally lacking, with no specific requirements in educational goals and no systematic training programs in educational content[23]. It is speculated that the lack of career planning education may be related to the economic backwardness of rural areas, incomplete student and family career awareness, and inadequate career education in schools.

Secondly, there is a contradiction between the positive role of policy perception and the negative image of vocational education. According to the research findings, policy perception strengthens the positive relationship between career planning and academic choices. However, when considering the questionnaire data, options such as "I understand the differences between regular high schools and vocational schools, and have made my choice clear" and "I understand the relevant policies and support measures for vocational schools by the government" did not significantly affect academic choices. It is speculated that this may be related to the negative image of vocational schools in society. Graduates of vocational schools often have lower socioeconomic status and slower career advancement, leading parents to perceive vocational education as "education for underachievers," "education for the common people," or "last-resort education.[24] "This perception to some extent influences the final academic choices of "sandwich

layer" students.

Thirdly, there is a contradiction between parental authority and student autonomy in planning. From the analysis of the data, it is evident that policy perception guides academic choices. However, students' understanding of the supportive policies for regular high schools and vocational education did not influence their final academic choices. In the current educational system, students at the basic education level rely on their parents and teachers for guidance in daily life and academic decisions, making it difficult for them to develop an independent personality. Parents often impose their own subjective desires on their children and use their authoritative status to forcibly choose and plan their children's future paths[25]. Although some students have developed clear career planning paths and are aware of government policies regarding vocational education, they still ultimately choose the paths and directions planned by their parents.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

When facing choices, people often encounter uncertainty, and the same is true for post-secondary school decisions after the high school entrance examination. For the "sandwiched" students whose grades hover around the cutoff scores for regular high schools and vocational schools, they typically exhibit a tendency to avoid risks. Therefore, when making choices, they must carefully weigh various factors, including expected benefits and potential risks. To mitigate the risks associated with this uncertainty, the expected utility theory proposes three measures: diversification of choices, obtaining more decision-making information, and considering insurance mechanisms[26]. Based on the above theory, the following recommendations can be summarized:

Establish and Enhance a Comprehensive Career Planning Curriculum: Schools should develop and refine a comprehensive curriculum dedicated to career planning. This curriculum should include detailed teaching guidelines and seamlessly integrate career planning knowledge with traditional academic subjects. By incorporating career planning education into the core learning experience, students will be better equipped to understand the intricacies of their future career paths. Moreover, fostering a sense of ownership over their career planning will empower students to engage in self-assessment and gain valuable insights into their future career environments. Ultimately, this approach will help students cultivate a clear understanding of their desired career trajectories and develop a strong set of values aligned with their professional aspirations.

Strengthen Awareness of Educational Policies and Local Support Initiatives: To facilitate better decision-making in career planning and academic choices, schools should prioritize disseminating information about relevant educational policies. This can be achieved through various means such as organizing lectures and distributing notices to students. These initiatives should aim to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the advantages, disadvantages, conditions, and requirements associated with different academic pathways. By fostering clear awareness and understanding of various educational options, students can be guided to select learning paths that align with their interests, abilities, and future career aspirations. Additionally, schools should emphasize the implementation of local support initiatives to offer students more choices and assistance. For instance, within career planning courses, schools can integrate information about local industry developments to guide students in selecting study directions relevant to regional industries. This approach enables students to grasp local industry demands and trends, ultimately enhancing their competitiveness in the job market.

Establish a Comprehensive Career Planning Education System: A holistic career planning education system spanning from primary to higher education levels should be developed. This system should begin with early career enlightenment in elementary school, fostering students' awareness of various professions and cultivating their interests. At the middle and high school levels, systematic career planning courses should be introduced, incorporating case studies and field trips to deepen students' understanding of different occupational fields. Advocating for practical opportunities and internship programs, collaboration with businesses should be encouraged to allow students to experience real-world work environments firsthand. Furthermore, the establishment of a mentorship program with experienced professionals serving as mentors can provide students with personalized career guidance. Emphasizing cooperation between schools and families, relevant training should be provided to parents to deepen their understanding of the importance of career planning and better support and guide their children in academic and career decision-making. These recommendations aim to establish a comprehensive career planning education system, enabling students to gain a comprehensive understanding of themselves, comprehend career choices, and lay a solid foundation for future career development throughout their academic journey.

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