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The Influence of Family Capital on Parents' School Choice for Junior High School Admission under the "Equal Enrollment for Public and Private Schools" Policy: An Analysis of the Mediating Effect Based on Educational Expectations

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Abstract. The "equal enrollment for public and private schools" policy is a key reform to promote equity in compulsory education, but parents' school choice behavior is still widespread. Based on capital theory and education choice theory, this study takes District Z of City N as the research object, analyzes 415 questionnaire survey data, and uses binary Logistic regression and mediating effect test methods to explore the influencing factors and mechanism of school choice for junior high school admission. The study finds that family capital has a significant positive impact on school choice behavior; educational expectations play a partial mediating role between family capital and school choice behavior. The "equal enrollment for public and private schools" policy has only changed the form of school choice without eradicating the deep-seated motivation for school choice, and on the contrary, it has intensified the "capital-dependent" education game to a certain extent. Based on this, this paper puts forward suggestions from three aspects: policy optimization, resource balance, and parental guidance to boost the equitable development of compulsory education.

Keywords: equal enrollment for public and private schools, parents' school choice for junior high school admission, family capital, educational expectations

1. Introduction

The contradiction between the unbalanced distribution of high-quality educational resources in compulsory education and the increasingly strong demand of parents and students for high-quality educational resources has become the core cause of the problem of "educational involution". As the first guardians of students, parents are not only the leading consumers of high-quality educational resources but also the core participants in school choice behavior [1]. Their school choice decisions are not only related to their children's educational paths but also profoundly affect the balance of the educational ecosystem and the orientation of social equity. From the perspective of policy reform, to promote educational equity and standardize the enrollment order, China has successively implemented key policies such as "nearby enrollment" and "equal enrollment for public and private

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schools", explicitly canceling selective examinations for junior high school admission and implementing the school district zoning enrollment model without selection thresholds. Although this reform has blocked the traditional path of directly striving for high-quality schools through academic performance, it has also triggered new practical contradictions: the strong desire of some parents for high-quality schools forms a huge gap with the reality that their children may be assigned to ordinary or even weak schools nearby. This gap has quickly turned into widespread parental anxiety, prompting parents to seek other ways to choose schools within the policy framework. Among them, school-district housing, which is directly linked to the "nearby enrollment" policy, has become the core choice for parents to accumulate school choice chips, further intensifying the binding between access to educational resources and family economic strength [2].

Against the background that the quality of compulsory education schools has not yet achieved substantial balance across the board, middle and high-income urban families rely on their economic foundation and social resource advantages to spend significantly more on education than ordinary families. Even though off-campus training is regulated, such families still try to improve their children's probability of entering high-quality private schools through diversified education service purchases. This behavior not only consolidates their own social class but also forms a "theater effect" through consumption transmission, forcing more families to participate in vicious education competition and fall into the involution dilemma of "everyone being kidnapped" [3]. As a core policy to promote educational equity and alleviate school choice anxiety, the reality that school choice behavior is still widespread after the implementation of "equal enrollment for public and private schools" not only reflects the gap between the original policy intention and practical effect but also highlights the necessity and urgency of in-depth exploration of the driving factors and formation mechanism behind school choice behavior.

Based on the above research background, the core issues concerned in this paper are: under the "equal enrollment for public and private schools" policy, does family capital affect parents' school choice behavior for junior high school admission? Does educational expectation play a mediating role between family capital and school choice behavior? On this basis, this paper puts forward suggestions on how to optimize and improve relevant policies such as "equal enrollment for public and private schools" to more effectively guide parents to choose schools rationally, alleviate education anxiety, and promote educational equity.

2. Literature review

2.1. Family capital and parents' school choice for junior high school admission

Firstly, family economic capital is a basic factor affecting parents' school choice. Coleman pointed out that children's choice of school type and whether they are confident and hopeful about learning are affected by family economic capital [4]. Dukhov's study found that parents with lower incomes are unwilling to choose schools for their children and tend to accept the current situation of their children's schools [5]. Relevant domestic studies have also proved that family economic capital has a significant impact on parents' school choice behavior. Zou Wei and Ma Zhanli found through research that families with abundant family economic capital are more willing to make material and time investments in their children, face smaller investment budget constraints, and can improve their children's human capital level by purchasing school-district housing, investing in after-school education, etc. [6]

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Secondly, family social capital also affects parents' school choice. Bourdieu and Coleman introduced social capital into the field of education, forming two research paths: network resources and social closure. Bourdieu believed that family social capital is a social resource structure that can help achieve family goals, exists as capital in social networks, is closely related to the family's socio-economic status, and thus greatly affects the educational prospects and expectations of their children [7]. Fang Changchun found through interviews with school teachers that the acquisition of special student quotas does not only depend on economic capacity but also on the social capital and social network owned by the family, that is to say, only those with money and connections can obtain special student quotas [7].

Finally, family cultural capital affects parents' school choice. He Xiaozhen believed that there is a positive correlation between parents' educational level and the possibility of their children receiving higher education [8]. Cheng Meng and Kang Yongjiu focused on the school education choice of children from poor families, and believed that Chinese families have the traditional quality of perseverance and diligence, the family traditions and family education adhered to by family members, and the inherent motivation of students from poor families are the key factors for their academic success [9]. Some scholars' research conclusions found that compared with other capital types, family cultural capital has the most significant and lasting impact on their children's school education choice [10]. Yang Ling and Chen Tianjiao found through data analysis that family cultural capital has an impact on the three enrollment stages of junior high school, senior high school and university, and there is a positive correlation between parents' educational level and the educational advantage ratio of their children [11].

2.2. Educational expectations and parents' school choice for junior high school admission

Parental educational expectations are an important psychological mechanism affecting school choice behavior. After Blau and Duncan proposed the classic model of status attainment, many scholars in the academic circle have supplemented, improved, expanded and revised its theoretical framework. Among them, the Wisconsin model constructed by Sewell and Heusler has high academic representation and has been widely recognized by the academic circle. On the basis of the original framework of the traditional status attainment model, this theory adds multiple influencing factors such as career expectations, academic achievement and the role of key others. Sewell and Heusler believed that variables related to individual family background do not directly affect education choices, but indirectly exert a deep impact on individual education choice behavior through the educational expectations held by key others [12].

Domestic academic circles have also explored the internal mechanism of educational expectations on education choices. Lu Genshu's research [13] shows that educational expectations profoundly affect adolescents' educational decisions. On the whole, all kinds of families generally have higher educational expectations for boys than for girls; the better the family economic conditions, the higher the parents' educational expectations; the expectation level of urban families is better than that of rural families; the educational expectations of only-child families are also significantly higher than those of non-only-child families.

2.3. Research review

Existing studies have carried out multi-dimensional discussions on the relationship between family capital, educational expectations and parents' school choice for junior high school admission, and achieved phased results. Based on Bourdieu's capital theory, Wisconsin model, etc., scholars have

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confirmed the significant impact of material support of economic capital, resource advantages of social capital and long-term penetration of cultural capital on school choice behavior, and clarified the mediating or direct driving role of educational expectations between family background and school choice decisions, laying a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the micro-logic of school choice behavior.

However, existing studies still have deficiencies: first, most of them focus on the independent influence of a certain capital dimension or educational expectation alone, lack an integrated analysis framework, and fail to systematically reveal the interaction mechanism of multiple factors; second, they pay insufficient attention to the background of policy changes such as "equal enrollment for public and private schools", ignoring the dynamic adaptation process of family capital operation and educational expectations after the policy reshapes school choice rules; third, the discussion on the differential mediating effect of educational expectations under different family capital dimensions is not in-depth, making it difficult to fully explain the complex causes of school choice behavior.

Based on the above discussion, this study puts forward the following hypotheses:

H1: Family capital has a significant positive impact on parents' school choice for junior high school admission.

H2: Parental educational expectations have a significant positive impact on parents' school choice for junior high school admission.

H3: Parental educational expectations play a mediating role between family capital and parents' school choice for junior high school admission.

3. Research design

3.1. Data sources

This study adopts a stratified sampling strategy to select questionnaire survey samples to ensure that the samples can better reflect the characteristics of parent groups in District Z with different socio-economic backgrounds, children's academic levels, residential areas, and differences in policy cognition and attitudes. The research object is defined as parents in District Z of City N whose children are about to go through the "junior high school admission" link (in 2025). The study adopts multi-level hierarchical sampling, selects 5 public junior high schools and their counterpart primary schools in District Z, and randomly selects 2 graduating classes from each primary school. The questionnaire survey was conducted through a combination of online and offline methods, and a total of 435 questionnaires were collected. After screening, 10 questionnaires with too short answering time and no obvious fluctuation in answers, and 10 paper questionnaires with unclear filling and missing items were excluded, and finally 415 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective rate of 95.04%.

3.2. Variable design

The specific definitions and explanations of core variables and control variables in this study are as follows. Independent variables: family capital and educational expectations. For family economic capital, drawing on the *China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)* questionnaire, three indicators are selected for measurement: "total family income in the past 12 months", "education and training expenditure in the past 12 months", and "cultural and entertainment expenditure in the past 12 months". For family cultural capital, three indicators are selected for measurement: "father's educational level", "mother's educational level", and "number of books currently owned at home".

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For family social capital, three indicators are selected for measurement: "father's occupation type", "mother's occupation type", and "gift expenditure in the past 12 months". Referring to the occupational differentiation classification method proposed by Professor Xueyi Lu [14], occupation types are divided into five levels, assigned 1-5 from high to low. For the measurement of parental educational expectations, drawing on Liu Huihua's scale [15], an educational expectation scale is compiled from three dimensions: academic development, quality cultivation, and social adaptation, with a total of 9 items (see Table 1).

Table 1. Educational expectation measurement items

Variable Name	Measurement Dimension	Measurement Item
Educational Expectation	Academic Development	XY1: You hope your child has excellent academic performance
		XY2: You hope your child can become an expert in a certain field
		XY3: You hope your child can develop interests and specialties
	Quality Cultivation	SZ1: You hope your child can be cultivated with noble moral character
		SZ2: You hope your child's academic performance can get better and better
		SZ3: You hope your child can make good teachers and helpful friends
	Social Adaptation	SY1: You hope your child can become a very popular person
		SY2: You hope your child can achieve great success
		SY3: You hope your child can abide by social rules and norms

Dependent variable: parents' school choice for junior high school admission. Combined with existing relevant studies on the "equal enrollment for public and private schools" policy and Bourdieu's family capital theory, this study explains that parents will achieve class reproduction through education choices. The intensity of school choice willingness directly reflects the initiative of parents to use capital to break through policy constraints. The dependent variable parents' school choice is set as a binary variable, that is, whether to choose a school, yes is assigned 1, no is assigned 0.

Control variables: this study selects children's gender and academic performance as core control variables. The introduction of children's gender (gender: male/female) aims to control the gender preference differences in family education investment. Zhou Xuehan believed that affected by the traditional concept of human capital investment, some families have a "boy priority" tendency in the allocation of educational resources, and this gender selection bias may significantly affect the family's response mode to education policies [16]. Li Haishen discussed the changes in students' academic performance under different school choice methods, and his research results indirectly reflect the differences in parents' school choice ability, believing that academic performance can be used as a key indicator affecting the level of school choice [17].

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4. Research results and analysis

4.1. Regression analysis of family capital on parents' school choice for junior high school admission

Binary Logistic regression analysis was conducted with school choice as the dependent variable, family social capital, family economic capital and family cultural capital as independent variables, and students' gender and academic performance as control variables. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Logistic regression analysis of the influence of family capital on parents' school choice for junior high school admission

Model		Unstandardized Coefficient B	Standard Error	Significance	VIF
Constant	Constant	-3.707	0.591	<0.001***	
Constant	Family Economic Capital	0.404	0.098	<0.001***	1.183
Constant	Family Cultural Capital	0.479	0.127	<0.001***	1.320
Constant	Family Social Capital	0.407	0.122	0.001**	1.295
Independent Variable	Gender (Female=1)	-0.125	0.234	0.592	1.048
Independent Variable	Performance (20-35th)	-0.846	0.442	0.055	2.840
Independent Variable	Performance (10-20th)	-0.173	0.426	0.684	2.945
Independent Variable	Performance (5-10th)	0.760	0.439	0.084	2.857
Independent Variable	Performance (Top 5)	0.407	0.507	0.423	2.020

Note: * indicates $p < 0.05$, ** indicates $p < 0.01$, *** indicates $p < 0.001$; the reference group for gender is "male = 0"; the reference group for grades is "after the 35th place".

The regression analysis results show that after controlling for students' gender and academic performance, family economic capital (B=0.404, p<0.001), cultural capital (B=0.479, p<0.001) and social capital (B=0.407, p<0.01) all have a significant positive impact on school choice behavior, and hypothesis H1 is supported.

4.2. Regression analysis of educational expectations on parents' school choice for junior high school admission

Binary Logistic regression analysis was conducted with school choice as the dependent variable, parental educational expectations as independent variables, and students' gender and academic performance as control variables. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Logistic regression analysis of the influence of educational expectations on parents' school choice for junior high school admission

Model		Unstandardized Coefficient B	Standard Error	Significance	VIF
Independent Variable	Educational Expectation	0.811	0.196	<0.001***	1.526
Control Variable	Gender (Female=1)	-0.306	0.248	0.217	1.055
Control Variable	Performance (20-35th)	-0.818	0.455	0.072	2.844
Control Variable	Performance (10-20th)	-0.387	0.44	0.379	2.954
Control Variable	Performance (5-10th)	0.594	0.454	0.191	2.876

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Table 3. (continued)

Performance (Top 5)	0.381	0.523	0.466	2.021

Note: * indicates p < 0.05, ** indicates p < 0.01, *** indicates p < 0.001; the reference group for gender is "male = 0"; the reference group for grades is "after the 35th place".

The regression analysis results show that under the control of students' gender and academic performance, educational expectations have a significant impact on parents' school choice behavior for junior high school admission (hypothesis H2 is supported). Specifically, educational expectations (B=0.811, p<0.001) have a significant impact on school choice behavior. Educational expectations essentially act as a key psychological hub for transforming static and objective "family capital" into dynamic and subjective "school choice actions".

4.3. Mediating effect of educational expectations on family capital and parents' school choice for junior high school admission

As shown in Table 4, there is a significant correlation among family capital, educational expectations and school choice behavior. Specifically, family capital is significantly positively correlated with school choice behavior (r=0.444, p<0.01), indicating that parents with richer family capital have stronger school choice willingness; educational expectations are also significantly positively correlated with school choice behavior (r=0.369, p<0.01), indicating that the higher parents' educational expectations for their children, the more inclined they are to choose high-quality schools. In addition, there is also a significant positive correlation between family capital and educational expectations (r=0.419, p<0.01), indicating that family capital not only directly affects school choice behavior but also may indirectly affect school choice decisions by improving parents' educational expectations.

Table 4. Correlation of each variable

	School Choice	Family Capital	Educational Expectation
School Choice	1		
Family Capital	0.444**	1	
Educational Expectation	0.369**	0.419**	1

A mediation model was constructed with educational expectations as the mediating variable, family capital as the independent variable, and parents' school choice for junior high school admission as the dependent variable. The latent variables family economic capital, family cultural capital and family social capital were summarized as family capital, and academic development, quality cultivation and social adaptation were summarized as educational expectations through Amos. After understanding the relationship between variables using correlation analysis, the mediating effect was further analyzed. As shown in Table 5, the goodness-of-fit indicators are good and the model fit is ideal.

Table 5. Test table of mediating model goodness-of-fit indicators

Goodness-of-Fit Indicator	Judgment Standard	Actual Value	Fitting Result
X2/df	<3	1.273	Excellent
RMR	<0.08	0.031	Excellent

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Table 5. (continued)

AGFI	>0.9	0.976	Excellent
GFI	>0.9	0.990	Excellent
CFI	>0.9	0.993	Excellent
NFI	>0.9	0.970	Excellent
TLI	>0.9	0.988	Excellent
RMSEA	<0.08	0.026	Excellent

The model path coefficients and significance test results in Table 6 show that the standard path coefficient of family capital to educational expectations is 0.647 (P<0.001), indicating that family capital has a significant positive impact on educational expectations, that is, the richer the family capital, the higher the parents' educational expectations for their children. The standard path coefficient of family capital to school choice is 0.43 (P<0.001), indicating that family capital has a significant positive impact on school choice behavior, that is, family capital directly promotes parents' school choice willingness. The standard path coefficient of educational expectations to school choice is 0.183 (P<0.05), indicating that educational expectations have a significant positive impact on school choice behavior, that is, the higher parents' educational expectations, the stronger their school choice willingness.

Table 6. Output of model path coefficients and significance test

Path	Standard Path Coefficient	Unstandardized Path Coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	P
Family Capital → Educational Expectation	0.647	0.594	0.093	6.362	***
Family Capital → School Choice	0.43	0.331	0.075	4.438	***
Educational Expectation → School Choice	0.183	0.153	0.077	2.003	0.045

To further test the mediating effect of educational expectations, this study adopted the bootstrap method to test the significance of the mediating effect, and 5000 bootstrap samples were drawn from the original data to complete the significance test of the mediating effect. If the confidence interval does not include 0, it proves that the mediating effect exists. The mediating effect results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Bootstrap analysis of mediating effect significance test

Path	Effect Type	Effect Value	Boot Standard Error	Boot CI Lower Limit	Boot CI Upper Limit	Effect Proportion	Mediation Result
Family Capital → Educational Expectation → School Choice	Direct Effect	0.331	0.331	0.2	0.485	78.44%	Partial Mediation Supported
	Indirect Effect	0.091	0.091	0.009	0.184	21.56%	
	Total Effect	0.422	0.422	0.339	0.523		

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It can be seen from the table that the indirect effect coefficient of the path "family capital → educational expectation → school choice" is 0.091, and the upper and lower limits of the 95% confidence interval do not include 0, indicating that educational expectations have a mediating effect between family capital and parents' school choice for junior high school admission, and hypothesis H3 is supported.

5. Research conclusions

5.1. Research conclusions

This study shows that family capital is a key factor affecting parents' school choice decisions, which shapes school choice behavior through direct effects and mediating paths, and the mediating role of parental educational expectations constitutes the core mechanism. As a basic hard constraint, economic capital directly determines the payment capacity and feasible boundaries of family school choice. Empirical evidence shows that family annual income and education and cultural expenditure are significantly positively correlated with school choice behavior. Families with strong economic capital can not only bear the explicit costs such as tuition fees of high-quality private schools, premium of school-district housing, and cross-district school transportation time, but also cope with the implicit costs such as information acquisition and lottery participation, essentially providing families with access to different levels of education markets. The influence of cultural capital is more profound and hidden, showing a dual role. Parents' educational background, education-related professional background and family cultural atmosphere jointly build a cognitive and value system for high-quality education. Parents with high cultural capital can accurately interpret the policy terms, enrollment risks and trends of "equal enrollment for public and private schools", and keenly identify implicit quality indicators such as teacher stability, campus culture and student source structure, making school choice behavior more proactive, rational and accurate. Social capital has both information symmetry and resource acquisition functions under the background of "equal enrollment for public and private schools", and there is a "threshold effect". Medium-level social capital provides implicit information such as school running quality, enrollment tendency and policy implementation differences through extensive social networks, reducing decision-making uncertainty; families with ultra-high-level social capital transform traditional relationship operation into long-term planning (such as school-district housing purchase), cross-school information network construction, accurate lottery participation and other strategies to maintain strong educational choice rights.

The core theoretical finding is that the mediating role of parental educational expectations is verified: family capital not only directly acts on school choice behavior but also indirectly drives school choice actions by improving parents' educational expectations. The three types of capital have different transformation paths: economic capital provides material support and risk tolerance space; cultural capital endows high educational expectations with value rationality and cognitive feasibility; social capital strengthens the reality and urgency of expectations through successful role models and information reference in social networks. The three types of capital and educational expectations together form a complete mechanism, revealing the deep logic of family capital affecting school choice behavior.

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5.2. Policy recommendations

Firstly, policy optimization to strengthen equity orientation and capital constraint adaptation. On the one hand, optimize the policy details of "equal enrollment for public and private schools", strengthen enrollment transparency, establish a lottery result publicity and appeal mechanism, clarify the dynamic adjustment rules of school district division, and curb the behavior of ultra-high-level social capital to avoid policy constraints through implicit operations. On the other hand, in view of the hard constraints of economic capital, establish a cost-sharing mechanism for private education, reduce the tuition threshold of high-quality private schools through financial subsidies, scholarships and other means, and standardize the transaction and pricing of school-district housing to avoid housing premium intensifying the differentiation of educational opportunities.

Secondly, resource balance to solve the root cause of unbalanced supply of high-quality education. First, promote the standardized construction of the teaching staff, establish a cross-regional and inter-school teacher mobility mechanism, and guide high-quality teachers to flow to weak schools. Second, deepen the reform of group-based school running and school district management, and promote resource sharing, curriculum co-construction and cultural integration between high-quality schools and weak schools. Third, optimize the spatial layout of educational resources, rationally plan the distribution of public schools in combination with population mobility trends, and increase financial investment in areas with weak educational resources.

Thirdly, parental guidance to build a rational educational expectation and cognitive system. First, build a public welfare education information service platform to systematically interpret policy details such as "equal enrollment for public and private schools", and disclose core information such as school running quality, enrollment process and teacher allocation of various schools to reduce the information acquisition threshold for families with low cultural capital. Second, carry out family education guidance services to guide parents to establish a scientific outlook on education and avoid excessive school choice competition caused by blindly raising educational expectations. Third, give play to the bridge role of communities and schools, spread the concept of diversified talent development, and promote the transformation of school choice behavior from "resource pursuit" to "adaptable choice".

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