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## Factors behind rural student drop-out rates in North China: a qualitative study

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### Abstract:

To promote the development of compulsory education and educational equality in China, Two Exemptions and One Subsidy (TEOS) policy which initially aimed to help students from poor background finish their compulsory education was implemented by Chinese government step by step. This study examined the fact there were students in rural areas still dropping out under the policy of TEOS using a qualitative approach. Interviews were made and information was collected from different perspectives, dropouts, parents as well as teachers. The analysis from this study suggests that it was time to rethink grade retention removed in the revised compulsory education law. Furthermore, programs intended to help low achievers and parents in rural areas is suggested. Ultimately, a comprehensive evaluation should be adopted when assessing students and capabilities of teachers should be built to enhance the teaching in rural areas.

**Key Words:** Dropouts; Policy; Rural areas; Two Exemptions and One Subsidy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Two Exemptions and One Subsidy (TEOS) policy was first put forward by the Chinese government in 2001<sup>2</sup> to enable children from poor families to go to school and promote educational equity. It supports the comprehensive exemption from miscellaneous fees for students in the compulsory education stage (including elementary and junior middle schools), free textbooks and a subsidy of living expenses for boarding students are provided in rural areas for boarding students in the rural areas<sup>3</sup>. Since the inception of the policy in 2001, the Chinese government gradually incorporated more favorable policies for students from the western region of China, rural areas, and urban areas. According to the *Notice of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of the Funds Guarantee Mechanism for Rural Compulsory Education* (2005), students in compulsory education in western rural areas of China would be exempted from miscellaneous fees, with the number of students benefiting from the policy reaching 48.8 million. It also stipulated that students in compulsory education in rural areas of central and eastern regions in China would be exempted from miscellaneous fees in 2007. In 2015, the State Council issued *Notice on Further Perfecting the Funding Guarantee Mechanism for Compulsory Education in Urban and Rural Areas*, which extended TEOS national-wide for students in compulsory education since the spring semester of 2017<sup>4</sup>.

The reasons for the Chinese government to implement TEOS can be various. Firstly, the push for this policy was to support China's objective of nine-year compulsory schooling for all children of school age. By 2001, China achieved the goal of generally popularizing nine-year compulsory education on a national scale as scheduled<sup>5</sup> (Jiang). However, in order to achieve this aim, many rural schools and areas encountered heavy debts totally approximately 50 billion RMB (Zhang, 2004). Another main reason was the high dropout rate in rural areas. A study investigated the drop-out students in 14 provinces and 33 counties and found that 40% of students dropped out of school because of poverty, making poverty one of the main reasons why students dropped out of school (Yuan, 2003). Furthermore, China has experienced remarkable development with GDP growth at an annual rate of 6.7% to 14.23% since 2000<sup>6</sup> (World Bank) and became the world's second-largest economy in 2010<sup>7</sup>, providing the government with more revenue to devote to education. Another factor was the implementation of a new management system "under the leadership of the State Council, in the charge of local

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<sup>2</sup> Implement the "Two Exemptions and One Subsidy" Policy. [http://www.gov.cn/ztlz/fupin/content\\_396672.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ztlz/fupin/content_396672.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Q&A on Student Financial Support Policy in Compulsory Education.

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_zwfw/zwfw\\_fwzt/fwzt\\_zzzcwd/zzzcwd\\_ywjy/201608/t20160817\\_275473.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_zwfw/zwfw_fwzt/fwzt_zzzcwd/zzzcwd_ywjy/201608/t20160817_275473.html)

<sup>4</sup> the State Council: Unifying the Policy of "Two Exemptions and One Subsidy" for Compulsory Education in Urban and Rural Areas <http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2015/1128/c1006-27867112.html>

<sup>5</sup> Motivation of Education Development in China.

[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_2082/zl\\_2018n/2018\\_zl90/201812/t20181210\\_362815.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_2082/zl_2018n/2018_zl90/201812/t20181210_362815.html)

<sup>6</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2017&locations=CN&start=2000>

<sup>7</sup> China Passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/business/global/16yuan.html>

governments, county-centered hierarchical management” in rural compulsory education in 2002<sup>8</sup>, which clarified the responsibilities of governments at all levels and strengthened the leadership and management of compulsory education in rural areas.

The TEOS targeted students from poor families and minorities, as well as disabled students, and resulted in improvements in educational outcomes (Sun & Chang, 2008). It has increased the probability of junior school students to attend school by 6% and achieved good results (Wang, 2009). Overall, the implementation of TEOS has a positive effect on the situation of drop-out students in rural areas and helped slow the drop-out rates due to poverty. However, the gross dropout rate of students in rural junior schools still reached 15.5% in 2013<sup>9</sup> according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Despite the intention of TEOS is to help students finish compulsory education without financial worries, students in rural areas still drop out of school. What are the factors that students in rural areas drop out? While there have been many quantitative studies about dropout students (Su, Liu, Chang), what is missing is a study from different parties such as parents, teachers as well as principals. Hence, the study wanted to go deep into this issue from different perspectives by a qualitative study.

## 2. METHODS

The study was conducted based on interviews with dropout students, teachers, parents, and a principal since all of them are important actors and involved in the problem. By interviewing with these actors, new information is expected to be revealed and deep reasons are expected to be discovered and further analyzed, which provides a different insight into the problem. The interviews were conducted with interviewees at a rural junior school in North China from November 2017 to February 2018.

### 2.1 Participants

First, the definition of rural areas should be clarified. According to the Chinese code, rural area refers to the agricultural area, which has market towns and villages and mainly focuses on the agricultural industry. With the development of industrialization, peasants were attracted to work in urban areas as the per capita cultivated land is only 0.11 hm<sup>2</sup> in China, which is only equivalent to 40% of the world average (Cai, 1997). To better understand the problem why students in rural areas drop out of junior middle school, non-probability sampling was adopted and the school was selected in this study. The small town where the school is located covers an of 104.5 square kilometers, including cultivated land of 52,000 mu (about 3,467 ha) and has a population of 59,300. The scarcity of land resources prompts young and middle-aged laborers to seek opportunities in urban areas. In 2016, as the only town in the county, the area was

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<sup>8</sup> Notice of the General Office of the State Council on Improving the Management System of Rural Compulsory Education. [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content\\_61475.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content_61475.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Only by reducing the dropout rate can the consolidation rate of compulsory education be improved. [http://www.jyb.cn/opinion/pgypl/201703/t20170317\\_698553.html](http://www.jyb.cn/opinion/pgypl/201703/t20170317_698553.html)

selected into the list of 3675 key towns in China considering six items: population reaching a certain scale, obvious location advantages, great potential for economic development, better service function, higher level of planning and management, and strong ability of scientific and technological innovation. Altogether, there are altogether twelve interviewees including six dropout students, three parents, two teachers, and one retired principal. Among the dropouts, three are boys while the other three are girls, all of them had the same age and were in grade 8.

## 2.2 Data collection

The investigator carried out individual interviews with dropout students and one interview with the retired principal from the same school along with one focus group interview with two teachers and the retired principal. The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' homes and notes were made during the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. See the figures below for details. Table 1: Basic information of the interviewed dropout students

Number	Gender	Age	Grade	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation	Father's education	Mother's education
A1	Male	14	8	Migrate to work	housewife	Junior middle school	Elementary school
A2	Female	14	8	Migrate to work	housewife	Junior middle school	Senior high school
A3	Male	14	8	Migrate to work	Stay at home disabled	Junior middle school	Elementary school
A4	Female	14	8	Self-employed	Self-employed	Junior middle school	Junior middle school
A5	Female	14	8	Migrate to work	Migrate to work	Junior middle school	Junior middle school
A6	Male	14	8	Migrate to work	Migrate to work	Junior middle school	Elementary school

Table 2: Basic information of the interviewed teachers

Number	Gender	Position	Degree	subject	Length of teaching(year)
B1	Male	Teacher in charge of a class	Junior college	Geography	21
B2	Female	teacher	Junior college	Math	20
B3	Male	principal	Junior college	PE then math	39

Table 3: basic information of the interviewed parents

Number	Gender	Occupation	Education	Children	Partner's occupation
C1	Male	Migrate to work	Junior middle school	2	Peasant
C2	Female	housewife	Elementary school	2	Migrate to work
C3	Female	housewife	Senior high school	2	Migrate to work

### 2.3 Data analysis

The transcripts were first read to get an overall impression and to be familiar with the data. Next, open coding was used to discover categories, characteristics, and themes in the material, then related themes were further categorized. Each interview was coded using different colors. By the way, similarities and differences in the material between interviews were identified. Some quotes were selected based on how well they illustrated and elucidated the themes and important points identified in the complete material.

### 2.4 Ethics

In the study, all interviewees participated voluntarily and they were informed about the aim of the study and results would be anonymous and the names of the participants were kept separated from the transcripts.

### 3. RESULTS

All of the six students interviewed had dropped out of school when interviewed, among them, two students dropped more than one time, and went back for a semester and then dropped again. All of them dropped at the very beginning of the spring semester after winter vacation, that is to say, the time that students usually chose to drop was grade 8 before the year when an examination would be held to be admitted by senior high school at the end of grade 9. The interview with teachers and principal showed that the intention was not noticed before students' drop-out. Three themes were identified factors promoting the drop-out: (1) incompetent parents; (2) over work-loaded teachers and the intense teacher-student relation; (3) lost students.

#### 3.1 Incompetent parents

It is noticeable that parents (either father or both) in the rural area usually would migrate to work in urban cities to make a living, leaving their children at home with relatives or friends, generally with grandparents. Even though they stayed at home, as parents or grandparents, they could not well perform the role of helping their child with study. As shown in the above table, the highest educational level of their parents interviewed was senior high school, none of the interviewee's parents received higher education. What they do most was to take care of their children's life and when it comes to study and tutoring, they became incompetent. A parent interviewed when first heard her child's intention to drop out decided to resign from work and specially rent an apartment near the school in order to take care of her children's study and life. Before this big move, she and her husband both migrated to work in other places. When asked whether or not she would help her child with homework, she expressed by saying:

*"No, I want to help but have no idea how to help her. It is also my fault, I do not know how to educate my child and I do not know how to do with my child's study."*

However, she tried to spend money on tutoring agencies to help improve her child's academic achievement, only finding out that the agency just provided a place for students to do homework with no tutoring. Many agencies do the same thing in rural areas and those agencies providing tutoring usually cost a lot, which is beyond their financial capacity. A father who also migrates to work in other places all year around punched him heavily when his child refused to go back to school. He explained:

*"I do not allow him to give up schooling, what I ask him is just stay at school until the time he graduates so that he can have a diploma of junior school".*

From the interviews with parents, it is clear that either both parents of dropouts or one of them would leave to work in urban areas to make a living while their children remained at home with relatives or family friends. These parents usually seldom come back home all year round, 28.2% of left-behind children could not see their parents more than a year (Duan, 2014) and do not know how to educate their children. Parents especially fathers tried to persuade their children to go to school again even by force but always failed. In front of their drop-out child,

parents usually are strong in will but weak in how to get them back to school. They have the intention but not ways to help with their children's study because of their poor educational background.

### 3.2 The intense teacher-student relation

When teachers were asked whether they knew in advance some students would drop out before they did not show up, the reply was no and they explained that:

*“they usually behave normal and sometimes I felt surprised when the students do not show up again especially at the beginning of a new semester.”*

As is known, it is not only the teacher's responsibility to teach students, but also the parents' duty to educate their children. In the teachers' opinion, this role is largely ignored by their parents in rural areas. Instead, they thought that their parents focus on migrating to work and making a living, giving little care about the education of their children. Some parents were accused of not caring about their children's education and their lack of educational responsibility. Another teacher expressed by saying:

*“A parent-teacher meeting would be held at school every semester, and some parents would not show up at the meeting for all sorts of reasons.”*

The dropout students interviewed were also low achievers in class. There are no less than 50 students in a class in this junior middle school. It is not easy for teachers to take care of every student. It is not deniable that low achievers are not favored in class, and one interviewee said: “we were allowed to sleep in class so long as we do not interrupt the teaching.”

In addition, in the rural junior school, the “full-close” management was adopted, which arouses strong dissatisfaction from students and parents. An interviewee expressed her feeling about school was “like being confined in prison, there is no freedom at all”. Another interviewee added that:

*“I was late for class from time to time and I was once slapped in the face because of my lateness again by my teacher in charge of the class.”*

She told her parents about what had happened and at first, her mother intended to have a talk with the teacher but stopped by her father, saying that “why the teacher does not slap other students? It is our child to blame”. The talk sank without trace, which could to some extent, illustrate the relation between parents and teachers who are highly respected in this area. The interviewee added the teacher who slapped her was retaliated by a group of students because he once punished a student heavily for misbehaviors.

### 3.3 Lost students

The retired principal said that now students did not drop out because of poverty, they dropped out voluntarily instead. The frequently reply given by the drop-out interviewees was that school was boring. One interviewee told her daily schedule which was that they would get up early

and go to school at 5:40 am, and school was over around 10 pm. Students almost spent the whole day at school. When it requires that they should do some reading in the early morning, they just fell asleep on their desks instead. When asked about how many students fell asleep. She said: "half of the students, generally after the teacher left as we are in average class and our teacher is not so strict." (there are two key classes and four average classes in her grade).

When it comes to the subjects, there are Chinese, math, English, ideology and morality, geography, physics, chemistry, music, PE as well as art taught in this school. PE, music, and art would be replaced when exams were coming, and these classes would be canceled in the ninth grade to save time for other subjects to improve students' academic achievement. Students have no choice even if they are not interested in the courses. Gradually they were unwilling to learn and schooling is not attractive for them. Students who voluntarily dropped out of the school generally believe that reading is useless, or that reading is hopeless, believing that the curriculum and classroom teaching are to blame. (Lu, 2009) The interviewee (A2) expressed her frustration by saying:

*"I could not see hope and I know that is it even if I continue to stay at school, it is hard for me to get admitted by high school, there was nothing to do but sleep in class because we could not understand what the teacher was teaching."*

Peer influence is also a factor to one's decision. "all my friends dropped out of school and I also want to", at last, the interviewee(A3) did drop out. A4 said that "there was a special feeling of envy in my heart when learning they did not have to go back to school".

In China, it is illegal to employ labor under 16, these dropouts stayed at home, with only one started off as an apprentice to a hairdresser. A3 said he spent most of his time playing computer and mobile games. Among the dropouts, nine-tenths of boys would play games; as for girls, they would like to WeChat, QQ (social media) and take photos. In this rural junior school, it is banned for students from phones and once discovered, the phone would be confiscated and only returned at the end of the week or when their parents were called. A teacher (B2) expressed that there was a male student who was playing games in class and his phone was confiscated and a few days later the student was caught again playing games with a new phone.

In fact, phones are cheap (less than 100 dollars) and easy to access in rural areas, the question is most of them use their phones for fun rather than for improving their studies and some dropouts were even addicted to mobile games. Both parents interviewed tried to do some phone control to their child but failed to direct them to use phones wisely as many of parents in rural areas do not know how to use the new technology.

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

The dropouts would be visited by his or her classmates and teachers to talk them into returning to school, which, which sometimes helped. Some of them would go back to school and would drop out again over a period of time or some dropouts were indifferent to the visits. As learning



is not attractive anymore, these dropouts fall into a vicious circle. How to help students from dropping out, based on the study, the recommendations are as follows:

#### **4.1 Recovery of Grade Retention**

Through interviews with dropouts, teachers, parents, as well as the retired principal of a rural junior school, it seems that every actor had a saying. How to reduce the high rate of dropout in rural areas? One of the main reasons is students could not follow the teaching. Hence, this study suggested the recovery of grade retention in compulsory education. According to the compulsory law and other regulations<sup>1</sup>, retention is not allowed and all of the students will be promoted regardless of their academic performance. It is obvious that retention has certain drawbacks. On one hand, it would destroy the self-esteem of repeaters (Huang, 1998), on the other hand, it occupies educational resources, which is not conducive to the popularization of compulsory education (Chen, 2013)). However, a few students would fall behind in their new grade and gradually some of them lose the interest of learning and probably end up dropping out of school. Repeating could be considered as the most efficient way to help those low achievers in rural areas as it is hard for parents to seek help out of school.

In 2017, the total national investment in education was 4256.201 billion yuan, an increase of 9.45% over 2016, and the average expenditure per student in junior middle schools around the country was 14,641.15 yuan, among which the rural area was 13,447.08 yuan, an increase of 7.77% over the previous year<sup>2</sup>. China government has the capability to allow low achievers to repeat. In addition, the psychological problems of repeaters can be counseled by counselors. It is time to recover grade retention in compulsory education in rural areas.

#### **4.2 Programs introduced to help low achievers**

Great improvements had been made in the popularization of compulsory education in China, especially the implementation of the TEOS policy step by step, which helps millions of children avoid dropping out of school because of poverty. According to Lowi, this policy can be a distributive policy by the central government of China to bestow privileges to students in rural areas in order to promote education equity. However, this policy alone is not enough. How to prevent those low achievers from dropping out of school is still a big problem. Here suggests that a new program intended to help low achievers to improve their performance should be introduced by the national government.

In addition, some schools pursue the exam-oriented educational mode and the one-sided pursuit of enrollment rate results in some students' weariness of study and dropping out of school because of the hopelessness of enrollment in high school (Tao, 2007). As the aim is to help every student finish their compulsory education which is the basis to receive further education

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.wh.gov.cn/2018wh/hdjl/lxgs/lxgs/201901/t20190121\\_249753.html](http://www.wh.gov.cn/2018wh/hdjl/lxgs/lxgs/201901/t20190121_249753.html)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance, Statistics on the Implementation of National Education Funds in 2017 [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A05/s3040/201810/t20181012\\_351301.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A05/s3040/201810/t20181012_351301.html)

or have a job. As not only the quantity of education but also the quality of education should be considered, to promote educational equity, programs which help low achievers should be launched in rural areas.

### **4.3 Strengthening parents' role**

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistic (NBS), the number of migrant workers reached 286,52 million in 2017<sup>3</sup>. There were 6,97million left-behind children in rural areas around the country in 2018<sup>4</sup>. It is not deniable that parents play an essential role in their children's growth. The absence of a father or both parents had a negative effect on educational attainment and achievement of their children (McKenzie, 2011& Hanson, 2002). One answer to this problem would be that children migrate together with their parents. This requires children of migrants should be inclusive in urban schools. Even though students of migrants receive education in urban areas, they have to go back to attend the college entrance examination because of the residential system. Therefore, more opportunities are expected to be created for these students.

To educate a kid is not one actor's job, it is the responsibility of all actors. Another way is to create a parent-teacher committee and give full play to the role of the parent-teacher committee. It is noticeable that the communication between parents and teachers is inadequate in rural areas. Hence, programs, lectures, and conferences should be introduced to strengthen the cooperation between different actors.

### **4.4 Changing the evaluation system and capacity building of teachers**

The reasons students in rural areas drop out of school are complicated, one of which is the exam-oriented educational mode. This existing evaluation system drives most of the teachers to focus on the achievements of students and evaluate students based on their academic achievements, leading to the neglect of low achievers. Only if the evaluation system is diversified, can we consider other essential ability of students such as rethinking ability, the spirit of cooperation, critical thinking ability as well as other abilities which are not easily tested by scores.

Furthermore, there was a huge gap in the quality of teachers between cities and rural areas and the gap was widening (Yuan, 2005). As to the intense relation between teachers and students in rural areas, the first thing that should be done is to build a student-oriented management system and build the capacity of teachers. According to Fowler,

Capacity building is well suited to situations in which the currently employed staff and existing institutions cannot carry out desired policies because they are incapable of doing so. This incapacity may result from insufficient training, a lack of

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<sup>3</sup> Survey report on migrant workers in 2017 [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427\\_1596389.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427_1596389.html)

<sup>4</sup> Data released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs show that there are more than 20% fewer left-behind children in rural areas. [http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-11/02/content\\_5336714.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-11/02/content_5336714.htm)

appropriate experience, inadequate equipment, or some use of capacity building.  
(p253)

Therefore, the key to solving the problem of students dropping out of school is to build the capabilities of teachers and enhance the quality of teachers and improve their awareness and receive new ideas of teaching in rural areas. Only in this way, can the problem of students dropping out of school in rural areas be solved.

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