



Home environment and educational transitions on the path to college in rural northwest China



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ABSTRACT

In China, the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*) is an important gateway to future life outcomes. In this paper, we analyze longitudinal survey data from two waves (2004 and 2009) of the Gansu Survey of Children and Families to examine the home environment factors that predict successful transitions on the path to participation in the college entrance examination among rural youth in Gansu province. Our results show that parents play a crucial role in determining their children's life chances through their shaping of a nurturing home learning environment.

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1. Introduction

Despite a dramatic expansion in the provision of higher education in China in recent years (He, 2008; Lin and Zhang, 2006; Ma and Abbott, 2008), the college entrance examination (*gaokao*) is still a highly competitive and selective examination that determines an individual's future life chances. A college education is an indispensable prerequisite to a well-paying job and a comfortable life in modern day China. Rural students are at an enormous disadvantage in the competition for achieving higher education attainment (Lin and Zhang, 2006). Many barriers stand in the way of rural students reaching the stage where they can even participate in taking the *gaokao* let alone pass it with a high enough score to enter into a university.

Furthermore, rural students are at increased risk for dropping out even before the completion of middle school. Upon completion of middle school, rural students face severe competition in gaining access to an academic track senior high school where they can follow the curriculum to prepare for the *gaokao* (Andreas, 2004; Lin and Zhang, 2006). In fact, Lin and Zhang (2006) argue that the competition to enter an academic track high school is even more severe in 21st century China than the bottleneck entering into university. They examine the structural barriers inherent in the educational system that hinder rural students from gaining access to a senior high school education. In an effort to raise levels of educational quality, the number of senior high schools available for

rural middle school students has decreased over the past decade. Many senior high schools have been moved to the townships, have been merged together or have been converted into vocational high schools (Lin and Zhang, 2006). Furthermore, the financial barriers for rural students to enter into high school are substantial. The costs of nine year compulsory education are largely covered for rural students by the central government since the 2006 implementation of the *liangmianyibu* (two exemptions/one subsidy) policy which waives tuition and textbook fees for poor rural students as well as providing a stipend to help cover living costs. Once students reach high school, however, they are on their own. Senior high school is not part of compulsory education and students must cover all the costs of tuition and boarding (Hannum et al., 2011; Lin and Zhang, 2006). These costs are prohibitive for most rural families.

In a recent study of rural youth in Gansu, only 48% of middle school graduates transitioned to an academic track general high school, with 26% going into a vocational or technical high school and 26% dropping out of school all together (Hannum et al., 2011). In this same study, of those students who completed high school and took the college entrance examination only 27% entered a four-year college program. Of the college entrance examination takers, 37% entered a three-year program or a vocational college program (Hannum et al., 2011). Only 17% of all the youth in the sample took the *gaokao* (Hannum et al., 2011). Hannum et al. (2011) provide rigorous and comprehensive evidence to support the role of parental education, family wealth and village context in shaping access to higher education for rural youth in northwest China.

Previous research in educational stratification has long supported the argument that families can provide different forms

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of resources to facilitate children's education, and that measures of family socioeconomic status (SES), such as parents' education and family income, alone cannot account for all the variations in home environment that lead to differences in children's educational outcomes (Sewell and Shah, 1968; Sewell et al., 1970; Woefel and Haller, 1971; Coleman, 1988; Teachman, 1987; Teachman and Paasch, 1998). There are also variations across households in family home environment including parenting styles and the educational expectations that parents have for their children. Other parenting behaviors vary as well including the priorities placed on providing educational resources in the home such as a special study location for the child and the number of books in the home. The way that children are allowed to spend their time also varies. Some parents require their children to help a great deal with the household chores, while others prefer to relieve their children of these tasks so that they can study. Parents likely also have an important influence on the amount of time that children play with friends or watch TV. All of these factors contribute to the kind of home environment that children grow up in and may have important effects on children's educational outcomes.

In this paper, we draw on the rich data available in the Gansu Survey of Children and Families (GSCF) to explore the role of home environment for children in rural China on successful transitions along the path to higher education. Specifically we look at the role of parenting style, parent's educational expectations for children, educational resources in the home, and children's daily use of time on the likelihood of taking the high school entrance examination (*zhongkao*) and the college entrance examination (*gaokao*). These two examinations are the key transition points that determine college access among young people in China and are thus major determinants of future life outcomes as well. In this paper, we examine the educational opportunity afforded by simply being able to sit for the examinations.

2. Parenting style

Parenting style has been found to be correlated to schooling outcomes. Most of the conceptual frameworks of parenting and child development are based on Baumrind (1971, 1991) typology of three different parenting styles related to the extent of responsiveness and demandingness in parents' control and direction of children's behavior: authoritarian, permissive and authoritative. By this definition, authoritarian parents have high demands on their children and tend to be unresponsive to their children's needs and desires. They are typically controlling and use power-assertive, punitive, and prohibitive strategies that require child obedience. Permissive parents, on the other hand, are very responsive to children's needs and desires, are accepting of children's behavior and make few demands on their children. Authoritative parents are both demanding and responsive and they provide explanations to their children and communicate with them. Using Baumrind (1971) parenting styles typology, subsequent research has found authoritative parenting to be associated with positive student academic outcomes and authoritarian parenting to be negatively associated with school grades and engagement (Dornbusch et al., 1987; Steinberg et al., 1992).

Asian families in the US have been found to exhibit more authoritarian and less authoritative parenting styles than non-Hispanic white families (Chao, 2001; Dornbusch et al., 1987; Steinberg et al., 1992; Pong et al., 2005). The finding that authoritarian parenting is negatively associated with academic achievement seems at odds with the tendency of Asian children to have higher academic achievement than their Western counterparts (Dornbusch et al., 1987). Indeed there is some disagreement among studies about the relationship between parenting style and schooling outcomes among Chinese children. In the US context, the

positive effects of authoritative parenting styles persist for Asian children in some studies (Steinberg et al., 1992), while other studies provide evidence for variability of effects of parenting style by ethnicity (Chao, 2001; Steinberg et al., 1992). Chao (1994, 2001) argues that studies of parenting style need to be contextualized within a specific cultural context. Chen et al. (1997) investigate the relationship between parenting styles in Chinese second grade families in Beijing and social adjustment and academic achievement. In this context, their findings are consistent with the positive effects of authoritative parenting and the negative effects of authoritarian parenting on children's achievement. Leung et al. (1998) conceptualize two dimensions of authoritarianism in their study of Chinese parents: general authoritarianism and academic authoritarianism. They also find that authoritarian behaviors related to schooling are negatively associated with students' academic achievement. Overall, then, the literature supports the notion that authoritarian parenting styles tend to be negatively associated with children's academic achievement while authoritative parenting styles tend to be positively associated with children's academic achievement. This result has been found to also hold true in studies of the effect of parenting style on children's academic achievement in China.

Another framing of parenting style has been described as social capital in terms of parent-child interactions and communication (Coleman, 1988; McNeal, 1999; Ho and Willms, 1996; Desimone, 1999; Park, 2008). Social capital often captures parent-child communication about issues at school, parent monitoring of homework, and general parent-child discussions. Parent discussion of schooling topics is a strong predictor of schooling outcomes (Ho and Willms, 1996; Desimone, 1999; McNeal, 1999; Park, 2008). Parent-child interactions have been found to vary based on a student's family background (Ho and Willms, 1996; Desimone, 1999; Lee and Bowen, 2006). McNeal (1999) found that parent-child communication was important for students from high SES families and had a positive result of reducing the likelihood of dropping out of high school. In this study, however, students from low SES did not receive the benefit from parent-child communication.

With regard to parent-child communication in the Chinese context, a recent study by Park (2008) of fourteen countries found that the schooling context could mediate the different socioeconomic effects of parent-child discussion of schooling issues. Park (2008) found that more standardized schooling systems, where the main barriers to entry are standard and transparent, could equalize the benefits of parent-child communication. Park suggests that differential benefits of parent-child communication may vary by student background in non-standardized systems, such as the United States, because of the unclear requirements of entry into tertiary education. Thus, the positive effects of parent-child communication may be more consistent for children from all backgrounds in the more standardized context of the Chinese education system.

3. Parents' educational expectations

One of the home environment factors that influences children's education is parents' educational expectations. Considerable evidence exists that parents' expectations for their children's future educational pursuits are linked to children's subsequent educational attainment (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002; Cheng and Starks, 2002; Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Teachman, 1987; Teachman and Paasch, 1998; Trusty, 1998; Wood et al., 2007). Parents' high expectations and the duration of these expectations are strong predictors of children's high school achievement and school persistence (Jacobs and Harvey, 2005). In the framework of status attainment, parental educational expectations are considered to be

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