

The Impact of Exam-Oriented Education on Adolescent Mental Health in Contemporary China

Chenxuan Xiong^{1,a,*}

¹Ready Global Academy, Columbus, The United States

a. chousen0135@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, as the competition for entrance exams has intensified, an increasing number of Chinese teenagers have begun to experience psychological problems. However, these psychological problems are neither properly recognized nor effectively treated and guided. In China, the exam-oriented educational model is considered the primary factor contributing to psychological issues among adolescents. This paper focuses on studying what psychological problems China's exam-oriented education has led to the emergence of teenagers, and how China's exam-oriented education has led to these problems. The psychological issues among Chinese adolescents due to exam-oriented education manifest as stress, anxiety, and other related concerns. The study identifies score primacy and intense competition as key factors exacerbating these mental challenges. Furthermore, it critiques the teacher-centered approach that undermines student motivation and self-esteem. Finally, given the drawbacks of China's exam-oriented education, the paper offers suggestions, including improving the assessment system, providing economic support, taking the initiative to change the mindset, and effectively using social media. This study underscores the necessity for ongoing, pragmatic changes aimed at swiftly alleviating the psychological burdens experienced by adolescents. By advocating for continuous improvement, the research contributes to the discourse on educational reform and its implications for youth mental health.

Keywords: Exam-Oriented Education, Mental Health, Chinese Teenagers.

1. Introduction

In the education of Chinese adolescents, exam-oriented education still plays a dominant role, while the coverage of quality education remains relatively limited. To be more specific, exams begin as early as primary school and continue through graduation from high school. Most public schools adhere to the nine-year compulsory education system, under which high school and university entrance examinations are determined by a single large-scale collective test: the Zhongkao and Gaokao. Recognized as China's National College Entrance Examination, the Gaokao is a high-stakes exam that greatly influences students' academic trajectories and career opportunities [1]. Nevertheless, such an important test only grades students by the number of questions they answered correctly. Students' regular classroom performance, semester grades; more importantly, personal interests and critical thinking are not included in the scope of these two examinations (except for some tests specialized for art and sports). Under this policy, achieving high scores is the most important task for all students, and any other activities are considered unnecessary. For example,

students are not allowed to have long hair or wear their own clothes because schools believe this will distract them from studying; teachers also do not allow boys and girls to develop relationships because they say it will affect their exam scores. When all students are required to focus only on academic study, everyone can master the knowledge in the textbooks. However, mastering all the knowledge renders the Zhongkao and the Gaokao meaningless because everyone gets high scores and cannot be ranked based on grades. Consequently, to distinguish individuals with different scores, an increasing number of knowledge points are added, escalating the difficulty of the exams. Originally, students were already suffering because they were permitted to focus solely on exams. Facing increasingly difficult questions, they need to put in more effort to keep pace with the difficulty. And the questions will become even more difficult, creating a cycle that intensifies the already fierce competition. The term “Nei Juan” best describes this competition behavior. For example, Half of the students engage in additional tutoring to enhance their rank. However, the remainder must strive to catch up with their advancing peers when they realize they are falling behind. Ultimately, everyone locks in the same rank, yet each student is burdened with an overload of study [2].

In summary, the Gaokao, as the main form of Chinese-style exam-oriented education, attracts tens of thousands of students every year. The competition is so fierce that every time a student misses a point, their ranking drops by a thousand or even ten thousand places. Therefore, students can only attempt to achieve good grades by consistently taking internal examinations. They have no other alternative because every point in the Gaokao determines whether a student will gain admission to their ideal college. For teenagers aged 17 or 18, this kind of pressure is unimaginable. Almost every student will experience some degree of psychological problems, ranging from minor to severe. In some key high schools, depression and pre-exam anxiety are common, and it is not uncommon for students to show self-harm or suicidal tendencies.

Although recent policies have continuously promoted quality-oriented education, the effect has been minimal. This is primarily because high school and university admission is entirely based on the student’s scores. As a high-stakes, high-pressure event, the Gaokao greatly impacts students’ mental health. In such a high-pressure environment with abnormal assessment standards, students find it challenging to cope with the difficulty of their studies, the pressure of competition, and the suppression of their emotions. Consequently, a large number of students have developed mental problems, including depression and suicidal tendencies. Therefore, the psychological issues among Chinese teenagers caused by exam-oriented education need to be taken seriously.

This study is of great significance both theoretically and practically. Firstly, it focuses on adolescents, a group particularly prone to psychological distress, and emphasizes the necessity of psychological education for adolescents, which is crucial for their comprehensive development. Secondly, the negative impact of exam-oriented education on the mental health of Chinese adolescents is becoming increasingly severe. However, there is a lack of literature on the relationship between exam-oriented education and the mental health of Chinese adolescents. Given that China’s exam-oriented education has unique contexts and characteristics, theories on global adolescent mental health often fail to adequately analyze this issue among Chinese adolescents. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the impact based on the characteristics of China’s exam-oriented education. Finally, by examining some of the root causes of mental health issues among Chinese adolescents, this study not only advocates for active intervention in adolescent mental health and proposes feasible suggestions but also reveals the negative impact of exam-oriented education, contributing to its further reform.

2. Problem Description

2.1. Exam-Oriented Education Definition

Compared to liberal education, which is characterized by continuous interaction with the greatest minds, in exam-oriented education, there is only one correct answer, and innovative answers are not allowed. Any answer that deviates from the standard is regarded as wrong. This may not be so obvious in science exams, but it is particularly prominent in liberal arts exams. Therefore, teachers do not encourage students to solve problems based on their own ideas. Instead, they ask students to follow the thinking and language of the standard answers and minimize the use of their own language, even if some of their ideas are correct. Liberal education focuses on the success and happiness of students' lives, while exam-oriented education emphasizes cramming and teaching methods that push students toward standardization, ensuring short-term academic success [3]. This approach, however, can lead to significant psychological issues among students, including anxiety, depression, and a lack of self-confidence.

Some other countries also implement exam-oriented education. The Malaysian education system has long revolved around assessing students through exams. Candidates from all levels of the secondary school must pass different forms of examination in order to gain access to the next level of study. However, students in Malaysia's assessment-oriented system can learn more and achieve more positive outcomes. Finally, the researchers found that both exam-oriented and liberal education play important roles in Malaysia's education system [4]. Therefore, unlike China's exam-oriented education, Malaysia's education system helps create a better learning environment for students. Statistical evidence shows that the number of Malaysian students suffering from psychological problems is much lower than that of Chinese students.

2.2. Adolescent Psychological Challenges

Chinese exam-oriented education has led to many teenagers developing psychological problems, which are mainly reflected in both academic performance and daily life. Firstly, the pressure of intense competition causes their performance to stagnate or even decline. This induces a sense of physical and mental exhaustion, prompting self-doubt. Gradually, anxiety sets in. Consequently, many choose to cheat in exams, negatively impacting students' personal credibility and academic norms. Chinese high school students face an excessive amount of daily homework, and the difficulty of which is beyond the ability of students. Thus, to pass exams, students start cheating, a behavior that persists through middle school, college, and into future employment [5]. Furthermore, due to city-wide or even province-wide unified examinations, classmates are regarded as competitors. This makes everyone selfish, and students no longer want to share what they have learned with others. Schools are no longer places for sharing knowledge and mutual progress.

Secondly, in daily life, parental pressure also makes teenagers suffer. Scenes of teenagers arguing with their parents over grades are too common in China. Parents often fail to understand the hardships their children face at school or the frustration of not being permitted individuality. Endless arguments often lead to a tense relationship between children and parents even when they become adults, without any relief. Adolescents, at a pivotal growth stage, undergo significant physical and mental changes. Unable to withstand the dual pressures of school and home life, they may develop distorted values. Some may feel that life has lost its meaning and choose suicide or self-harm to seek relief, while others may turn to criminal behavior as a means of venting their anger. Even students who survive the Gaokao and enter university may not be emotionally mature enough to handle college-level work due to the psychological and personality development defects, self-hatred, and lack of other abilities that stem from exam-oriented education.

2.3. Consequences of Exam-Oriented Practices

Students with a fixed mindset tend to believe that abilities are fixed and immutable. In an educational system that emphasizes grades and rankings, this belief can be reinforced, leading to anxiety, stress, and fear of failure [6]. The core of Chinese education, exam-oriented education, has two significant features: the supremacy of scores and intense competition. Both have contributed to the current situation of excessive competition in Chinese education. Teachers and parents, who are involved in the exam-oriented education system, may also be contributing to the psychological problems of Chinese adolescents.

2.3.1. Score Primacy

In the case of the Gaokao, students take seven subjects, which is common in many countries. However, many courses are designed specifically for testing, such as English. Since the Gaokao is a written exam, the format of the questions is mainly focused on reading and writing. Therefore, in the high school curriculum, teachers and students pay a lot of attention to vocabulary and grammar but have very little practice in speaking and listening. As a result, students with a high reading vocabulary are often unable to speak at a level sufficient for daily communication. This is because Confucianism, an educational model that has profoundly influenced Chinese education for thousands of years, sees the teacher as the owner of knowledge. Students should not ask teachers questions, and teachers should not engage in debates or role-playing with students, because it is considered a violation of the teacher's dignity [7]. This kind of deviation from the essence of learning makes students feel troubled, disappointed, and helpless and exacerbates their weariness of learning. This has also resulted in the current situation in China, where the penetration rate of English is very high, but not everyone who has been educated in English has mastered the basic spoken language ability. At the same time, adolescents may experience psychological issues such as frustration and high levels of stress during the process of learning English to improve their Gaokao scores, only to find themselves unable to use it effectively afterward.

2.3.2. Fierce Competition

The Gaokao, typically serving as the provincial unified examination, is administered in Chinese provinces with populations in the tens of millions. Despite this vast base, a single examination determines the students' three-year academic outcomes and their future life trajectories. This kind of pressure is difficult for adults to bear, let alone a mentally immature high school student. Even if some students are not anxious, the intensified competition, known as "Nei Juan", can lead them to sacrifice time that would otherwise be spent on hobbies and rest. Chinese students are not merely rule-abiding nerds, they also seek the possibility of personalized answers. Regrettably, both the system and the teachers tend to suppress such behavior, fostering a depressive mood among students. This mood is not only reflected in individuals but also becomes an atmosphere that persists into future work and life, affecting society. Some students may seek moral support, but this need is also discouraged. Students view others as competitors and become indifferent in their interactions. Students with good grades will crowd out students with poor grades, even turning close friends into enemies because of the comparison of grades. Parents who do not understand their children's ideas may not communicate with their children effectively, and some of their ideas may not align with the current educational environment. These factors can become the fuse of Chinese youth's psychological problems, potentially detonating their fragile mental states at any time.

2.3.3. Teacher-Centered Approach

In exam-oriented education, teachers play a crucial role. Their main task is to convey information to students, who can only passively acquire knowledge [8]. However, passively receiving knowledge can diminish students' thirst for knowledge and thus reduce their interest in education. Teachers are not inclined to encourage students to delve deeply into knowledge, as it is far less efficient to thoroughly understand every point than simply to memorize it. An educational system that restricts students' choices and prioritizes grades can undermine student motivation, leading to further demotivation and increased anxiety. Psychologically, a teacher-centered approach may affect students' self-esteem.

3. Suggestions

Cultivating students to break free from the bondage of exam-oriented education should meet the following requirements: First, establishing an equal teacher-student relationship. This can cultivate students' ability to think independently and their critical spirit. Second, giving up outdated teaching methods, such as cramming education, to liberate students' initiative and creativity and to stimulate their enthusiasm for learning. Therefore, reform should focus on improving the system in four key areas: systemic reforms, economic support, social environment, and social media influence, in order to meet the requirements.

3.1. Assessment System Enhancement

In terms of the systemic reforms, the evaluation system needs to be improved. Specifically, the previous system that relied solely on exams for university admissions should be abandoned. Instead, the new system should incorporate assessments of students' daily performance and classroom behavior. This approach will not only reduce the pressure students face from large exams determining their fate but also encourage students to improve the quality of their daily assignments and have a deeper understanding of their academic learning. The new system will help students develop a correct learning attitude and experience the joy of learning, rather than spending most of their time focusing on exams. This will also make exam results more objective, as a single exam cannot fully reflect a student's academic abilities and may demotivate students who perform well in daily learning but fail to perform well during exams.

Additionally, there is a demand to expand the quality and quantity of subjects in the course schedule. In Chinese public high schools, students are required to take six subjects. However, these subjects do not include non-academic subjects such as drama and arts. Therefore, students spend the entire day studying academic subjects with textbooks. Subjects like physics and chemistry often contain complex and abstract concepts. If students study these complex subjects intensively all day, they will feel exhausted. Even though there are physical education classes in high schools, schools often do not prioritize the development of students' physical fitness. Some schools even reduce the time allocated for physical education to focus on subjects that will be tested. Therefore, policies should include non-academic subjects in the examination system and provide funding for the development of non-academic courses, encouraging schools to recruit excellent teachers. With support in both funding and policies, students are more willing to engage in non-academic courses, which will help them discover interests outside of academics, relax their minds, and reduce the chances of developing psychological problems.

Moreover, policies should also regulate the self-management rights of schools. Students' freedoms are often excessively controlled, and the government tends to overlook schools' overreach. For instance, the government should supervise whether school rules violate human rights, such as prohibiting physical contact between boys and girls or mandating that students wear uniforms instead

of dressing as they wish. If students are not allowed to interact with other people from different sex, it may create an oppressive atmosphere that could lead to psychological issues. These rules are aimed at benefiting students' academic progress, but they overlook the feelings of adolescents who are physically and emotionally developing. Unfortunately, the government seems to ignore this. Another field in which the government neglects is the implementation of psychological courses in schools. Although some public high schools have already introduced psychological courses, they are inefficient. Teachers in these courses are not able to resolve students' issues. Gradually, students become reluctant to share their inner thoughts. When students keep everything bottled up inside, they are more likely to develop depression.

3.2. Providing Economic Support

In terms of economic support, many students who are facing the Gaokao also place a significant financial burden on their parents. As parents grow older, they not only have to work harder than their younger peers, but they also need to plan their children's future. This is particularly evident in low-income families, where children are not contributing to the family's income. This situation inadvertently creates additional pressure on the child. Once the results of the Gaokao are out, they can lead to emotional breakdowns among poor students who have no other options. Therefore, policies should not only offer scholarships to students with good academic performance but also provide financial aid to students from low-income families.

Additionally, the government should allocate more funds to teacher training. For example, in Louisiana, many schools receive private, federal, and state funding under the Teacher Incentive Fund. As a result, experienced faculty and administrators from highly selective schools are attracted to other schools, which are often located in less desirable districts or have more challenging student populations. The statewide rollout of funding has also provided job opportunities for students majoring in education. These students now have the opportunity to serve as lead teachers in new schools, while lead teachers are also recruited into administrative leadership positions in these schools [9]. When a large number of outstanding teachers graduate from universities, they can go on to teach in various schools. This helps narrow the gap between different schools and lowers students' anxiety about not being able to attend a good school. In addition, not all students will go to high school or university, so policies should also focus on funding vocational schools to ensure that teachers in these institutions are adequately supported. Once teachers are well paid, they will be more motivated to care for their students, thereby reducing the anxiety caused by the inability to attend a university or high school, as students can graduate with specialized skills to find decent jobs.

3.3. Mindset Transformation Initiation

In terms of society, both parents and schools need to correct the exam-centric mindset, even if the policies are not changed. Relevant departments should work to inform students and parents about alternative ways for further education, such as studying abroad. Some parents in cities would rather spend a bunch of money on their children's high school education, enrolling them in various tutoring institutions, than look for economic ways to study abroad. However, their goal is not to force their children into a painful environment, but rather because they are unaware of the costs and results of studying abroad. This information imbalance may need to be addressed by relevant departments. Additionally, some students are highly talented in arts or sports, but their parents are reluctant to let them pursue breakthroughs simply because of the bias against non-academic courses. Moreover, the change should not come solely from schools, parents also need to provide emotional support to their children. Many parents believe that they have sacrificed so much for the family and that their children should not resist their decisions. They fail to understand the difficulties their children face in their

studies and are unwilling to listen to their teenagers' struggles. In some cases, they excessively emphasize academic learning and neglect their children's talents, leading to depression because children cannot do whatever they want. This process should be mutual: when parents provide proper care for their children, the children will also understand their parents' sacrifices for the family.

3.4. Social Media Utilization

In terms of social media, the rapid development of the internet has made communication between people more accessible. On social media platforms, everyone can share their content. However, when students see other students showing their high scores and prestigious schools online, they may feel inferior. Unfortunately, these "perfect" videos often receive high engagement. When an ordinary student repeatedly sees others' perfection, self-doubt and self-rejection may set in. Therefore, social media platforms should promote positive content that provides proper guidance for young people. When teenagers feel encouraged and supported, they will become more confident and not develop feelings of inferiority.

Social media platforms can also create a special section to provide psychological counseling services for students facing mental health challenges. Online, adolescents' information remains private. Unlike face-to-face conversations, they are more likely to open up. For many with psychological issues, revealing their struggles to others in real life can feel shameful, but the anonymity of the internet makes it easier for them to seek help.

The above suggestions present a reform plan that addresses various difficulties currently faced by China's education system. It must be admitted that in the decades since the resumption of the Gaokao, various policies have emerged to further reform the education system. This seems to send a positive signal, but ineffective policies will only make an already dire situation worse.

Despite many changes in contemporary Chinese education policies, the mental health of teenagers is becoming an increasingly severe problem. Digging deeper, it is not hard to see why these policies failed. Policymakers do not fully realize the source of teenagers' psychological problems, do not adequately realize how much the education system can affect students' psychological conditions, and more importantly, the policies introduced are ineffective or even counterproductive. It is therefore hard to shake the status quo. Liberal education is not necessarily suitable for China's development, so it is undesirable to blindly reject or accept western liberal arts education. At present, the primary goal should be to continuously improve China's education system and change the extremely difficult situation of students. This requires the support of governments, schools, and families. All three are indispensable, and any laziness and incompetence will turn into an obstacle to the healthy growth of students. Therefore, the methods in the article are relatively mild, to ensure that the measures are not counterproductive and at the same time help to solve adolescents' psychological problems to the greatest extent. In the future, these former students will become the core part of society, including government workers, school staff, or parents who once controlled them, as the implementers of reform, they are well aware of the shortcomings of Chinese exam-oriented education. Fortunately, they have the ability to make the right changes that will help young people no longer have psychological problems and have a healthy and happy learning time.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the primary causes of mental health issues among Chinese teenagers, focusing particularly on the negative impact of China's exam-oriented education system. Through detailed analysis, it reveals how this educational model contributes to mental problems among adolescents and how the education system can be improved. The study highlights the detrimental effects of excessive academic pressure on young people's mental well-being, filling a gap in the current

research on the psychological effects of China's exam-oriented education system on teenagers. In addition, the paper offers several constructive suggestions for reform, emphasizing the importance of promoting a more balanced educational system that prioritizes mental health alongside academic performance. The findings emphasize the urgent need for action from the government, families, society, and social media to help address the mental health issues faced by Chinese teenagers due to the exam-oriented education system. These recommendations can serve as valuable references for future policy changes aimed at improving the educational environment and alleviating the mental burdens faced by students.

However, despite the insights provided, this research has some limitations. The scope of the study is limited to analyzing the educational system in China, and future research could expand to include a broader comparison with other educational systems worldwide. Additionally, the focus of this paper has been primarily on the theoretical aspects, and empirical studies would be beneficial to validate the proposed reforms. Future research may also explore new approaches.

In conclusion, while the recommendations proposed in this paper are a step in the right direction, continued research and reform efforts are necessary to ensure that these changes are effectively implemented. By focusing on a balanced, holistic education system that supports both academic and mental development, it is possible to create an environment where students can thrive academically and emotionally, ensuring their overall well-being.

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