High school students' choices for out-of-school English learning in Mainland China: A case study in Chengdu

by

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Abstract

Private tutoring has historically served as a crucial out-of-school learning resource for families seeking educational advantages, particularly in Confucian-heritage regions such as Mainland China. In July 2021, the Chinese government implemented the Double Reduction policy (DRP) to radically restrict excessive private tutoring activities, aiming to alleviate students' academic pressure and address the persistent issue of educational inequality. As a core subject in the Chinese educational system, English significantly determines one's educational trajectory, making English private tutoring (EPT) highly sought after. The DRP has severely disrupted EPT, potentially driving students toward other forms of out-of-school English learning resources. Drawing on Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which is increasingly utilized to explain educational inequality at educational transition points, this study endeavors to address a critical research gap by examining students' out-of-school English learning choices under the DRP and evaluating the policy's effectiveness in mitigating educational inequality. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study collected quantitative data from 1,287 Grade-12 students via questionnaires and qualitative data from 36 students through semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate that while the DRP has reduced tangible inequalities in access to private tutoring in the marketplace, unobservable factors rooted in students' social origins continue to perpetuate intangible educational disparities, undermining the policy's intended outcomes. This study offers practical insights for policymakers and advances theoretical understanding of educational inequality, highlighting the constraints of structural reforms in resolving entrenched inequities.

Keywords: out-of-school learning, English private tutoring, Double Reduction policy

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Acknowledgments

As I pen these final words, a myriad of emotions surges within me.

It is April in Hong Kong when nature awakens in vernal splendor. Four years ago, during a similarly crisp early spring, I received my PhD offer at my aunt's home. While I had long anticipated this moment of composing my dissertation acknowledgments, now that it has arrived, I find myself overwhelmed by complex emotions and hesitant where to begin. Though these four years seem fleeting in retrospect, they have been enriched by countless acts of kindness that remain etched in my heart.

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thoughtful gift you made for me at the departmental conference in July 2024. I would also express my gratitude to Dr. Xu Huixuan for always being there to talk to me like a friend. Every time I saw you, I felt a warm connection; you offered me unconditional care and academic support, making me feel at home in Hong Kong. I am fortunate that my first book chapter was published in the book you edited, which is a symbol of our friendship.

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You once told me: “When we fully mourn the past, our pain gradually softens into life’s profound tenderness – and from this very softness emerges extraordinary power for growth”. I am finally feeling this resilient yet gentle strength now, making me become fearless yet calm and composed. Thank you for selflessly illuminating the path ahead of me in the darkness, and now I have the ability and courage to venture forth on my own. In December last year, I wrote in my diary: “I have forgiven everything from the past and let go of all my sadness, grudge, regret, and pain. True forgiveness happens naturally, and it is never directed outward but inward. In forgiving myself, I have also received life’s absolution”. Thank you, Ms. Chen Jing. May your days be filled with spring’s warmth and sunlight’s gentleness.

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twin sister. I am so lucky to have you by my side for 28 years; you have been my closest companion and dearest friend since childhood. May your life overflow with happiness and success. I love you all.

Thanks to my beloved Alfie. The previous version of my acknowledgment wrote last June: “Thank you for completing my soul”. I once thought my soul was only half and that only your love could make it whole. Yet now I realize that my soul has always been whole, requiring no external completion. At this moment, I want to thank you in a different way: “Thank you for helping me recognize my innate wholeness”.

Our love teaches me that true love demands nothing – it gives freely, accepts unconditionally, and blesses sincerely, without any wanting, control, or expectation. Thank you, and thanks for our love, for helping me understand this. My heart has since become gentle and steadfast. Falling in love with you remains my life’s most authentic and regretless choice. Like how I have told you before, I love you evermore, truly and most ardently.

I wish to express my gratitude to the person who has occupied an irreplaceable place in my heart for many years. Even now, I can vividly recall the serendipity of our first encounter eight years ago – on an early summer day when I was twenty years old. That moment remains etched in my memory, as beautiful and romantic as the day it unfolded. Though time has passed, those cherished memories continue to flourish in my thoughts, untouched and undimmed by the years.

The year I completed my undergraduate studies, I read the book “Call Me by Your

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Name". What was written in the book was exactly what I had been longing to express to you. Everything between us remains alive in my heart. As the book romantically states, "I remember everything". At last, looking back on that past no longer fills me with sorrow or pain but with only love and gratitude. And in that moment, I knew I had gained the courage to let go and say goodbye. Thank you for inspiring me to venture boldly into the world, to embrace my true self, and to dream crazy. Even though you are no longer by my side, my sincerest wish remains unchanged: may you find boundless happiness. That, above all else, is what I will always desire for you.

In the end, my highest and most profound gratitude extends to this doctoral journey and life itself. These four years have humbled me, dissolving my arrogance into awe. Though graduating, I feel but a novice before life's vastness. I allow myself to reclaim the pure innocence and ignorance of a child, embarking on the next journey of my life with reverence, passion, and the most genuine desire for knowledge.

Four years ago, I aspired to proudly call myself "Dr." rather than "Miss" or "Mrs". Today, writing these words, I simply declare: I have no title – I am only myself. Stripped of identities, returning to the unadorned essence of being. At this moment, all I can hear is my soul whispering: "I am not experiencing my life, but instead only experiencing myself".

Rainy day, 5th April, 2025

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List of Abbreviations

AME	average marginal effect
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network
DRP	Double Reduction policy
EPT	English private tutoring
ESCS	Economic, Social, and Cultural status
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
KHB	Karlson, Holm, and Breen
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
MUN	Model United Nations
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RCT	Rational Choice Theory
RRA	Relative risk aversion
RQ	Research question
SES	Socioeconomic status
TEDx	Technology, Entertainment, Design Talks
VOA	Voice of America English News

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the topic

This chapter introduces the topic. First, I describe the research context. Then, I discuss the general background of private tutoring in China regarding its scale, intensity, and subjects. Also, I talk about the social problems brought about by private tutoring and then introduce the Double Reduction policy (DRP). Lastly, I specify the significance of the study.

1.2 The research context

There are two primary ways to achieve successful language learning: formal school-based language learning and out-of-school language learning (Richards, 2015). The latter typically serves to complement and enhance school-based education. Chinese society has been deeply influenced by Confucian heritage culture and values, which emphasizes elitism, academic diligence, and meritocratic achievement (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Feng, 2021). Therefore, out-of-school learning has become an instrumental means for academic advancement and upward social mobility through competitive examinations.

In China, the educational system consists of compulsory and non-compulsory education stages. The compulsory education stage comprises six-year primary (i.e., Grades 1 to 6) and three-year middle school education (i.e., Grades 7 to 9). Upon completion, students undertake the High School Entrance Examination (*Zhongkao*) to progress into high school. High school education belongs to the non-compulsory education stage and lasts for three years (i.e., Grades 10 to 12), after which, students take the College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*) to

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enter university. *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao* are the two most vital watersheds for Chinese students that determine students' educational trajectories, consequently generating substantial demand for out-of-school education, particularly private tutoring, during educational transitional points (i.e., Grade 9 and Grade 12). Many Chinese parents invest heavily in private tutoring to secure admission to key high schools and prestigious universities (Zhang & Bray, 2017).

Such substantial investment in private tutoring by parents can be considered a strategic educational decision to enhance social status. According to Entrich and Lauterbach (2021), the motive of maintaining the existing social status is core in families' educational decision-making, especially for the middle and upper classes. Hence, privileged families systematically utilize out-of-school learning resources, such as private tutoring, to maintain or even exacerbate the existing educational and class advantages (Bray, 2007; Lynch & Moran, 2006; Matsuoka, 2015; Tsiplakides, 2018). As Zwier et al. (2020, p. 414) noted, with educational expansion promoting social mobility, parents from higher social origins must take a more active role in their children's educational careers to sustain social boundaries. Although some schools have implemented the equalization policy, such as prohibiting the classification of students into different classes based on academic abilities, to equalize learning opportunities, many parents still take advantage of private tutoring to counterbalance the effects of school equalization policies (Zhang, 2018).

However, the rapid growth of private tutoring has precipitated significant societal concerns,

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including exacerbated educational inequalities, heightened academic stress, and adverse impacts on children's healthy growth (Yu et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the present study has examined China's private tutoring phenomenon, contextualizing its development and analyzing its associated challenges.

1.3 Private tutoring in China

Private tutoring is gaining popularity throughout the world (Bray, 2009; Kim & Jung, 2021). This phenomenon has historically been prominent in East Asia, particularly in Japan and South Korea, which had been largely influenced by Confucian-heritage cultures (Bray, 2023; Bray & Lykins, 2012). Driven by the dynamic market shaped by globalization, neoliberal forces, and the fierce competition for high-stakes examinations (Zhang & Yamato, 2018), private tutoring has spread globally (Liu, 2023). Like many other countries around the world, China "embraced the neoliberal ethos to boost its economic competitiveness in the global market" (Zeng & Yung, 2024, p. 2), facilitating the rapid growth of private tutoring from the 1990s onward (Wang & Hamid, 2024; Zhang, 2020). Although shadow education emerged relatively late in China, it expanded rapidly, eventually matching and even exceeding the scale and sophistication of century-old shadow education systems in other countries like Japan and South Korea within merely three decades (Zhang, 2022).

The 2017 China Institute for Educational Finance Research-Household Survey report (CIEFR-HS) showed that the overall participation rate of academic private tutoring was 43.7% at the middle school level and 48.2% at the high school level. This enrollment rate

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could be considered exceptionally high in the northeast, with 67.8% at the middle school level and 48.2% at the high school level (Wei, 2018). Similarly, Xue and Ding (2009, p. 40) surveyed 4,772 students in both rural and urban areas, discovering that students' participation rate in private tutoring exceeded 50%, with the highest rate (73.8%) at the primary school level, followed by 65.6% at the middle school level and 53.5% at the high school level. As can be seen, in China, students' participation rate of private tutoring was highest in the compulsory education stage and decreased as the schooling stage rose.

Additionally, within China's educational landscape, Chinese, Mathematics, and English constitute the three core academic subjects and correspondingly dominate the private tutoring market. Empirical research by Li (2016) revealed disproportionate enrollment patterns, with Mathematics (33.7%) and English (31.7%) tutoring significantly surpassing other academic subjects. This trend is further corroborated by official data from the Shanghai Bureau of Statistics (Lu, 2021), which documented particularly high participation rates in English (68.6%), Mathematics (60.6%), and Chinese (41.8%) tutoring across all educational levels. These findings collectively establish English as one of the most prevalent subjects in China's shadow education system.

Scholarly explanations for this phenomenon frequently reference China's Confucian heritage, emphasizing its cultural values of diligence, academic excellence, and social hierarchy (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Feng, 2021; Sun & Braeye, 2012). Within this framework, private tutoring is perceived by many families as a strategic investment for educational advancement and

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upward social mobility. However, Zhang (2020) pointed out that while cultural factors remain salient, socioeconomic determinants – particularly middle-class families' pronounced educational aspirations and strong desires for upward socioeconomic mobility – constitute equally significant drivers of tutoring participation.

The massive enrollment in private tutoring, however, imposes substantial financial burdens on families. Prior research has shown that the costs associated with private tutoring account for almost half of a Chinese family's total education expenses annually (Qu & Xue, 2015; Song & Xue, 2017). This considerable investment in private tutoring is particularly pronounced among urban households, where they invest twenty times more than rural families (Qu & Xue, 2015). The huge expenditure of private tutoring inevitably exerts substantial financial burdens on numerous Chinese families, thereby exacerbating the costs associated with childbirth. Many scholars (e.g., Li et al., 2022; Yuan, 2022) even argued that the exorbitant tutoring costs must be a primary factor in China's declining fertility rates in recent years.

In addition, the prevalence of private tutoring in China operates within – and exacerbates – a broader phenomenon termed "*Neijuan*", commonly referred to as "educational involution" in English (henceforth referred to as educational involution). *Neijuan* emerges from a complex interplay of institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic forces within society, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of competition within zero-sum educational systems. Within this cycle, structural constraints (e.g., high-stakes exams, scarce elite university slots) compel

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participants to intensify investments of time, capital, and effort without achieving commensurate gains in outcomes (Li et al., 2022; Wang & Hamid, 2024). This results in stagnant hierarchical or competitive rankings and diminishing returns on personal efforts (Li, 2023), highlighting the futility of such relentless striving in an environment that fails to yield meaningful rewards. Despite recognizing the detrimental cycle of escalating yet futile investments in education, many parents continue to feel compelled to allocate increasing amounts of time and financial resources to their children's education, particularly in private tutoring, driven by the fear of their children lagging behind as they observe similar actions taken by other parents (Li, 2023; Liu & Bray, 2022). In this context, private tutoring simultaneously manifests systemic academic pressures and amplifies their effects by commodifying competitive advantages, undoubtedly perpetuating the vicious cycle of educational involution.

As can be seen, private tutoring has caused many social and educational problems in China. Over the past several decades, the Chinese government has consecutively promulgated relevant policies and legislation in the hope of addressing these problems, but all delivered little effect (Chen & Miao, 2021; Zhang, 2020). Based on the concept of building a sound ecology for education and promoting the all-round development and healthy growth of students (Liu, 2023; Xue & Li, 2023), the Chinese government launched the most stringent governance of the private tutoring industry through enacting the DRP in 2021, with the policy's intensity and coverage surpassing all policies in the past. The next section introduces the DRP in more detail.

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1.4 The Double Reduction policy

Mainstream and shadow education are two parallel and mutually independent educational systems in Chinese society. While the former adheres to the principles of socialist collectivism (Yang et al., 2024), the latter is a "by-product of neoliberalism" (Hamid et al., 2018, p. 882) characterized by free markets, deregulation, privatization, and reduced government intervention in the economy (Wang & Hamid, 2024). The permeation of neoliberal forces into Chinese society has significantly impacted the education system. On the one hand, this neoliberal expansion of shadow education has generated significant pedagogical tensions, intensifying academic stratification and undermining the egalitarian ideals central to China's socialist educational framework (Yang et al., 2024). On the other hand, these neoliberal influences have begun to increasingly divert mainstream education away from the principles of socialist collectivism in mainstream education over recent decades. As such, policymakers strategically incorporated both shadow education and school-based practices within the DRP regulatory purview, representing a deliberate reassertion of socialist educational governance.

In response to the adverse effects of neoliberalism and to realign education with socialist values, the Chinese authorities promulgated a policy on July 24, 2021, entitled "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework Burden and Out-of-school Training Burden of Students in Compulsory Education", commonly referred to as the *Shuangjian* policy or the Double Reduction policy (henceforth referred to as the Double Reduction policy, DRP). This policy primarily targets the compulsory education stage, with the objective of reducing the academic

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burden from both homework and out-of-school private tutoring (The Central Government of the People's Republic of China, 2021). According to the regulation, the homework load is required to be reduced:

> Schools should ensure that no written homework is assigned to students in Grades 1 to 2 of primary school, but consolidation exercises could be appropriately arranged for them within the school. The average completion time of written homework for Grades 3 to 6 of the primary school shall not exceed 60 minutes per day, and for middle schools shall not exceed 90 minutes. (Article 5)

With a reduced homework load, students have more available time to develop their hobbies after school. Additionally, out-of-school academic tutoring is strictly restrained:

> Localities will no longer approve new academic private tutoring institutions for students in compulsory education, and existing academic private tutoring institutions will be uniformly registered as non-profit institutions. [...] Private tutoring institutions are strictly prohibited from training ahead of the standard curriculum, engaging in academic tutoring at non-academic educational tutoring institutions, and offering international education courses [...] Out-of-school tutoring institutions are not allowed to take up national holidays, rest days, and summer and winter vacation periods to organize academic private tutoring. (Articles 13 and 14)

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In this case, academic private tutoring can only be carried out on weekdays (i.e., from Monday to Friday), but strict rules must be followed:

> Online tutoring should take measures to protect students' eyesight. Each tutoring lesson cannot exceed 30 minutes, with lessons spaced no less than 10 minutes apart, and the tutoring classes must end no later than 21 o'clock. [...] Online tutoring institutions must not provide or disseminate undesirable learning methods, such as apps that allow students to search for answers by taking photos of questions, which impair students' thinking ability, affect their independent thinking, and violate rules of education and teaching. [...] Tutoring institutions are strictly prohibited from hiring foreigners located outside China to conduct tutoring activities. (Article 15)

As can be seen, although the DRP allows students to take academic private tutoring on weekdays, the imposed time constraints present significant challenges. The fact is that many students often finish classes late on weekdays and do not have time to attend academic private tutoring any more. This issue is exacerbated for boarding-school students who have evening classes, rendering attendance at such tutoring sessions nearly impossible. In such cases, "restrictions" on academic tutoring are equated with "prohibition" to a certain extent. As noted by L. Zhang (2022), the DRP is "a decisive attempt to put an end to the destructive rivalry" (p. 460) brought about by the private tutoring industry. Therefore, out-of-school tutoring institutions aimed at teaching academic subjects were shut down on a large scale.

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In order to compensate for the vacancies brought by the strict restrictions on private tutoring, the DRP (Articles 9 to 12) has initiated school-based after-school services to offer additional academic help for students, such as homework supervision, self-study support, and academic tutoring. However, whether such after-school services can really be alternatives to private tutoring remains under-researched.

While its primary focus is on primary and middle school students, the policy's reach extends – at least in principle – to the high school level. Article 30 of the official policy document stipulates:

> There will be no more approval of new out-of-school academic tutoring institutions for high school students. The management of academic tutoring organizations for general senior high school students shall be implemented with reference to the relevant provisions of this document. (Article 30)

This provision effectively subjects high school education to similar regulatory constraints, aligning its governance with the DRP's broader educational philosophy. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, enforcement at the high school level, particularly for Grade 12 students, has been markedly more lenient in practice. Local authorities, wary of provoking resistance from students and parents in this critical exam-preparation year, have often exercised discretion in applying the policy. As a result, while private tutoring persists in modified forms, the DRP has undeniably reshaped the ecology of out-of-school English learning,

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altering the availability, accessibility, and perceived necessity of out-of-school education. Against this backdrop, the decision-making behavior of Grade 12 students presents a compelling research focus. The unprecedented scale and intensity of the DRP have created a complex and evolving educational landscape, offering a valuable lens through which to examine how students navigate their learning strategies under such policy disruptions.

Overall, this policy is a comprehensive treatment of educational problems, re-establishing the leading position of mainstream schooling in the field of education and alleviating the utilitarian examination-oriented behavior in the market to some extent (Xue & Li, 2023). As many scholars (Xue et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) noted, the DRP is intended not only to reduce academic pressure and alleviate educational involution but also to address these significant social issues related to people's livelihood in the sphere of education on a large scale. However, educational problems persist in such a meritocratic society. Students' aspirations for attending prestigious universities and parents' high expectations never decline under the DRP (Jin & Sun, 2022). Consequently, the strong educational expectations held by families may have led to an enduring demand for private tutoring. This enduring demand helps to explain why many previous policies aimed at eliminating or reducing the dependence on shadow education failed in the end or delivered little effect (Entrich & Lauterbach, 2021, see pp. 247–248). An illustrative case is South Korea. In the 1970s, seeking to curb private tutoring, reduce severe education involution, and lessen academic burdens, the Korean government promulgated a "high school equalization policy" and prohibited out-of-school private tutoring (Ji, 2022; Lee, 2023). However, the persistent pressure from the fierce

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competition of the College Entrance Examination led privileged and affluent families to circumvent these restrictions by securing expensive one-on-one home tutoring. This exacerbated educational resource disparities, severely disadvantaging lower and middle-class families (Choi & Choi, 2016; Ji, 2022). Consequently, an underground illegal tutoring market emerged, characterized by profit-driven practices that often compromised educational quality (Kim, 2016). These issues finally fueled popular discontent and the deterioration of public education, ultimately failing the policy. This precedent underscores how deeply entrenched examination-oriented values can undermine regulatory efforts to promote equity, often intensifying competition and disproportionately benefiting the privileged.

While the DRP in China differs significantly in scope and mechanism from South Korea's outright prohibition – focusing on homework reduction and tutoring restrictions rather than a blanket ban – a similar dynamic of demand persistence and market adaptation is evident. Although the DRP led to the formal closure or radical restructuring of many large-scale academic tutoring institutions, the underlying demand for academic tutoring did not disappear. Instead, tutoring activities adapted, continuing underground (e.g., disguised one-on-one home tutoring) and proliferating online (e.g., small-group sessions or platforms operating in regulatory shadowed areas) (Xue & Li, 2023). While affluent families experienced negligible disruptions, middle-class households in urban centers faced rising costs yet maintained relatively stable access to tutoring services. The most pronounced effects were observed in the underground tutoring market, where premium instruction – typically provided by elite educators – became both scarcer and prohibitively expensive,

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disproportionately restricting access for less privileged students. This adaptation demonstrates, like the South Korean case, the formidable challenge of curbing demand driven by high-stakes exams and socio-educational aspirations through regulation alone.

1.5 Objectives of the study

This study was framed by three interconnected research objectives that collectively address critical gaps in understanding how Chinese Grade 12 students navigate out-of-school English learning:

1) to identify the types and reasons for Chinese Grade 12 students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities.

2) to empirically investigate how socioeconomic stratification systematically shapes students' out-of-school English learning choices, thereby revealing inequitable learning opportunity distributions beyond mainstream schooling.

3) to analyze Grade 12 students' rational decision-making process during critical educational transitions, with particular attention to a) cost-benefit considerations and b) differential attitudinal responses to regulatory interventions such as the DRP.

First, the study was conducted under the background of the DRP. As mentioned above, DRP's impacts are not limited to academic tutoring but also shaped the broader market for other forms of out-of-school English learning in Chinese society. In Chinese educational transition points (i.e., Grade 9 and Grade 12), out-of-school learning assumes heightened significance due to its role in high-stakes examination preparation. The DRP's disruptive effects on these

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learning practices have created a critical research gap regarding how students now navigate supplementary education. To address this significant gap, this study utilized the English language as a focal point to 1) identify the types and reasons for Chinese Grade 12 students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities.

Second, this study employed Rational Choice Theory (RCT) as the theoretical framework. RCT has traditionally been recognized as a foundational micro-theory for elucidating educational inequality through the lens of educational decision-making (Boudon, 1974). Given that shadow education is often identified as a significant contributor to the perpetuation of educational disparities (Entrich & Lauterbach, 2021; Mahmud & Bray, 2017), RCT has garnered substantial empirical support in elucidating these inequalities within the shadow education context (e.g., Entrich, 2018, 2024; Lorenz & Stubbe, 2020). The DRP's restructuring of China's supplementary education market renders RCT especially salient for interpreting emergent inequalities and unpacking adaptive behaviors As such, the second research objective is to 2) empirically investigate how socioeconomic stratification systematically shpaes students' out-of-school English learning choices, thereby revealing inequitable learning opportunity distributions outside mainstream schooling.

Third, RCT is also frequently utilized to explore how individuals make choices based on "subjective and bounded rationality" (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 5). According to "bounded rationality" model, individuals make decisions under uncertainty and cognitive constraints. Faced with limited information-processing capacity, people cannot evaluate all alternatives or

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predict every outcome, and thus they seek satisfactory rather than optimal solutions when navigating complex decision-making environments (Liu, 2023). The DRP exemplifies such environmental uncertainty, representing a comprehensive reform that fundamentally restructures China's out-of-school educational landscape. Unlike the previous burden-reduction policy, the DRP is a comprehensive initiative designed to radically address the multifaceted challenges of education within Chinese society. The aims of the DRP are notably ambitious, as articulated by Xue and Li (2023):

> The policy of "*Shuangjian*" is not a simple sense of the education teaching burden, but the burden of the people's livelihood of families involved, is the volume in the education in recent years, the social class curing, anxious parents' education, higher spending on education, students' physical and mental burden and so on comprehensive treatment of the problem. (p. 2)

Consequently, significant transformations in various educational settings, family educational psychologies, and overall attitudes toward learning are anticipated under the DRP. However, the extent to which these changes will materialize remains empirically uncertain. Numerous scholars (e.g., Li, 2023; Liu & Bray, 2022; Yang et al., 2024) have expressed skepticism about the policy's capacity to effectuate substantial changes in educational environments and to address the underlying social issues associated with them. Particularly, questions persist regarding the DRP's effectiveness in curtailing families' reliance on private tutoring services (Lu et al., 2022) and in alleviating educational inequalities due to restrictions on shadow

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education (Li, 2023). The policy's implementation has created uncertainty and complexity in students' decision-making environment where students must navigate through "bounded rationality" to achieve results most consistent with their goals. This context provides a critical framework to 3) analyze Grade 12 students' rational decision-making process during critical educational transitions, with particular attention to a) cost-benefit considerations and b) differential attitudinal responses to regulatory interventions of the DRP

In summary, this research investigated how Chinese high school students from different social classes engage in English learning beyond the mainstream school context. By employing RCT, the study sought to determine whether students' educational choices regarding out-of-school English learning activities contribute to alleviating or exacerbating educational inequality.

1.6 Significance of the study

This study makes significant contributions to the existing literature on practical and theoretical levels. This study makes significant contributions to the literature on out-of-school English learning by examining how Chinese Grade 12 students navigate learning choices beyond formal schooling. While existing research has predominantly focused on in-school language education, this study shifts attention to the understudied domain of supplementary English learning, uncovering how students strategically select English learning activities, such as EPT, self-directed media consumption, and skill-based language practices, based on their perceived utility and constraints. By empirically mapping the types and motivations

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behind these choices, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how students optimize learning opportunities outside the classroom, particularly during high-stakes educational transitions.

Theoretically, this study advances the application of RCT in educational research by systematically analyzing how students engage in cost-benefit calculations and differential attitudinal responses to regulatory interventions when selecting out-of-school English learning activities. While RCT has been widely used to explain educational inequalities in shadow education, this study extends its explanatory power by examining bounded rationality – how students make decisions under imperfect information and resource constraints. By demonstrating how socioeconomic status shapes students' ability to pursue different learning strategies, the study reinforces RCT's relevance in explaining stratification in out-of-school learning. Furthermore, this study categorized out-of-school English learning activities into two distinct categories: 1) EPT and 2) other forms of out-of-school English learning activities other than EPT (e.g., reading English literature, watching English videos, and accessing English media channels). This classification not only facilitated a comparative analysis of students' preferences for private tutoring versus other learning modalities but also enriched our comprehension of the diverse manifestations of out-of-school English learning activities.

On a policy level, this study offers critical policy implications concerning educational inequality by revealing how socioeconomic stratification persists in out-of-school learning, even when formal schooling systems aim for equity. By using Economic, Social, and Cultural

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Status (ESCS) as a key variable, the research empirically demonstrates how class-based disparities manifest in students' learning choices, reinforcing the role of family resources in shaping educational trajectories. This finding challenges assumptions that reducing formal school burdens alone can equalize opportunities, highlighting instead how inequities are reproduced through differential access to supplementary learning.

Ultimately, this study enriches both theoretical and empirical discussions on out-of-school English learning by integrating RCT with an analysis of students' adaptive strategies. It not only expands our understanding of how learners navigate supplementary education but also refines RCT's applicability in explaining educational decision-making within stratified contexts.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant research on the theoretical foundations of this study. First, I define and conceptualize the key terms related to the topic of this study. Then, I review the literature on out-of-school English learning activities. Next, I introduce the theoretical framework and propose the conceptual model of this research. Informed by the literature review and conceptual framework, I put forward the hypotheses. Finally, I end my literature review with the overarching research questions and hypotheses.

2.2 Definitions and conceptualizations

This section defines and conceptualizes the key terms in this study. First, the central term shown in the title is "out-of-school learning" and, thus, I discuss this term in detail. In addition, as shadow education is the most formal and systematic type of out-of-school learning activity, I have developed a separate section to discuss the definition of shadow education and then identify the relationship between shadow education and out-of-school learning activities. Finally, considering that the social origin in this study is the central variable, I also discuss related terms of the social origin measurements.

2.2.1 Out-of-school learning

With the development of society, the Internet, technology, and all sorts of media resources provide various learning opportunities for students outside school (Dressman & Sadler, 2020; Richards, 2015). "Out-of-school learning" or "learning beyond the classroom" has become an

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important alternative for students to learn apart from school-based learning and has expanded rapidly to diversified fields (Bolat & Köroğlu, 2020).

According to Benson's (2011) preliminary model, learning beyond the classroom refers to an array of out-of-school learning activities, which can be identified by the following four distinctive dimensions (pp. 9–12). In each dimension, many terms are used to justify the characteristics, which are summarized in Table 2.1.

1. ***Location:*** Out-of-school learning is usually defined as the additional learning that is supplementary to school learning. Terms such as "out-of-school", "out-of-class", "after-school", "extracurricular", and "extramural" "off-campus" are often used to describe this dimension.
2. ***Formality:*** Out-of-school learning is normally perceived as "non-formal" or "informal". Non-formal learning represents structured educational activities that occur outside formal schooling systems, typically characterized by intentional design and explicit learning objectives, while informal learning emerges spontaneously through daily life experiences, lacking predetermined structure or specific pedagogical aims (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Both non-formal and informal out-of-school learning refer to non-institutional or individual learning activities, and are usually undertaken by learners for interest without involving qualifications and tests.
3. ***Pedagogy:*** The pedagogy of out-of-school learning is usually termed as "self-instructed" or "non-instructed", as it does not involve a formal teaching process. The difference between self-instructed and non-instructed is for the former, learning materials, such as

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videos, books, and newspapers, serve as instructors, and students have a strong intention to learn; while for the latter, there is no instruction, and students have no intentional learning purpose (p. 11).

4. ***Locus of control***: This dimension concerns who makes the major decisions for learning. Out-of-school learning requires learners to be "autonomous" and "self-directed" and make decisions for learning primarily by themselves.

Table 2.1

Dimensions and terms of the preliminary model

Dimension	**Terms**
Location	out-of-school, out-of-class, after-school, extracurricular, extramural, off-campus
Formality	non-formal, informal
Pedagogy	self-instructed, non-instructed
Locus of control	independent, self-directed, autonomous

Although a large body of literature has frequently cited this model, some terms still need more clarity and modification. First of all, it is true that out-of-school learning, at most times, takes place outside school. However, the terms "out-of-class" and "out-of-school" here do not mean that learning beyond the school necessarily excludes the environment of classrooms or schools (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Instead, these terms should also include, for example, the learning in the classroom of private tutoring institutions outside the formal schooling hours (Benson, 2011). From this perspective, these terms of location may be better

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understood as “out of regular class hours” or “after the school day is finished”. As Reinders and Benson (2017) noted, learning beyond the classroom does not mean learning away from the classroom; instead, it refers to the “extension of classroom learning” (p. 574).

Furthermore, out-of-school learning does not necessarily indicate that students do not learn intentionally for qualifications or tests, nor does it only refer to those self-instructed and non-instructed learning activities. One example being the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offered beyond formal schooling throughout the globe. In the past decade, the Coursera platform has opened hundreds of specialized online courses for students to learn in certain fields, and each course is delivered by professional instructor teams from prestigious universities (Wu & Zhou, 2020). The courses involve a formal teaching process, such as learning, practices, explanations, and tests. Students who successfully complete the courses will also be awarded a MOOC certificate. MOOCs’ systematic teaching and learning process indicate that out-of-school learning can also be instructional activities. Additionally, although there are, indeed, students who take MOOCs for interest (Chang et al., 2015), empirical studies have also found that students take MOOCs for the great value of the certificate as well, especially students who find it difficult to access formal education (Pursel et al., 2016). Some take MOOCs to build expertise, gain practical skills in their domains, and advance employment (Breslow et al., 2013; Fini, 2009; Littlejohn et al., 2016).

As can be seen, many students take out-of-school learning activities not just out of interest but also for instrumental purposes, such as obtaining specific certificates or improving

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academic abilities. This example problematizes the dimensions of formality and pedagogy, because out-of-school learning, in fact, also entails those "formal" and "instructed" learning activities. As Bolat and Köroğlu (2020) argued, although many educators perceive out-of-school learning activities as informal, these activities "should be conducted with educational goals and plans of a certain subject or domain, otherwise out-of-school learning may be more like a leisure activity rather than learning activity" (p. 1633). In this sense, out-of-school learning can occur in formal, informal, or non-formal settings outside mainstream schooling and can be instructed, self-instructed, or non-instructed.

Although Benson's (2011) model has provided us with a basic structure for understanding out-of-school learning, many other important aspects have been overlooked in this model. Whether the out-of-school learning is formal or informal, instructed or non-instructed, self-directed or other-directed, these dimensions should be understood as a matter of "degree" rather than an absolute concept (Reinders & Benson, 2017, p. 562). Based on the above discussion, this study modified the dimensions of the out-of-school learning model, and terms describing the characteristics are elaborated in Table 2.2.

1. ***Location:*** Refers to the place and time of taking learning tasks. Terms should be better understood as "outside mainstream schooling", "out of regular class hours", or "after the school day is finished".
2. ***Formality:*** Refers to the degree to which the learning activities are designed for certification purposes and are organized by educational institutions. Out-of-school learning activities can be "non-formal" or "informal", under which, circumstances

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students take out-of-school learning activities for interest independently of educational institutions. However, “formal” learning activities are by no means excluded from the concept. Students would also take out-of-school learning courses and programs structured by schools or educational institutions for qualification and test purposes.

3. ***Pedagogy:*** Refers to the degree to which the learning materials and practices are designed specifically as pedagogical (Reinhardt, 2022). First, if students take out-of-school activities that have intentionally designed learning materials and formal pedagogy processes, this learning is “instructed”. Second, if students learn independently through watching television, listening to videos, and reading newspapers, etc., the learning is “self-instructed”. Lastly, students may learn incidentally in a “non-instructed” naturalistic environment. For example, when communicating face-to-face with native speakers of the targeted language, learners may be more focused on the conversation rather than language learning, but they can still gain language-speaking skills from the conversations (Benson, 2011, p. 11).
4. ***Locus of control***: Refers to the degree of learner autonomy in making learning decisions. These learning decisions can be made by teachers, tutors, parents, and students themselves. However, at most times, learners who take out-of-school learning are “autonomous” and “self-directed” rather than “other-directed”.

Table 2.2

Dimensions and terms of the modified model

Dimension	**Terms**

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Location	out-of-school, out-of-class, after-school, extra-curricular, extramural, off-campus
Formality	formal, non-formal, informal
Pedagogy	instructed, self-instructed, non-instructed
Locus of control	independent, self-directed, autonomous

In recent years, out-of-school language learning has also received much attention (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Reinders & Benson, 2017). Students traditionally learned language inside the school but used language outside the school (Nunan, 2017). Today, however, a wide range of language learning opportunities are available beyond school context (Dressman & Sadler, 2020; Gardner, 2022; Lee, 2022a). Out-of-school language learning resources include newspapers, books, media, online programs, and also native speakers of the targeted language (Benson, 2022). The book of Nunan and Richards (2015) categorized out-of-school language learning into five categories: preparation of language learning activities, learning through technology and the Internet, learning through television, extracurricular projects, and communicating with native speakers. They documented twenty-nine out-of-school language learning activities, such as extensive reading, intensive listening, social media language learning, autonomous learning integration programs, study-abroad programs, and so forth. Since school-based learning has limitations in excessive class size, limited teaching time, and the lack of authentic communication and personalized curriculum design (Richards, 2015), out-of-school language learning serves as alternatives to help enhance learners' language learning (Nunan, 2017; Nunan & Richards, 2015; Thorne & Hellermann, 2022).

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As can be seen, out-of-school learning is a broad concept that encompasses a variety of learning activities outside regular school hours. By referring to the modified model in Table 2.2, this study adopted "out-of-school learning activity" to refer to the institute-based, program-oriented, or self-conducted supplementary learning activities that students learn for academic purposes outside mainstream schooling hours, including academic private tutoring, learning programs, online courses, self-study through books and media, and so forth. Out-of-school English learning activities are used to refer to the type of out-of-school language activities that focus on the English language subject, such as EPT.

2.2.2 Shadow education

Private tutoring, or shadow education, is the most formal and systematic type of out-of-school learning activity. The metaphor of "shadow" was first formally introduced to academic literature through the studies of Marimuthu et al. (1991) and Stevenson and Baker (1992). It was not until 1999, when Mark Bray published his book "The Shadow Education System: Private Tutoring and Its Implications for Planners" in UNESCO, that the terminology "shadow education" was popularized worldwide. Bray (1999, p. 17) described shadow education as a paralleled educational sector to mainstream schooling and highlighted its imitative character from four aspects: first, shadow education only exists because mainstream education exists; second, the size and shape of shadow education will change alongside that of mainstream education; third, the public is typically far more concerned with mainstream education than with its shadow; and lastly, the features of shadow education are far less distinct than those of the mainstream education.

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Despite its mimicry features, shadow education still distinguishes itself from standardized mainstream schooling in terms of its diversity, fluidity, and a high degree of adaptation to the changing market demand (Zhang, 2019; W. Zhang, 2022, p. 12). When compared with uniform mainstream schooling, the various supply modes (e.g., one-on-one, small group), class sizes, locations (e.g., classroom, home, online), types and qualifications of tutors (e.g., schoolteachers, full-time tutors, university students) of shadow education better satisfy students' individualized learning (Bray, 2006; Kim, 2016; Kim & Jung, 2019; W. Zhang, 2022). However, whatever the forms of shadow education are, it basically follows the three core characteristics put forward by Bray (1999, p. 20):

1. ***Supplementary:*** Subjects provided in shadow education are already covered in school; shadow education is supplementary to mainstream schooling, helping students with remedial and enhancement learning.
2. ***Private:*** This dimension emphasizes the fee-paying nature of shadow education, referring only to those provided by for-profit individuals or institutions but not to those that are unpaid or publicly funded.
3. ***Academic:*** Academic subjects that are usually included in examinations, such as languages, mathematics, and sciences. Subjects for personal development such as music or sport are excluded.

In light of these features, many scholars then defined shadow education as out-of-school academic activities that share similar features with mainstream schooling and are designed to

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improve students' chances of becoming academically successful (Baker et al., 2001; Buchman et al., 2010; Malik, 2017). However, this conventional definition has been subject to critical scrutiny due to its conceptual limitations, prompting scholars to propose more nuanced frameworks in recent years. According to Bray (2014), certain forms of private tutoring extend beyond mimicry, instead supplementing school curricula with additional content. For example, some EPT courses are not in parallel to the school curriculum but aim to raise learners' English proficiency for authentic communication (Yung & Hajar, 2023). This includes business English or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) courses, where English is not learned as an academic subject but a functional linguistic tool. Moreover, Yung (2022) argued that the fee-paying dimension is not too clear-cut because, nowadays, some governments and schools would provide free private tutoring for financially disadvantaged students. This phenomenon, indeed, happens in some countries. For example, many publicly funded out-of-school services are provided for low-income families by the US government (Cooper et al., 2000; Mori, 2013). In addition, under the DRP in China, the state has also advocated providing free online tutoring services for needy students (The Central Government of the People's Republic of China, 2021, Article 12). In light of these critiques, this study adopts an expanded definition of shadow education that accommodates both tutoring that extends beyond school syllabi and non-fee-based tutoring, such as publicly funded tutoring services. .

Scholars in many other countries have also introduced different terminologies to refer to shadow education since the beginning of the 1990s. For example, shadow education is called

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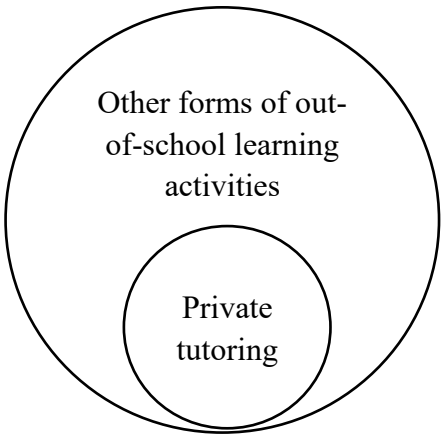
juku in Japan (Dolly, 1993; Harnisch, 1994), *hagwons* in South Korea (Hune et al., 1991), *buxiban* in Taiwan (Miller & Stigler, 1991), and *private tuition* in Singapore (Kwan-Terry, 1993) and Malaysia (Marimuthu et al., 1991). This thesis has termed shadow education as "private tutoring" and defined it as the lessons that teach academic and examinable subjects offered at school and public examinations outside regular schooling hours. Such tutorial lessons can be either fee-paying or free-of-charge, provided online or offline, with different class sizes and tutors. As can be seen, private tutoring is a narrower concept when compared to out-of-school learning (see Figure 2.1), and it can be defined as the "formal" and "instructed" out-of-school learning activity that is supplementary to school teaching and learning (Yung & Hajar, 2023). In addition, the term "English private tutoring" (EPT) is used to refer to the kind of private tutoring that teaches the English language subject.

Figure 2.1

Out-of-school learning



2.2.3 Social origin

Much literature has associated students' participation in out-of-school learning with their

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family's social origin (e.g., Ghorbani & Golparvar, 2020; Tsiplakides, 2018; Xue, 2017). This study also used social origin as the central explanatory variable, exploring how social origin influences students' educational choices beyond school contexts. Therefore, it is important to distinguish relevant terms of social origin measurements. I will now compare two methods of measuring social origin and explain the reasons ESCS was chosen for this study.

The first method of measuring social origin is through the concept of "Socioeconomic status" (SES), which is commonly used in educational research to denote one's access to social, economic, cultural, and human capital resources (Cowan et al., 2012; Mueller & Parcel, 1981). Many researchers have reached an agreement that parental education, parental occupation, and parental income are the three main indicators of SES (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Mueller & Parcel, 1981; Sirin, 2005). However, according to Brese and Mirazchiyski (2013), there are three problems with using parental income as an indicator to measure SES. Firstly, unlike other indicators such as parental education and occupation, income is not always stable and predictable, and it changes over time. Secondly, if children are the research participants, they may not be very clear about their parents' income. Even if questionnaires are handed out directly to parents, some may feel reluctant to provide authentic information regarding their economic status when facing such a sensitive question. Both of these would affect data reliability. Finally, due to the fluctuations in the currency exchange rate between countries, it is challenging to conduct international research using family income as an indicator of SES.

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In order to improve the measurement of social origin, another measurement was first introduced to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and is referred to as the "PISA index of Economic, Social and Cultural status (ESCS)" (OECD, 2010, p. 131). Avvisati (2020) defined ESCS as "a measurement of students' access to family resources, which determines the social status of the student's family" (p. 3). ESCS incorporates parental highest education, parental occupation, and home possessions (family wealth possessions, cultural possessions, home educational resources, and the number of books at home) as the three most important metrics (OECD, 2014, p. 351). As can be seen, the third indicator "home possession" has no direct information regarding household income but focuses on the possession of household items and assets, such as the availability of computers, cars, classical literature, etc. (OECD, 2014, see p. 316). These items and assets are more stable sources than income to capture family wealth, so "home possession" can be regarded as a proxy or a substitute for the traditional measurement of family income (Brese & Mirazchiyski, 2013).

Today, ESCS is primarily used to resolve issues related to educational opportunities and inequalities (Avvisati, 2020). Through robustness examination, Zwier et al. (2020) also found that home possession is the most crucial index in predicting participation in shadow education. Much of the shadow education literature (Entrich, 2015; Hu et al., 2016; Zwier et al., 2020) has also used family ESCS to explore equality. Thus, this thesis used the index of ESCS to analyze students' family backgrounds.

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2.3 Research on English learning beyond the school context

This section develops a thorough literature review of out-of-school English learning activities, which consists of two parts. The first part discusses previous research on EPT, the most formal and systematic type of out-of-school English learning activities. The second part discusses previous research on other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. I review the literature in a thematic manner and identify relevant research gaps.

2.3.1 Research on English private tutoring

As an international language, English possesses considerable value in many fields today (Mahmud & Bray, 2017), and it is one of the most popular subjects taught in shadow education in many countries (Kim, 2016, see p. 63; Tanner et al., 2009). However, research on EPT is still in its infancy despite its popularity and theoretical and policy implications (Yung, 2015a; Yung & Hajar, 2023), largely due to EPT's various forms that "limit researchers' ability to make precise statements" (Chang, 2019, p. 80). In addition, EPT, as "one of the most important out-of-school learning activities" (Yung, 2015a, p. 708), is substantially restricted by the DRP. This part, thus, particularly reviews the literature on EPT and discusses the research gaps.

Previous studies have first examined how EPT influences students' English academic achievement, but the findings are mixed. Some have reported a positive impact of private tutoring on English performance. For example, Candia et al. (2018) used Uwezo Uganda National Learning Assessment data and the structural equation modeling approach,

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identifying EPT's significant and direct effects on primary school students' English Language literacy in Uganda. Likewise, Chang (2019) found an apparent positive effect of EPT on improving Taiwanese students' English scores in college admission examinations through an investigation of 200 high school students. Nevertheless, Chang noted that self-study exerts a more significant influence on students' English learning than EPT, suggesting that self-study activities may be more effective in improving academic achievements.

By contrast, other studies have shown heterogeneous effects of EPT on students' English learning. Zhang (2013) initiated the first study in China on the effects of private tutoring on *Gaokao* performance. Through the hierarchical linear model, Zhang found that EPT has no significant average effect on English scores, and only rural low-achieving students can benefit from EPT. Therefore, Zhang concluded that private tutoring, at most times, is only a way to ease the anxiety of parents and students. Using the same statistical model, Kim et al. (2016) researched the effect of EPT time and cost on middle school students' English achievement. Based on a nine-year longitudinal database in Seoul, the study showed that the time spent in EPT has no significant effects on students' English performance, and the cost invested in EPT shows a positive correlation with female students only. However, both the studies of Zhang (2013) and Kim et al. (2016) have limitations in that they only collected data from one city, which undermines the results' external validity. Hence, on a larger scale, Nam (2013) used the national database and longitudinal analysis to verify the effect of private tutoring. She came to a different conclusion that, in the case of English, time spent in private tutoring negatively affects academic achievement, pointing out that private tutoring can only

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improve students' academic performance in the short term but exerts a negative influence in the long run. As can be seen, these research findings vary widely, and the reasons for this may be the problems of data analysis and research methods. All of these studies were conducted using the quantitative method. Thus, issues such as model constraints and data bias would probably lead to inconsistent results. In addition, many details and internal factors might be overlooked if qualitative aspects are not considered.

Researchers have also explored the factors influencing students' demand for EPT. Many studies held that students' motivations for taking EPT are extrinsic, such as the perceived poor quality and insufficient exercises of school instruction (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Lowe & Mizukura, 2021; Mahmud & Bray, 2017) or the desire to get good grades in high-stakes examinations (Yung, 2015a). The study by Yung and Chiu (2020) investigated 543 students in Grade 12 and explored which motivation affects students' enjoyment of EPT through the logistic regression model. However, in contrast to previous studies, they found that student participation in EPT entails not only extrinsic motivations but also intrinsic motivations (e.g., self-interest in English learning). Nevertheless, under the pressure of *Gaokao*, Yung (2019) noted that students are mainly extrinsically motivated (ought-to L2 self) to enroll in EPT, while their intrinsic motives (ideal L2 self) are suppressed.

Additionally, literature has also related EPT to educational inequality. Many studies (e.g., Dang & Rogers, 2008; Dawson, 2010; Pallegedara, 2012; Xue, 2017) noted that students from privileged families are able to attend more and better-quality private tutoring, which

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results in educational inequality and social stratification. A recent study conducted by Islam et al. (2021) reported this educational inequality and even discrimination brought about by EPT. This study investigated 11 Bangladeshi high school students through a phenomenological qualitative analysis and found that EPT acted as a barrier that created educational inequality between those students who participated in EPT and those who did not. On the one hand, EPT provides better English learning opportunities for wealthy families who participate in EPT; on the other hand, it excludes socioeconomically disadvantaged families who cannot afford it. Similarly, Tsiplakides (2018) surveyed 30 students in Greece to explore the relationship between EPT and social class inequalities in secondary education by drawing on Bourdieu's Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory. However, Tsiplakides did not find a relationship between social class inequality and engagement in EPT, as almost all students in the sample said they had attended EPT. Instead, he noted that inequality is related to the type of EPT – students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to engage in expensive one-on-one EPT, while students from working-class backgrounds tend to opt for lower-cost mass EPT. As such, middle- and upper-class students may enter the labor market with higher levels of English language knowledge and better occupational prospects than lower-class counterparts, in which case "social class inequalities are maintained or even reproduced" (p. 87).

Unlike other studies, Yung's (2020a) longitudinal narrative study examined the English learning experience of Diana, an underprivileged secondary student in Hong Kong, investigating how she successfully moved socially upward by taking EPT. The findings

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revealed that, by attending EPT with elite students, Diana had not only expanded her social networks with students from prestigious schools (social capital), but also acquired English test-taking skills and eventually succeeded in getting into a high-ranking university (cultural capital). Yung, thus, concluded that while it is true that private tutoring aggravates educational inequalities, students from lower classes can strategically utilize private tutoring to overcome the systemic inequality that exists in the educational system and society. This conclusion accords with the study of Song and Xue (2017), which states that social inequalities can be reduced if students from different social classes have the same opportunities to attend high-quality private tutoring. However, Yung noted that Diana's success represents an exceptional case rather than a normative outcome for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, because not all disadvantaged students can be as fortunate as Diana. Structural educational and social inequalities may persist unless financial help or free tutoring opportunities can be provided for students with financial difficulties.

Despite the expanding research on EPT, only a few studies (e.g., Entrich, 2015; Yung, 2021) have focused on students' choices for EPT at the educational transition point. Besides, under the DRP, EPT is subject to many restrictions, and students may turn to other forms of out-of-school English learning activities for help, which is also an area that is currently unstudied. In the following section, I review the literature about other forms of out-of-school English learning.

2.3.2 Research on other forms of out-of-school English learning

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There is a wide range of out-of-school English learning activities apart from EPT. With the advancement of technology, the most common English learning resources are various media technologies, such as the Internet, television, videos, and email (Benson & Chik, 2010; Kuure, 2011; Lee et al., 2019). Students can also learn English through English books, magazines, and auxiliary materials (Benson, 2022; Kalaja et al., 2011). Additionally, some organized English learning activities such as workshops, online learning projects (e.g., MOOCs), as well as English self-study lessons and tests (e.g., Duolingo) are also important methods for students to learn English beyond the classroom (Dincer, 2020; McMinn, 2017; Nunan & Richards, 2015).

Although there is a wealth of out-of-school English learning activities, research has shown that students usually prefer certain forms of learning. For example, Dincer (2020) found that social media, online dictionaries, and websites are the three most frequently used digital English learning resources for Turkish university students. Kuure (2011) also mentioned the prominent role of various media technologies in Finnish students' English learning. By contrast, through narrative inquiry, Doyle and Parrish (2012) found that Japanese university students prefer to learn English in a more traditional way after school, such as doing standardized English proficiency tests, rather than learning through electronic media and online resources.

In the Chinese context, Zhan and Andrews (2014) investigated undergraduates' out-of-school English learning through 106 diary entries and 30 post-diary interviews. The finding showed

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that students have both technology-based and conventional ways of English learning, such as reading English newspapers extensively, listening to authentic English radio programs, doing examination-oriented exercises, and memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules. Hsieh and Hsieh (2019) performed a similar study to report different autonomous out-of-school English learning behaviors by conducting email interviews with 35 Chinese college students. The results showed that most Chinese students learn English after school through the Internet, online software, standardized tests, and English magazines, while some prefer workshops and English learning consultations.

Empirical studies have also discussed the purposes of students' participation in out-of-school English learning but showed different results. Lai (2015) investigated the attitudes of 11 undergraduate students in Hong Kong toward school-based and out-of-school English learning. The research revealed divergent student perceptions between these two learning approaches: while students simultaneously consider school-based English learning as the core of learning, they still take out-of-school English learning activities to help maintain learning motivations, develop learning interests, and gain practical English skills. In addition, through a longitudinal study, Kalaja et al. (2011) found that unlike English learning at school that emphasizes only formal learning aspects (e.g., word and grammar), most Finnish learners engage in out-of-school English learning activities that focus on sociocultural communication. This finding accords with Kuure (2011) that technology-based out-of-school English learning not only improves students' language skills but also builds communicative relationships. However, other studies (e.g., Lee, 2022b; Lee et al., 2019) came to different

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conclusions, arguing that students participate in out-of-school English learning mostly for individualized purposes (e.g., complete English homework, improve English writing skills) rather than collaborative purposes (e.g., communicate with friends).

Recent attention has been increasingly focused on how out-of-school English learning activities can improve students' English language achievements. Scholarly consensus (e.g., Dincer, 2020; Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019; Reinders et al., 2022) suggests that the effectiveness of out-of-school English learning depends on the type of learning activity, with both productive and receptive out-of-school English learning activities positively affecting students' English learning achievements. Furthermore, a study by Peters (2018) surveyed 79 teenagers' various out-of-school English learning behaviors. The result indicated a positive correlation between students' English vocabulary knowledge and exposure to English books and magazines, non-subtitle English television programs, and the Internet.

In contrast, Sundqvist's (2011) research drew a different conclusion by revealing gender-specific patterns in activity effectiveness. By exploring the relationship between English learning activities and Swedish students' English oral and writing skills, she found that the amount of out-of-school English learning is positively and significantly related to boys' oral English proficiency and vocabulary volume. After comparing the English learning activities taken by boys and girls, she further noted that boys generally engage in more productive English learning activities than girls, such as reading books and surfing the Internet (p. 114). In this case, boys usually have a higher level of self-efficacy and English proficiency, but a

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lower level of anxiety related to English speaking.

Other scholars have related the effectiveness of out-of-school English learning to learners' individual characteristics. For example, Ghorbani and Golparvar's (2020) path analysis of 382 university students established SES as a significant predictor of learner autonomy which, in turn, positively influenced both participation in self-directed out-of-school English learning and ultimate achievement levels. These findings echo Dincer's (2020) study that out-of-school English learning effectiveness is positively related to learner autonomy – students with greater autonomy in engaging in digital language learning tend to have a higher level of English proficiency and can, thus, master more practical and authentic English skills.

As can be seen, existing research demonstrates substantial variation in the types, forms, and effectiveness of out-of-school English learning, as well as in students' choices for these activities. However, the current literature exhibits two notable gaps. Firstly, the predominance of studies focusing on university populations, with comparatively less attention devoted to secondary students, particularly those at critical educational transition points. Secondly, there is an absence of empirical investigations into out-of-school English learning post-DRP. To date, to the author's knowledge, no study has systematically examined how students engage with out-of-school English learning activities under the DRP framework, nor has any research undertaken a comparative analysis of students' participation in EPT versus other forms of out-of-school English learning.

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To fill these research gaps, this study intended to explore high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning under the DRP, including both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning. To this end, RCT developed by Boudon (1974) was employed as the guiding conceptual framework. In the following, I discuss the details of this theory.

2.4 Theoretical framework

This section introduces relevant theories pertaining to this study. First, I introduce Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and the relevant theoretical terms and mechanisms. Then, I compare RCT with Bourdieu and Passion's (1977) Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory, distinguishing the differences between these two theories and explaining why RCT was considered more suitable for this study. Next, I discuss the limitations of RCT and provide relevant modifications. Finally, I compare the two main approaches to applying RCT and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. By combining these two approaches, I propose my theoretical model and hypotheses.

2.4.1 Rational Choice Theory – two key concepts

Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which is also called Rational Action Theory, proposes that individuals always make rational choices through rational cost-benefit calculations and achieve results most consistent with their personal goals (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). Within the educational context, rational decisions in RCT typically pertain to the educational choices made in educational transition points, such as whether to stay in school or to enter the labor market, to choose the academic track or the vocational

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one, to pursue higher education or not, and so forth (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 47). In this framework, RCT regards class differences in educational decision-making as "the outcome of rational calculations of the costs and benefits associated with continued participation in education" (Zwier et al., 2020, p. 414). Consequently, variations in rational cost-benefit calculations regarding education among families from different social classes lead to distinct educational decisions, thereby exacerbating disparities in educational attainment.

Before discussing RCT further, two key concepts need to be elaborated on here. First, what is the rational mindset in RCT? According to Stanovich (2016), rationality refers to "how efficient we are in achieving our goals" (p. 25) using the best means possible. In this context, a rational mindset can be defined as a cognitive approach characterized by methods of thinking that align with one's goals, preferences, and self-interests, while ensuring consistency with available evidence (Stanovich et al., 2013). It involves employing methods of thinking that facilitate optimal decision-making, where individuals or groups strive to maximize subjective or objective utility in specific contexts (Stanovich, 2016; Thompson, 2022).

There are typically two types of rational mindsets. The first, termed the "epistemic rational mindset", pertains to the alignment of beliefs with objective reality, defined as "how well beliefs map onto the actual structure of the world" (Stanovich, 2016, p. 24). This mindset prioritizes truth-seeking and evidence-based reasoning to ensure cognitive representations accurately reflect empirical conditions (Thompson, 2022). The second is the "instrumental

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rational mindset", which refers to the thinking ability to act in a manner that effectively achieves one's most desired outcomes, given the available physical and mental resources (Stanovich, 2016; Thompson, 2022). What should be noted is that the instrumental rational mindset is only concerned with "whether people act in accordance with their motivations, regardless of what those motivations may be" (Quackenbush, 2004, p. 94). This means instrumental rationality is motivationally neutral – as long as actors make decisions systematically to advance their prioritized goals according to their preferred motivations, they are deemed instrumentally rational. These two rational mindsets work together: while the former concerns what is true, the latter concerns what to do (Manktelow, 2004).

According to Quackenbush (2004), RCT is fundamentally rooted in the assumption of instrumental rationality, as it underscores the optimization of goal fulfillment, whereby individuals strategically navigate their decision-making and actions to secure the best possible results in alignment with their objectives. However, as the rationality of belief (i.e., epistemic rationality) serves as a foundational element for the rationality of action (instrumental rationality) (Stanovich, 2016), researchers such as Klein et al. (2020) argued that defining rational mindsets in RCT exclusively as instrumental rationality is overly restrictive. They advocate for the inclusion of epistemic rational mindsets in RCT as well. Therefore, given the strong interconnection between epistemic and instrumental rationality, this study has defined rational mindsets, which facilitate individuals' rational calculations regarding educational choices, as an integrative framework comprising both epistemic and instrumental rationality.

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Another concept that needs elaboration is that the rational cost-benefit calculations regarding educational choices in RCT generally include three dimensions: 1) the anticipated costs or benefits of attaining the next-level education, 2) the perceived likelihood of success or failure of the next-level education, and 3) the motive of social status maintenance, that is the motive of maintaining and protecting the current social status (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Thompson, 2016).

Among the three dimensions, the motive of social status maintenance can be explained by one of the most influential rational choice perspectives – the relative risk aversion (RRA) mechanism (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). This mechanism holds that all participants in the educational systems share the same goal when making educational decisions: to try to avoid downward social class mobility. In addition, all children take their parents' social position as a reference for their educational aspirations (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997, p. 293; Goldthorpe, 2000). As Bernardi (2012) noted, from the perspective of the RRA mechanism, educational decisions are not about maximizing opportunities for upward mobility but about minimizing the risk of downward mobility for individuals in terms of their original social class.

In this case, compared to equally talented lower-class counterparts, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to stay longer in the education system and are more likely to pursue higher levels of education. This phenomenon can be attributed to three interrelated factors. First of all, upper-class students usually have a higher reference level of social

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position; they aspire to achieve educational, occupational, and social status at least equal to that of their parents (Goldthorpe, 2007; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). This creates strong incentives for prolonged educational engagement. Secondly, maintaining a higher social position in this meritocratic society is more difficult than maintaining a lower one. As such, upper-class students require more education to avoid downward social mobility (Thompson, 2016). By contrast, lower-class students can maintain their social status without too much education, so they tend to have "less incentive" to pursue higher education or choose the academic track (Breen et al., 2014, p. 261). Lastly, privileged students tend to benefit from substantial educational resource advantages that mitigate academic risks (Keller & Zavalloni, 1964, p. 60), which indicates that even if they fail the high-stakes examination, their families can utilize socioeconomic resources to make up for this failure or resort to educational alternatives (Bernardi, 2012; Thompson, 2016). As a result, when pursuing higher levels of education, middle- and upper-class students tend to be more "financially insulated from adverse outcomes" (Hallsten, 2010, p. 812), enabling them to pursue ambitious academic trajectories as much as they can to maintain their superior social status, regardless of associated educational risks (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Breen et al., 2014, p. 259). By contrast, lower-class students tend to be more risk-averse when making educational decisions, carefully weighing potential costs against benefits when considering educational investments so as to make the safest choices.

Arguably, it is not that families from lower social origins desire less education but rather that they may need greater aspirations to reach higher levels of education (Thomson, 2016).

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Although all classes are equally concerned with downward mobility according to the RRA mechanism when facing the same educational goal, such as whether to attend university or not, students from different social origins still make different educational decisions.

2.4.2 Rational Choice Theory – primary and secondary effects

Drawing on RCT, Boudon (1974) further developed a model of primary and secondary effects of social origin to explain educational inequality. The primary effect of social origin refers to the class differences in academic abilities generated by cultural disparities at the earlier stage of schooling (Goldthorpe, 1996, p. 491; Thompson, 2016). An example of the primary effect is that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to achieve academic success than those from lower social origins (e.g., Plewis & Bartley, 2014; Sirin, 2005). Primary effects in particular have some affinity with Bourdieu's habitus (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014), showing that students' decisions are largely constrained and shaped by family sociocultural identity (Liu, 2019).The secondary effect of social origin refers to the class differences in educational decisions made at educational transition points after controlling for the class differences in academic abilities (Boudon, 1974; Entrich, 2015; Goldthorpe, 1996). Factors influencing the educational decision-making process usually focus on schooling aspirations (van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007) and mechanisms of cost-benefit considerations (Bachsleitner et al., 2018; Nash, 2006). Therefore, according to RCT, lower-class families tend to have lower educational aspirations due to the financial burden and uncertainty about potential educational failure. As such, they are more likely to choose vocational education or enter the labor market earlier than their equally performing

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counterparts from the upper class. In summary, the primary effect is manifested in the class differences in academic abilities, while the secondary effect refers to the class differences in educational choices made by families with equally performing children at educational transition points.

Although these two effects approach educational inequality from different perspectives, much has been discussed about which one is more important. Goldthorpe (1996, 2007) argued that attention should be centered more on secondary effects rather than primary effects. This is because, with the expansion and reform of education, class differentials in academic ability shown at the early stage of schooling tend to decrease while the educational choices for children from the lower class will increase (van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). In this case, more children, including those from disadvantaged families, will stay longer in the educational system after the compulsory educational period (Goldthorpe, 2007), with more educational choices facing them, including optional courses, academic tracks, higher education, etc. Hence, inequalities at lower educational transition (i.e., from primary school education to middle school and high school education) may decrease with the reduction in class influences, while inequalities at higher educational transition (i.e., from high school education to tertiary education) still exist due to the increasing educational choices (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Thompson, 2016). The secondary effect is, thus, imperative in explaining educational inequality at higher transitional points. Therefore, although many studies (e.g., Barglowski, 2019; Roksa & Potter, 2011; Tsiplakides, 2018) used class origins (e.g., SES, parental education, parental occupation, cultural capital, etc.) to explain the inequality of

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educational outcomes, a growing number of empirical studies also began to explore educational inequality through educational choices (i.e., secondary effects) (e.g., Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Matsuoka, 2018; Reimer & Pollak, 2010; Zwier et al., 2020).

2.4.3 Rational Choice Theory and Cultural Value Theory

In recent years, Boudon's rational choice explanation of educational inequality has gained increasing attention and recognition in academia. Some scholars (Nash, 2005; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007) argued that this view offers an alternative to the dominant class or cultural value theory. Previously, the most influential cultural theory was Bourdieu and Passion's (1977) Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory, which held that the class origin resources (social, cultural, and economic capital) among classes are distributed unequally and transmitted through generations. The possession of these power resources would influence students' academic performances at school. In this theory, cultural capital is considered the most significant capital associated with scholastic outcomes and the main cause of educational inequality – children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds inherit more cultural resources from their parents and tend to perform better in school. As such, cultural inequalities among classes are considered essential in reproducing educational inequalities.

However, unlike the Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory, Boudon acknowledges the effectiveness of cultural advantage in academic abilities but does not treat it as the entire explanation for educational inequality (Thompson, 2016). Instead, he incorporates the class differentials in educational choices made by students at a similar academic performance level

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as the second influencing factor. Arguably, Boudon's RCT offers a more comprehensive view of the problem of educational inequality methodologically, emphasizing the fact that the inequality of educational outcomes persists after controlling for academic performances (Nash, 2005, 2006).

Nevertheless, although Boudon does not refer to Bourdieu, his arguments share certain similarities with Bourdieu (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014). In the study of van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007), the researchers compared Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory with the RRA mechanism. They found that while Bourdieu's Cultural and Social Reproduction Theory can manifest the primary effect of social origin, the RRA mechanism exerts more influence on educational aspirations and the desire to avoid downward social mobility, which is more closely linked to the secondary effect. Other scholars made a similar argument, holding that the primary effect can, in fact, be understood more broadly as "cultural or genetic" (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 33) influences, while the secondary effect is conceptualized by the RRA mechanism (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Nash, 2003, 2006). Arguably, at the level of primary effects, cultural inequalities are acknowledged by Boudon to explain the class differentials in scholastic performances and academic abilities, while at the level of secondary effects, Boudon approaches the problem of educational inequality more thoroughly from the risk aversion and educational decision-making perspectives.

2.4.4 Limitation and modification

RCT also has its limitations, and two aspects need clarification and modification. Firstly,

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RCT considers educational decision-making as rational, holding that families always make the most rational choices about children's future learning path based on careful assessments of costs and benefits. However, Goldthorpe (1996, p. 485; 2007, p. 26) argued that people cannot act in a purely rational manner, because they do not always fully know about their goals, always have the necessary information or calculation power to determine the best means to pursue their goals, or always ultimately follow what they consider a reasonable course of action. As Thompson (2016) pointed out, people are not always rational and may not have a "perfect understanding of their situation" (p. 9). It can be said that the assumption of complete "rationality" cannot be satisfied in practical research. Therefore, the "rationality" here does not refer to "objective or infinite rationality" but rather "subjective and bounded rationality" (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 5). That is, people are not acting rationally at all times but rather "have the tendency" (Goldthorpe, 2006, p. 141) to act rationally as much as they can. Hence, when applying RCT in my research, individuals are assumed to develop clear goals and beliefs, have as much information as possible, and make associated calculations to maximize the subjective expected utility under the circumstances (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Goldthorpe, 2006).

A further theoretical limitation of RCT concerns its insufficient conceptualization of agency in educational decision-making processes. Within educational research, agency is broadly conceptualized as an individual's capacity to exercise autonomous, goal-directed decision-making in response to contextual constraints and opportunities (Gao, 2010). While RCT ostensibly centers agency in its theoretical framework and recognizes socioeconomic

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stratification in agentic educational choices (Thomson, 2016), it fails to adequately specify whether parental or child agency predominates in these critical determinations. Commonly, parents are perceived to function as the primary decision-makers by virtue of their control over resource allocation, which directly enables children's participation in high-stakes academic pursuits including competitive examinations, higher education pathways, and private tutoring. This parental dominance is especially pronounced during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by increased educational stratification.

Supporting this view, empirical research conducted by Entrich (2025) involving participants aged 12 to 16 revealed that parents' prior experiences related to academic performance can be consciously or unconsciously projected onto their children, thereby exerting a considerable impact on the children's academic grades, ability self-concept, and performance anxiety. These factors, in turn, collectively determine the investment in shadow education. Additionally, although educational decisions are made within the family context, the influence of fathers' educational aspirations appear to be minimal, as they are less engaged in children's school and extracurricular life compared to mothers (Entrich, 2015, 2018). As can be seen, parents (particularly mothers) play a pivotal role in shaping children's educational decision-making.

However, children seem to play an increasingly leading part in making decisions about the investment in shadow education as they grow older (Entrich, 2015, p. 212), even though parents' influence accompanies them throughout their educational stage. This conclusion

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accords with other studies – primary or middle school students' parents take dominant control over children's participation in private tutoring (Yung & Zeng, 2022, p. 381), while high school students usually decide for themselves whether to participate in private tutoring (Yung, 2019). As Zhan et al. (2013, p. 496) argued, although most tutoring fees are paid by parents, it is the children who are the real consumers, as well as the primary decision-makers in the subjects, forms, and tutors of the private tutoring they receive. Likewise, many other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, such as reading English books and listening to authentic English radios, are self-directed and require children to make their own decisions.

Hence, while parents indeed play a crucial role in deciding the investment in shadow education, it is important to acknowledge that, as children become mature, particularly those in their later adolescent years, they begin to assert their agency in decision-making processes. As such, by choosing Grade 12 students as the research subject in this thesis, this study incorporated parents' influence through ESCS but intended to put more emphasis on other factors at the individual level of the students that influence their educational decision-making.

2.4.5 Empirically testing Rational Choice Theory

This thesis intended to use RCT to explore high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities under the DRP, including choices for EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. From the perspective of RCT, since educational investments require the careful consideration of both students' time and energy as well as

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parents' financial conditions (Entrich, 2015), the investment in or against out-of-school English learning activities can be viewed as a result of the rational choice made by individuals.

Currently, there are two primary strategies to test RCT empirically. The first is to directly test RCT by measuring the "subjective preferences for motivating individual behavior" (p. 13) through rating scales (Thompson, 2016), where the variables are related to students' subjective beliefs of cost-benefit calculations of educational choices in the RCT model, such as the perceived likelihood of educational success and failure, the subjective evaluation of costs, the anticipated educational benefits, and the desire to avoid downward mobility. For example, Gabay-Egozi et al. (2010) used the direct measurement to examine the correlation between students' subjective cost-benefit considerations and educational choices by including three independent variables: relative risk aversion, beliefs about future utilities, and relative failure expectation. They found that educational choices are significantly influenced by individuals' expected probability of utilities and failure but not affected by social status maintenance motivations. While this approach gives us a precise understanding of the subjective cost-benefit considerations of individuals, it has also been frequently criticized for failing to achieve research validity due to the lack of objective circumstances and valid exogenous predictors (Jaeger, 2007; Thompson, 2016).

The second approach is called the "revealed preference analysis" (Jaeger, 2007, p. 458), which indirectly tests RCT by measuring the behavioral preferences, such as the actual

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educational decisions made by students (Thompson, 2016). This approach typically identifies rational decision-making by examining how educational decisions are influenced by different exogenous conditions to which individuals are hypothesized to respond (Jaeger, 2007). For example, Breen and Yaish (2006) used three exogenous variables – financial resources, social class backgrounds, and academic abilities – to examine students' educational choices without directly measuring any of the subjective cost-benefit calculations of the RCT model. Matsuoka (2018) used RCT to explore how Japanese students' decisions for shadow education are influenced by family SES and neighborhood SES, finding that students from higher SES tend to invest more in shadow education. Similarly, Forster and van de Werfhorst (2020) employed parents' knowledge of the educational system as an exogenous factor, identifying that parents' knowledge can influence students' academic success and rational educational choices at the educational transition point. This revealed preference analysis approach is more objective than the first approach as it does not rely on individuals' subjective beliefs of cost-benefit calculations. However, the main drawback of it may be theoretical ambiguity – the empirical findings may also be explained by alternative theories (Jaeger, 2007; Thompson, 2016).

Although these two approaches test RCT from different aspects, Stocké (2007) argued that these two approaches are complementary because subjective beliefs of cost-benefit calculations are restricted to objective antecedent conditions. For example, subjective cost estimation depends on the number of children at home and available household income, and subjective success probability relies on the current academic achievement (p. 510). Jaeger

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(2007) adopted this approach of combining both subjective cost-benefit considerations and external objective conditions, where expected economic and social returns are used as subjective motivations, while factors such as school-level SES and reading ability are set as objective conditions. Arguably, subjective motivations and objective conditions, on the one hand, can explain educational decisions from different perspectives, while on the other, they are interrelated.

Therefore, this study combined these two approaches to explore students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities by considering both subjective beliefs of cost-benefit calculations and external objective conditions. This study first utilized the subjective measurement approach by employing three subjective cost-benefit considerations: 1) anticipated English learning benefits, 2) anticipated English learning success probability, and 3) motive of social status maintenance. Furthermore, to measure how students respond to the larger educational environment under the DRP, I also included two attitudinal factors: 1) English learning policy stance, 2) perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning. Second, this study adopted revealed preferences analysis to incorporate objective antecedent conditions – social origin and students' English exam scores – as proposed by the RCT model. In addition, considering that family social capital serves as important antecedence to students' decision-making behavior to rationalize environmental uncertainties, this study also examined 3) family social capital invested in English learning under the DRP.

As such, social origin was set as the core variable in the study; students' demonstrated

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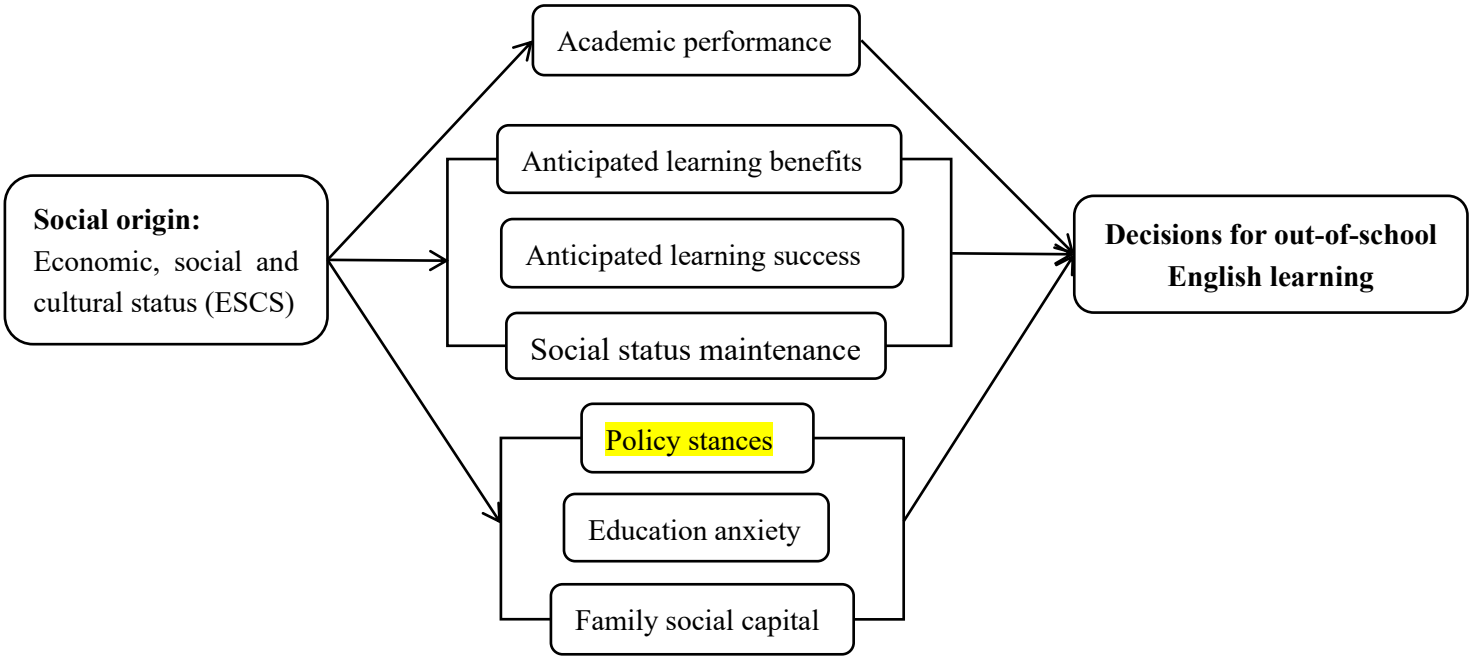
English academic performance was used to capture the primary effect; the three subjective cost-benefit considerations and the three attitudinal factors toward policy were used to capture secondary effects. Informed by these discussions, I put forward the conceptual model as shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2

High school students' out-of-school English learning choices through the lens of RCT



2.5 Research questions and hypotheses

Currently, no study has been designed specifically to identify students' educational choices under the DRP. Therefore, drawing on RCT and employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, this study aimed to bridge this critical research gap by investigating how high school students made out-of-school English learning choices under the DRP. To align with the three research objectives outlined in Section 1.5, this study first explored the

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types of and reasons for out-of-school English learning activities chosen by high school students, aiming to gain a general understanding of their out-of-school English learning situations under the DRP. Secondly, I sought to understand the role of social origin in shaping students' out-of-school English learning choices, considering both its primary and secondary effects. Finally, I attempted to compare the similarities and differences in out-of-school English learning choices made by students from different social classes, so as to evaluate the effectiveness of the DRP in alleviating educational inequality. To address these research problems, I put forward three overall research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What types of out-of-school English learning activities do high school students in Mainland China choose and why under the DRP?

RQ2: In general, how does social origin shape high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects?

RQ3: By differentiating students into upper, middle, and lower social classes:

(1) How does social origin differentially shape high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects?

(2) What factors related to social origin help to explain the inequality in educational decision-making among the three social classes?

The first research question (***RQ1***) aimed to investigate the specific types of and reasons for out-of-school English learning choices. The findings to this question unveiled the general trend of high school students' out-of-school English learning choices under the DRP,

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providing background information for my further analysis.

The second research question (***RQ2***) explored the roles of social origin effects (i.e., family ESCS) in shaping students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary effects (i.e., English academic performance) and secondary effects (i.e., anticipated English learning benefits, anticipated English learning success probability, motives of social status maintenance, English learning policy stance, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital in English learning). Findings pertaining to this research question revealed how students' educational choices were shaped by their social origins, subjective cost-benefit considerations, and the influence of the DRP.

To better answer ***RQ2***, four main hypotheses were formulated based on the literature accordingly. First, as the core variable in this study, social origin plays a pivotal role in influencing students' out-of-school English learning choices. As discussed above, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to stay longer in the educational system without worrying too much about educational risks and have more socioeconomic capital to obtain learning opportunities (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Liu & Bray, 2020). As such, I hypothesized that:

> ***Hypothesis 1***: High school students' social origins (i.e., family ESCS) positively correlate with their choices for participating in out-of-school English learning activities.

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In terms of primary effects of social origin (i.e., English academic performance), due to the social-class differentials in socioeconomic and cultural capital, parental support and expectations, as well as access to learning resources, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally achieve better academic outcomes (Boudon, 1974; Matsuoka, 2018). Consequently, in turn, students who come from more affluent families but exhibit lower academic performance are more inclined to participate in out-of-school educational activities aimed at improving their academic outcomes, owing to their access to sufficient resources and the elevated expectations set by their parents. Therefore, I hypothesized that:

> ***Hypothesis 2***: English academic performance significantly correlates with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities and contributes to part of the social origin effect.

Regarding secondary effects of social origin, first of all, individuals from varying social classes exhibit distinct subjective cost-benefit considerations. I have assumed that engagement in out-of-school English learning activities are particularly significant for students hailing from higher social origins, as they offer enhanced subjective benefits (e.g., the potential to improve future career prospects) and assist in the maintenance of their superior social standing (i.e., RRA mechanism), which is particularly true for those whose parents possess advanced education and hold high academic expectations (Bachsleitner et al., 2018). Furthermore, students from affluent social backgrounds who seek to sustain their educational advantages should be more likely to be swayed by their perceptions of the

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English learning success probability, thereby participating in out-of-school English learning activities for purposes of either enrichment or remediation. As such, I put forward ***Hypothesis 3*** as follows:

> ***Hypothesis 3a***: The effect of anticipated English learning benefits is significantly correlated with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, partly explaining the social origin effect.
>
> ***Hypothesis 3b***: The effect of anticipated English learning success is significantly correlated with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, partly explaining the social origin effect.
>
> ***Hypothesis 3c***: The effect of social status maintenance motive is significantly correlated with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, partly explaining the social origin effect.

Furthermore, the three attitudinal factors toward policy may exert varying effects on students' educational decisions. The implementation of the DRP, which limits private tutoring, may lead students who aspire to seek additional academic support to strongly oppose the policy, potentially resulting in heightened anxiety regarding its negative consequences. Consequently, it is expected that increased opposition to the DRP's interventions in English and greater perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning increase the likelihood of students engaging in out-of-school English learning activities. Additionally, students from affluent families who possess substantial social capital, such as interpersonal connections,

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may be more likely to covertly access individualized home tutoring or participate in tutoring lessons conducted by acquaintances (Xue & Li, 2023; L. Zhang, 2022), despite the restrictions imposed by the DRP. Therefore, ***Hypothesis 4*** was as follows:

> ***Hypothesis 4a***: The effect of English learning policy stance is significantly correlated with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, partly explaining the social origin effect.
>
> ***Hypothesis 4b***: The effect of educational anxiety is significantly correlated with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, partly explaining the social origin effect.
>
> ***Hypothesis 4c***: The effect of family capital is significantly correlated with high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, partly explaining the social origin effect.

Finally, to address the third research question (***RQ3***), this study differentiated students into upper, middle, and lower classes according to the values of their family ESCS. First, I utilized quantitative analysis to examine ***RQ3(1)*** and then conducted semi-structured interviews to address ***RQ3(2).*** This research question has provided a deeper understanding of how students from different social strata made educational choices.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces and explains the methodological issues related to this study. First, I introduce the research method – explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach. Second, I introduce the research settings, explaining why the study chose two different schools and selected high school students in Grade 12 as research subjects. Then, I describe the research design of this study and related research instruments used, including questionnaires and interviews. Next, I discuss the data collection process, including data collection timeline, the determination of sample size, variables (i.e., explanatory, dependent, and control variables), and the interview process in detail. Further, I explain the data analysis procedures of both the quantitative and qualitative research phases. Finally, I discuss the issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

3.2 Research method

This thesis employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach. This method is a sequential two-phase approach, consisting of the initial quantitative analysis and the subsequent qualitative research; the qualitative phase is usually used to explain quantitative results in more depth (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In the quantitative phase, this study first conducted a survey and used stepwise logistic regression to identify the correlation between explanatory variables and the outcomes. Next, this study used the decomposition method developed by Karlson, Holm, and Breen (KHB) in 2012 to conduct causal mediation analysis, so as to identify the contribution of each variable to the total effects of social origin. After

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obtaining quantitative results, this study conducted qualitative research through in-depth semi-structured interviews to explain the important findings in the quantitative phase.

The first-phase quantitative analysis served two functions for the subsequent qualitative research. First, by identifying the potentially predictive factors contributing to students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities, the outcomes of logistic regression and KHB decomposition helped inform the interview questions in the qualitative research. Second, it helped the author purposefully select participants for the qualitative phase. For example, this study interviewed students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to explain the quantitative results. Before the research, it was challenging to know the students' family ESCS. However, the researcher could select students more precisely based on the information provided by students in the questionnaires.

In summary, the quantitative data from this study elucidated the general mechanisms through which primary and secondary effects of social origin influenced students' decisions regarding out-of-school English learning. Complementing this, the qualitative research conducted through semi-structured interviews examined the specific factors related to social origin that contributed to unequal educational choices, as well as the reasons these factors may have varying degrees of impact on the educational choices of students from different social classes. In other words, the quantitative analysis offered insights into the correlations between potential influencing factors and educational outcomes, while the qualitative data provided a deeper exploration of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and other intrinsic factors affecting

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their choices in out-of-school English learning.

3.3 Research setting

In this section, I first discuss the research site and schools where I conducted the research. Then, I explain three main reasons why I selected high school students in Grade 12 as research subjects.

3.3.1 The research sites

This research was conducted in the capital city of Sichuan Province: Chengdu. As one of the nine initial pilot cities of the DRP and among the first cohort to adopt the policy in Mainland China, Chengdu represented an ideal case study due to its established and stable phase of DRP execution, thereby ensuring data validity. The study deliberately limited its scope to Chengdu's administrative region to maintain methodological consistency. This localized approach enabled better control over inter-regional policy implementation variances, while allowing focused examination of how school-level and individual-level factors shaped students' out-of-school English learning choices.

Using purposive sampling, I selected two public high schools (A and B) in Chengdu to collect questionnaires and conduct interviews. Several methodological considerations guided the selection of these two schools. First of all, School A and School B were at different ranking levels, where students were heterogeneous in academic abilities. School A was a key high school, while school B was a much lower-ranking high school. As the students of both

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schools were admitted through the unified *Zhongkao*, students in School A tended to have much higher academic performances, while students in School B were less academically capable. This contrast allowed for a comparative analysis of how students from different academic backgrounds made out-of-school English learning choices under the DRP.

Second, students in these two schools had diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. School A was located in the downtown while School B was located in the suburban area. Therefore, students in School A generally came from wealthier families, while those in School B came from relatively poorer families. As social origin was the core variable in this study, this diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds enabled the study to more precisely examine how students from varying social backgrounds chose out-of-school English learning activities.

Overall, selecting two schools that exemplified contrasting academic rankings and locations facilitated a richer and more comprehensive investigation of students' out-of-school English learning choices across diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds within the framework of the DRP. This selection approach not only had the potential to reveal both common patterns and unique variations in students' responses to the DRP regarding their out-of-school English learning preferences, but also significantly improved the reliability and validity of the research as well as its potential for analytical generalizability. Consequently, this methodology allowed for the derivation of insights that may be relevant to analogous contexts within the DRP.

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3.3.2 Participants

The study chose high school students in Grade 12 as the research subjects, with average age around 18 and above. There were three main reasons for choosing Grade 12 students. Firstly, the purpose of this study was to explore students' out-of-school English language learning under the DRP, which meant that the selected participants should be subject to the influence of the DRP. As stipulated in Article 30 of the policy document, relevant provisions should also be applied to the high school stage. Therefore, although the DRP is mainly targeted at the compulsory education level, the high school level has also been inevitably affected by the DRP. The cohort in question enrolled in high school in September 2021, shortly after the DRP's enactment in July of the same year. Consequently, these students completed their entire three-year high school education under the policy's sway, making their experiences particularly relevant for assessing its potential impact on out-of-school English learning. That said, it is crucial to recognize that the DRP's ramifications extend well beyond formal academic tutoring, permeating the broader ecosystem of out-of-school language acquisition – including private instruction, digital learning platforms, and informal study practices.

Nevertheless, while this sample offers meaningful insights into students' decision-making behavior against the DRP background, the generalizability of the findings must be approached with caution. China's significant regional disparities – manifested in uneven policy implementation, varying access to educational resources, and socioeconomic differences – inevitably lead to divergent experiences among students. Thus, while the selected cohort provides a valuable case study, further research incorporating geographically

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and demographically diverse populations would strengthen the validity and applicability of the conclusions.

Second, RCT is usually applied to transition points in the educational system where students need to make appropriate educational choices based on rational evaluations to pursue further studies, during which primary and secondary effects are generated accordingly to constrain the students' educational choices (Goldthorpe, 2007). As a result, compared with freshmen and sophomores, senior students in high school in Grade 12 were considered more appropriate for this research. With the upcoming *Gaokao*, senior students were facing the most important educational transition point in their educational career, where they had to make corresponding educational choices, such as whether to take private tutoring or not, to better achieve personal educational pursuits. Therefore, through the research of students in Grade 12, we could gain a better understanding of how they made out-of-school English learning choices at this critical educational transition point to cope with the *Gaokao* and pursue their educational goals.

Finally, when applying RCT to explore educational choices, I was very aware of the importance of ensuring participants' "rationality", or, as what Goldthorpe (2006, p. 141) mentioned as have "the tendency to be rational". Therefore, compared with primary and middle school students, high school students aged 18 and above tend to be more mature, have stronger personal ideas about future careers, and are more likely to fulfill their agency to make rational choices according to their personal educational plans. Previous studies (e.g.,

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Entrich, 2015; Yung, 2019; Yung & Zeng, 2022) have also demonstrated that compared with primary and middle school students, whose parents may dominate control over educational choices, high school students are more inclined to make educational choices according to their own preferences, expectations, and rational evaluations. Besides, if primary and secondary school students had been selected, the role of parents should have also be taken into account, which would make the study more complex and less focused.

Taken together, this study chose high school students in Grade 12 to explore how they made educational choices through RCT. To ensure appropriate samples, the age requirement (i.e., 18 years old and above) was explicitly stated before I delivered questionnaires in the classroom and the consent form acted as a legal gatekeeper. In the Chinese educational system, students typically enter Grade 1 at ages 6 to 7, and thus Grade 12 cohorts predominantly met the age requirement. In addition, there were many "*Gaokao*-retaking students" in each class, who spent an additional year repeating the Grade 12 studies and retaking the *Gaokao*. Their participation proved particularly valuable as they not only represented mature learners with extended educational experience, but also enhanced the sample size while maintaining age-appropriate representation.

3.4 Research instruments

The explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach in my study consisted of questionnaires, followed by interviews. Details of the two research instruments are discussed below.

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3.4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire is one of the most frequently used research instruments to obtain data, especially when the targeted research population is large. In the quantitative research phase, a questionnaire (see Appendix I for the questionnaire) was designed to explore the background information regarding high school students' choices for out-of-school English learning. The questionnaire specifically consisted of two parts.

The first part of the questionnaire collected descriptive data, including the types of and reasons for student participation in out-of-school English learning activities. All questions in the first part were designed as multiple-choice questions, which helped us gain a preliminary understanding of how high school students learned English after school and why they made such learning choices. However, because the multiple-choice questions were closed-ended, some other potential answers might have been missed. As some scholars (e.g., Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004; Zohrab, 2013) argued, compared to open-ended questionnaires, although data collection through close-ended questionnaires is more efficient and faster, open-ended questionnaires are more likely to capture richer and more in-depth information. Therefore, to explore students' English learning situations at a greater level, I incorporated an open-ended fill-in-blank question "Others, please indicate ..." at the end of each section of the descriptive data collection. The second part of the questionnaire was designed for collecting statistical data, exploring essential information about the explanatory and dependent variables used for logistic regression and KHB decomposition. As the explanatory and dependent variables were mostly related to students' degree of feelings, attitudes, and views, I used Likert-type

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questions. According to Stehr-Green et al. (2003, p. 4), ordinal close-ended questions are good at seeking information like the degree of involvement or the intensity of feelings. Therefore, questions in the second part consisted of forced-response choices concerning the family backgrounds, English academic performances, subjective cost-benefit considerations, and attitudinal factors toward policy. Regarding demographic details (i.e., gender, ethnicity, and registered residence), by contrast, I used categorical close-ended questions. At the end of the questionnaire, I also asked students to leave their contact details, such as their phone number or WeChat number, and if they were willing to join the following interviews. This step helped me to identify potential interview participants and saved time for my later interview process.

To ensure high-quality responses and the return rate of the questionnaires, the study chose group-administered questionnaires, in which process questionnaires were handed out to participants “at one time and space” (Zohrabi, 2013, p. 255). Specifically, I went to each classroom to distribute my questionnaires with the assistance of teachers and then accompanied the students on-site to complete them. Teacher presence was deliberately permitted during questionnaire administration to leverage their authority, thereby reinforcing students’ engagement, minimizing distractions, and mitigating risks of non-response or careless answers. Nevertheless, acknowledging potential social desirability bias arising from teacher presence, wherein students might modify responses to align with perceived teacher expectations, participants received clear assurances regarding the confidentiality of their responses prior to questionnaire distribution, with explicit statements that only the researcher

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would have access to the raw data (see Section 3.8.3). To eliminate potential comprehension barriers, I also explained questions explicitly in the questionnaire and clarified important points to avoid ambiguities, ensuring participants fully understood each question before responding. Furthermore, all questionnaires were written in Chinese, the mother tongue of the participants, in case some respondents may not have accurately understood or comprehended the questions due to their lack of English proficiency. The questionnaires were distributed on paper in both research schools. The paper-based questionnaires were distributed uniformly across both research schools through coordination with classroom head teachers. This methodology yielded 1,345 distributed questionnaires, with 1,287 valid returns representing a 95.7% validity rate.

3.4.2 Interviews

Interview is a widely used research method of collecting qualitative data, which allows the researcher to gain deeper and richer understanding of respondents' lives. According to Tegan (2023), there are three most common types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Structured interviews refer to the interviews with predetermined questions in fixed order and number. Although structured interviews are useful for generating rich data, they are challenging for new researchers (Zohrabi, 2013). In contrast, unstructured interviews are conducted without any predetermined questions, and the questions usually "arise from the natural flow of the conversation" (Zohrabi, 2013, p. 256). Semi-structured interviews are a combination of both structured and unstructured interviews – although questions are fixed, the researcher may reword them in any order or ask additional questions as appropriate.

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Therefore, in this study, the semi-structured interview was considered as the most popular interview type, as it is flexible, versatile, and not too rigid (Kallio et al., 2016; Tegan, 2023; Zohrabi, 2013).

Therefore, after obtaining the quantitative results, the study conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews to further identify potential factors influencing students' varying out-of-school English learning choices across different social classes. Specifically, the interviews first tried to understand the role of students' family social origin in shaping their out-of-school English learning choices. Furthermore, by delving deeper into students' previous learning experiences, the interview protocol systematically explored both tangible and intangible dimensions of social origins, analyzing and comparing their impact on students' cost-benefit calculations and their responses to policy constraints across different social classes.

While face-to-face interviews remain the predominant qualitative research technique, they present significant logistical constraints, including geographical barriers, scheduling limitations, and so forth (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). These challenges were particularly salient in the present study, given that all participants were Grade 12 students – a demographic characterized by demanding academic workloads during weekdays and frequent private tutoring commitments on weekends. Such time constraints rendered traditional face-to-face interviews impractical for this population. To address these methodological challenges, this study employed synchronous online video interviews conducted via WeChat.

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This approach offered two distinct advantages. First, it provided participants with greater flexibility in scheduling, enabling them to accommodate interviews within their highly structured academic routines. Second, online environment appeared to foster higher levels of participant engagement, as students demonstrated greater willingness to articulate their perspectives openly compared to more face-to-face settings. Nevertheless, I recognized the drawbacks of online interviews, especially the lack of nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, facial expressions, emotional meaning) that are pivotal in face-to-face interactions, potentially hindering rapport-building and nuanced interpretation of responses (James & Busher, 2009; Khan & MacEachen, 2022). To mitigate these constraints, the interview protocol tried to implement verbal check-ins (e.g., "How do you feel about your early English learning experience?") to explicitly elicit emotional states when necessary. Furthermore, I emphasized open-ended questioning strategies designed to elicit expansive responses during video calls, thereby compensating for the reduced availability of nonverbal information while simultaneously generating richer qualitative data.

Each participant received one round of interview, and each interview lasted for around one hour. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the mother tongue of both the researcher and participants. With the consent of the participants, I recorded all the interviews for later-stage transcription.

3.5 Data collection

This section gives details of the data collection procedures. First, I outline the data collection

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timeline and then discuss the arrangement of the pilot and final studies. Next, I introduce the data collection in the quantitative phase, including the determination of the sample size and the operationalization of explanatory, dependent, and control variables. Finally, I present the data collection in the qualitative phase, providing details of determining the sample size, recruiting suitable interview participants, and conducting interviews in the qualitative phase.

3.5.1 Data collection timeline

Figure 3.1 shows the data collection timeline of the whole study. The data collection time lasted for almost one year and can be divided into two parts: the pilot study and the final study.

The two rounds of pilot studies were conducted in March and May of 2023, respectively, aiming to test the research instrument. Some of the questionnaire questions in the first pilot study failed to satisfy the validity and reliability, so I refined my questionnaire questions and conducted the second round of the pilot study in May 2023. Afterward, I used the quantitative results of the second pilot study to purposefully choose participants for pilot interviews in July 2023.

The final study was formally carried out in September 2023, with an overall of 1,321 students filling out the questionnaires. It took me around four weeks to hand out, collect, and organize questionnaires in the two schools, and I finally sorted out 1,287 valid questionnaires. I conducted the quantitative analysis during October and November 2023. Based on the

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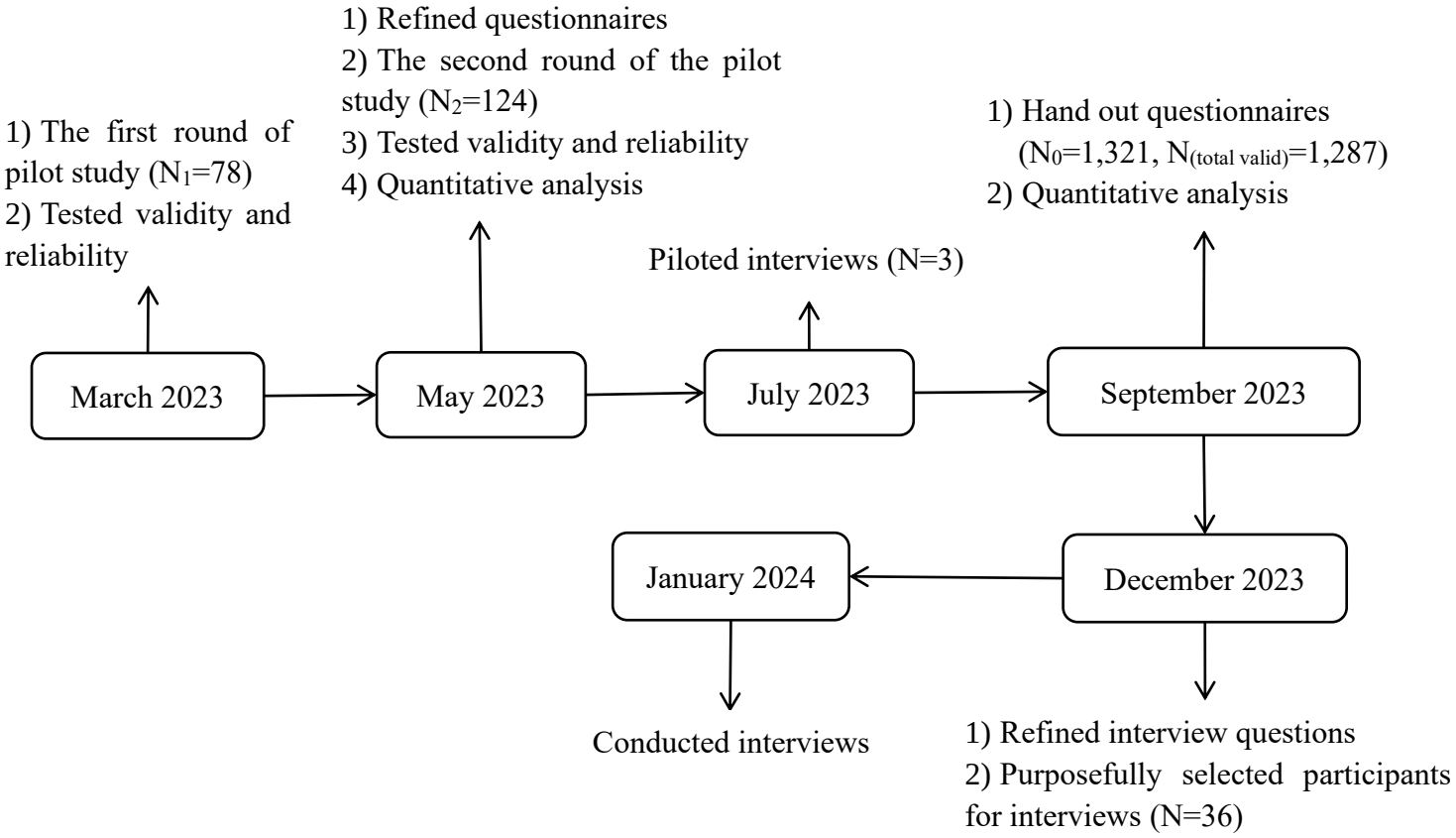
Figure 3.1

Timeline of the data collection



quantitative results, I further refined my interview questions in December. Finally, I used purposive sampling to select 36 students for final interviews in January 2024. As high school students in Grade 12 were busy preparing for the *Gaokao*, they were only available on weekends to participate in my interviews, so the interviews lasted for over two months until the end of March 2024.

3.5.2 Quantitative research

In the explanatory sequential method, the theoretical framework usually helps inform the design of the first-phase quantitative analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 137). In this study,

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the variables collected, and the questions included in the questionnaires were guided by the conceptual framework of RCT. According to the framework of RCT, this research employed family social origin as the key variable and used English academic performance to measure primary effects. Furthermore, this study utilized three subjective cost-benefit considerations (i.e., anticipated English learning benefits, anticipated English learning success probability, and motives of social status maintenance) and three attitudinal factors toward policy (i.e., English learning policy stance, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital in English learning) as secondary effects. Questions and items regarding eight explanatory variables and two dependent variables were referred to existing questionnaires in other relevant literature (e.g., Becker, 2003; Lu, 2022; Pan & Block, 2011; Yu et al., 2022). Appendix I shows the questionnaire, in which the questions and their items were revised after the pilot study.

3.5.2.1 Determining the sample size

In the quantitative research, data collected from the questionnaires needed to be used in the logistic regression model. Therefore, ensuring sufficient samples for logistic regression was highly important. In logistic regression analysis, the determination of the sample size usually depends on the guideline of Outcome Events Per Variable (EPV), and the rule of thumb of EPV=10 is the most common rule and is widely accepted by many scholars (Concato et al., 1995; Peduzzi et al., 1996). Based on this rule, the required sample size (N) is calculated by the formula:

$$N=10\times i / p$$

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where EPV equals 10, *i* represents the number of independent variables in the final model, and *p* refers to events fraction – the probability of occurrence of outcome events (usually $p \leqq 0.5$). In this study, there were 8 independent variables (i=8). Additionally, according to the results of the pilot study (see Section 3.7.1), the number of students who participated in EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities among the 111 sampled students was 28 and 57, corresponding to events fractions of 0.25 and 0.49, respectively. I, thus, assumed that the expected events fraction in the final study would be at least 0.25 (p = 0.25). Substituting all values into the above equation, the calculated minimum sample size for the final study was 320.

However, the EPV of 10 criterion has generated much debate. Some scholars (e.g., Pavlou et al., 2016; Vittinghoff & McCulloch, 2017) argued that the EPV=10 rule is too strict and can be relaxed to EPV<10. By contrast, van Smeden (2016, 2019) criticized that as a minimum sample size criterion for binary logistic regression analysis, the evidence on which the EPV=10 rule is based is too weak and does not accurately account for changes in events fraction. Through empirical studies, Bujang et al. (2018) made a similar argument that EPV=10 is insufficient for statistical accuracy. They concluded that the minimum sample size for logistic regression must be at least 500 to adequately represent the parameters of the target population in any case and further proposed a new formula for calculating the sample size:

$$N=100+50\times i$$

where EPV=50 and *i* represents the number of independent variables in the final model. Therefore, based on this new guideline, at least 500 (N=100+50*8=500) samples should be

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collected in the final study. In order to sufficiently represent the parameters of the targeted population and to account for the problem of missing data, all high school students in Grade 12 in the two schools were recruited to fill out the questionnaires. This study finally collected 1,321 samples. After excluding questionnaires with inconsistent information, incomplete, or blank responses, the obtained valid samples were 1,287 (see Table 3.1 for details).

Table 3.1

Sample size for quantitative analysis

	All samples	Valid samples
School A	632	623
School B	689	664
Total number	1,321	1,287

3.5.2.2 Independent variables

With the overall 1,287 questionnaires, I collected students' information regarding the eight explanatory variables as follows. The ultimate operationalization of secondary-effect variables is presented in Table 3.2.

Social origin

Social origin served as the core variable in this study, which was measured by family Economic, Social, and Cultural status (ESCS) in the analysis. Three major indicators were created to reflect ESCS. The first indicator was the parental highest educational degree,

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which was encoded into five categories[1]. Second, parental occupation[2] referred to Lu's (2002) classification of Chinese social occupations. The third indicator – household possession – included three aspects: family wealth possession, cultural possession, and educational resources possession. Among all, family wealth possession[3] encompassed twelve items. It drew on the items and assets identified in the table of "Household possessions and home background indices" (OECD, 2014, p. 316) and "National household possession items" (pp. 445–446) in PISA 2012. Cultural possession[4] was used as the proxy of family cultural capital, which consisted of three items (OECD, 2014, p. 316). Educational resources possession[5] was comprised of seven items identified in the table of "Household possessions and home background indices" in PISA 2012 (OECD, 2014, p. 316). All the above assets and

[1] Parental education degree: 1) middle school diploma or below, 2) high school or vocational school diploma, 3) technical college, 4) university degree, 5) postgraduate degree or above.

[2] Parental occupations: 1) government (including the state-owned company) officials, 2) managers in the private company, 3) private entrepreneurs, 4) professional and technical personnel (including faculty in higher education institutions, other researchers, school teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, designers, etc.), 5) clerk and related workers, 6) individual business, 7) military personnel and police, 8) business service personnel, 9) industrial workers, 10) agricultural laborers, 11) unemployed, and 12) others, please indicate _____.

[3] Home wealth possessions: 1) a room of your own, 2) room with a bath or shower, 3) own mobile phone, 4) iPad, 5) computer/laptop, 6) television, 7) digital camera, 8) vacuum cleaner, 9) home cinema system, 10) car, 11) own passport, 12) Juice extractor.

[4] Cultural possession: 1) classical literature, 2) books of poetry, 3) works of art.

[5] Home educational resources: 1) a desk to study at home, 2) a quiet place to study, 3) a computer you can use for schoolwork, 4) educational software, 5) books to help with your schoolwork, 6) technical reference books, 7) a dictionary.

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items were coded as (Yes=1, No=0), and the total score was used to indicate household possession. According to the PISA 2012 and 2015 Technical Report, ESCS was described as a composite score derived via the principal component analysis (PCA) from parental highest education, parental occupation, and home possessions (OECD, 2014, p. 396; 2017, pp. 339–340). As such, after collecting these three indicators, this study employed PCA to combine these three indicators into one standardized continuous index of ESCS.

Students' academic performance

This variable was used to capture the primary effect in educational decision-making. This study employed students' English examination scores in the unified municipal examination to represent their English academic performance. This variable was performed as a continuous variable, with higher scores representing higher academic ability.

Anticipated English learning benefits

Anticipated learning benefits can be understood as the extent to which individuals perceive the utility of learning for future academic, career, and economic achievement (Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010). Therefore, this study employed students' subjectively anticipated benefits of English learning as one of the cost-benefit considerations contributing to out-of-school English learning choices. Informed by the study of Pan and Block (2011) and Khan (2014), this study designed four questions to measure students' anticipated English learning benefits (see Appendix I for the questionnaire). Each question was scored on a five-point scale, with a higher point representing a higher level of anticipated English benefits.

Anticipated English learning success probability

Anticipated probability of learning success can be defined as the perceived likelihood of

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successfully completing the prescribed course of study (Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010) or successfully obtaining an educational degree (Becker, 2003; Stocké, 2007; Zimmermann, 2020). In this research context, I defined the anticipated English learning success probability as the perceived likelihood of successfully completing the English language course at school and reaching the target English examination scores in the *Gaokao* only through school English education without resorting to out-of-school English learning. In other words, the higher the anticipated probability of students' English learning success, the more confidence they had in school English education. By referring to the measuring scale of Becker (2003, p. 8) and Bachsleitner et al. (2018, p. 28), four questions scored on a five-point scale were designed to measure students' anticipated probability of English learning success (see Appendix I for the questionnaire), with "5" representing "strongly agree" and "1" representing "strongly disagree".

Motive of social status maintenance

The motive of social status maintenance reflected students' educational aspirations and desires to avoid downward social mobility, which was decisive in making educational decisions from the perspective of the RRA mechanism. According to the RRA mechanism, all individuals are unanimously concerned about downward social mobility and will take their parents' social positions as the reference for their educational aspirations. Based on this definition, five questions were designed to explore students' motives of social status maintenance by referring to van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007, p. 399). Specifically, these five questions measured students' motives for social status maintenance from the perspectives of their anticipated highest educational degree, occupation, earnings, and social status in the

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future. The questions were scored on a five-point scale (see Appendix I for the questionnaire), with “5” representing “strongly agree” and “1” representing “strongly disagree”.

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Table 3.2

Operationalization of secondary-effect variables

Variables	Items	Mean	Cronbach's alpha	KMO	Factor loading
Anticipated English learning benefits	(1) Learning English enables me to read advanced literature in future studies.	3.979	0.816	0.719	0.872
	(2) English improves my employment opportunities.	4.292			0.864
	(3) English brings me a competitive edge in future work and promotion.	4.153			0.756
	(4) I might use English as the working language in my future career.	3.086			0.715
Anticipated English learning success probability	(1) I believe I am able to fully master all the English knowledge at the high school stage even without out-of-school English learning.	2.470	0.851	0.784	0.851
	(2) I believe I am able to successfully achieve my target score on the English examination in the *Gaokao*.	2.521			0.854
	(3) I believe I am able to help me to score over 120 even if it is a very difficult English examination.	2.012			0.866
	(4) I believe I am able to score above the class average, no matter how difficult the English examination is.	2.948			0.754
Motive of social status maintenance	(1) I would like to attain a higher level of education than the level of education of my parents'.	4.564	0.779	0.738	0.837
	(2) It is important for me to work in an occupation that is better than the occupations of my parents.	3.990			0.836
	(3) It is important for me that my salary be at least equal to the level of my parents'.	3.948			0.772

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	(4) I would like to attain a social class on a level at least equal to my parents'.	3.864			0.695
	(5) My parents would not be satisfied if I found a worse job than they have.	2.954			0.485
English learning policy stance	(1) Do you approve of reducing English homework in high schools?	3.240	0.746	0.500	0.893
	(2) Do you approve of restricting English private tutoring in high schools?	3.094			0.893
Perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning	(1) I am worried that English learning is more involuted under the Double Reduction policy.	3.405	0.759	0.671	0.865
	(2) I worry that my English grades will drop in the absence of English homework and practice after class.	3.248			0.823
	(3) The restriction on English private tutoring makes me feel anxious than before.	2.503			0.777
Family social capital invested in English learning	(1) How much do your parent(s) value English education?	3.173	0.801	0.757	0.840
	(2) How often do your parent(s) check or provide instructions on your English homework?	1.758			0.799
	(3) How many social relationships (e.g., acquaintances, colleagues, friends, etc.) do your parent(s) have that are able to provide English private tutoring or other English learning opportunities for you under the Double Reduction policy?	2.548			0.791
	(4) How often do you discuss future alternative educational choices with your parent(s) to cope with the Double Reduction Policy and *Gaokao* failure?	3.109			0.735

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English learning policy stance

This variable was used to capture students' attitudes toward the policy interventions in English education. As the DRP primarily involves two aspects – reduction of homework load and restriction on private tutoring – this variable, thus, consisted of two questions covering these two aspects (see Appendix I for the questionnaire). Each question was scored on a five-point scale, with higher points representing more supportive attitudes toward the policy interventions in English learning at high school stage.

Perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning

This variable was used to explore students' perceived policy-induced anxiety degree in English learning at Grade 12. Many empirical studies have defined educational anxiety as the excessive concerns for academic performance, school admission, and learning attitudes (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). Informed by these studies, educational anxiety in this study included two aspects: academic performance anxiety and school admission anxiety under the DRP (see Appendix I for the questionnaire). Each question was scored on a five-point scale, with a higher point representing a higher level of anxiety. This study used the sum score as the measure of educational anxiety.

Family social capital invested in English learning

Social capital was defined by (Coleman, 1988) as the "social relations among persons" (p. S118), including the relations between students and schoolteachers, parents and schoolteachers, and especially students and parents. Such social relations provide resources (e.g., information flow, trust, social values, social network, parental involvement, parents' expectations and norms, etc.) for individuals to achieve certain goals (Coleman, 1990, 1998).

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While Bourdieu saw social capital as reproducing social inequality, Coleman (1990) regarded social capital as a positive social resource that can collectively help shape individual behavior in the RCT context. Social capital is thus also used by scholars to explore rational actors' educational choices (Berends, 2019). Informed by studies of Tan and Fang (2023) and Byun (2012), this study designed four questions to capture family social capital invested in English learning at Grade 12 (see Appendix I for the questionnaire): parents' importance attached to English education, parental involvement in checking up or giving instruction on students' English homework, family social interpersonal relationships that provide out-of-school English learning opportunities for students under the DRP, and parent-children discussions on alternative future educational choices to cope with the DRP. Each question was scored on a five-point scale, with higher points representing higher levels of social capital.

3.5.2.3 Dependent variables

Students' actual participation in out-of-school English learning activities was used as a proxy for their educational decisions. This study included two dependent variables – participation in EPT and in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. This division was conducive to the later-stage analysis of comparing the specifics of student participation in the two categories of English learning activities.

EPT choices

This dependent variable was measured by students' actual participation in EPT at Grade 12 (e.g., one-on-one EPT, home private tutoring, online tutoring, etc.). This variable was defined as equal to 1 if students had participated in EPT and 0 otherwise.

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Other forms of out-of-school English learning choices

This dependent variable was measured by students' actual participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities at Grade 12. Informed by Nunan and Richards (2015) and Reinders et al. (2022), this study included, firstly, informal English learning activities independent of educational institutions, such as reading English newspapers, listening to online videos, and watching television channels; and secondly, some formal academic workshops, self-study lessons, and learning consultations, etc. This variable was defined as equal to 1 if students have engaged in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities and 0 otherwise.

3.5.2.4 Control variables

Three socio-demographic variables were incorporated as control variables to mitigate potential confounding effects in the relationship between family social origins and out-of-school English learning choices. First, informed by Park et al. (2016) who demonstrated significant gender- and ethnicity-based disparities in out-of-school education engagement, gender and ethnicity were, thus, included as control variables in this research. This decision aligned with the study's demographic context: Sichuan Province hosted substantial ethnic minority populations, and both male and female students were represented in the research sample. Second, registered residence (*hukou* status) was controlled due to its well-documented association with social stratification, differential access to educational resources, and its endogenous relationship with learning motivations (Mahmud & Bray, 2017; Qu & Xue, 2015). By controlling for students' gender, ethnicity, and registered residence, the

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research isolated the unique explanatory power of social origins while addressing key sources of bias. These three control variables were all coded as binary variables: gender (Male=1, Female=0), ethnicity (Han=1, Minority=0), and registered residence (Urban=1, Rural=0).

3.5.3 Qualitative research

After collecting quantitative data, this section shows how I conducted the following qualitative research, including recruiting participants and conducting interviews.

3.5.3.1 Determining the sample size

In the qualitative phase, I used purposive sampling to select suitable participants for interviews to help explain quantitative results. The determination of the number of participants in purposive sampling usually depends on the data saturation. However, the minimum sample size required to reach the theoretical saturation in purposive sampling is difficult to estimate (van Rijnsoever et al., 2017), and scholars have proposed different sample sizes for purposive sampling. According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 85), 20 to 30 interviews in grounded theory qualitative studies can sufficiently saturate the categories. Marshall (2013) and Mason (2010) shared this view that sample sizes in the qualitative study usually lie between 20 and 30 and lie under 50. Other scholars, such as Bertaux (1981, as cited in Guest et al., 2006, p. 61), suggested the minimum sample size for all qualitative research is 15, and Morse (1994, p. 225) held that 30 to 50 could adequately reach the data saturation. Although saturation plays an essential role in excellent qualitative work, there are no published guidelines and adequacy tests for estimating the sample size needed to reach

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saturation (Morse, 1995, p. 147; Patton, 1990, p. 184). Therefore, van Rijnsoever et al. (2017) noted that whether the sample size is saturated is usually based on the researchers' personal judgment and experience and is often implicit. Based on the above discussion, I determined to select a total of 36 students for interviews in order to sufficiently satisfy the theoretical saturation.

Additionally, because I realized that, as noted by (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 141), I could not precisely determine the participants to be selected in the qualitative research phase until the first-stage quantitative results were obtained, I finalized my selection criteria for participants only after I completed the quantitative analysis. The results of the quantitative study revealed significant variations in out-of-school English learning choices among different social classes. To delve deeper into the reasons behind these class disparities, I explicitly based my selection criteria on participants' family ESCS values. With a total sample size of 36, I interviewed 12 students each from the upper, middle, and lower classes, respectively.

After categorizing the students into three social strata based on their ESCS values, I categorized them into twelve subgroups based on their out-of-school English learning choices. As shown in Table 3.3, I first prioritized students who took both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning. Second, I chose students who only took the EPT. Next, I considered students who only took other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. Finally, students who took neither EPT or other forms of out-of-school English

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learning activities were also taken into account.

Table 3.3

Participants for the interviews

English learning choices \ ESCS	Upper	Middle	Lower
Both	6	3	3
EPT	1	3	2
Other forms of out-of-school English learning	5	3	3
None	0	3	4
Total numbers	12	12	12

The original research design aimed to recruit three participants from each subgroup; however, participant recruitment presented unexpected challenges. Notably, among potential upper-class interviewees, only 17 students reported no participation in neither EPT nor other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, and the remaining upper-class students chose at least one type of out-of-school English learning activity. Despite repeated contact attempts, none of these 17 students consented to participate in my interviews, necessitating compensatory sampling adjustments by increasing recruitment from other subgroups to maintain the target of 12 upper-class participants. The same process was applied to the selection of other subgroups of students.

While this resulted in uneven subgroup representation, the distributional imbalance itself reflected meaningful empirical patterns: upper-class students overwhelmingly pursued out-of-school English learning, whereas lower-class students demonstrated lower participation rates.

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Consequently, the uneven sample composition did not compromise data interpretation validity, as it accurately mirrored broader participation trends. Nevertheless, this methodological constraint should be acknowledged as a potential study limitation regarding the generalizability of findings across non-participant populations.

3.5.3.2 Conducting interviews

Through interviews with 36 students, this study aimed to more comprehensively understand how social origin shaped high school students' out-of-school English learning choices and contributed to educational inequalities across different social classes. Interview questions were guided by RCT and mainly focused on exploring factors pertaining to social origins that accounted for statistically significant outcomes identified in the quantitative analyses (see Appendix II for the interview questions).

In preparation for the interviews, I prioritized establishing rapport and trust with the participants to ensure they felt comfortable and open during the discussions, thereby encouraging the articulation of important ideas. Initially, participants were asked to describe their family backgrounds, focusing on three critical aspects: family cultural atmosphere, parents' educational philosophy and aspirations, and home English learning environment. These three aspects provided a comprehensive understanding of the potential influencing factors related to participants' social origins, thereby facilitating the formulation of more pertinent questions in subsequent stages of the interviews.

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Subsequently, participants articulated their subjective cost-benefit considerations regarding English language learning. In this phase, they were prompted to elaborate on the anticipated benefits of learning English, encompassing both extrinsic and intrinsic values of learning English. Additionally, recognizing the significant impact of school-based English education on students' perceptions of their anticipated probability of English learning success, participants were encouraged to express their views on the effectiveness of school English education and to explain their decisions to engage in out-of-school English learning activities from this perspective.

Finally, participants shared their opinions on the DRP, discussing their policy stances in English learning, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital invested in out-of-school English learning under the DRP. These insights provided a deeper understanding of how the DRP affected students' choices regarding out-of-school English learning across different social classes.

3.6 Data analysis

This section describes how I analyzed the data. In the quantitative phase, I introduce the data analysis method and associated analysis software that I used. With reference to relevant theories, I explain why I used logistic regression and KHB decomposition fort quantitative analysis. In the qualitative phase, I introduce the deductive and inductive coding approach.

3.6.1 Quantitative data analysis

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The 1,287 questionnaires aimed to collect information regarding the eight explanatory and two dependent variables. The social origin was the core variable among the eight explanatory variables. To understand how social origin influenced students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects, this study performed both stepwise logistic regression using IBM SPSS statistics 27 and the effect decomposition using the KHB method in STATA to test the hypotheses. Data analysis included two parts, as shown in Figure 3.2 while the first part of data analysis helped explain the overall results, the second part focused on comparing the differences in the impact of the explanatory variables on the three social strata.

In Part 1, all valid samples (N=1287) were put into the model to test overall results. First, I conducted binary logistic regression analysis to examine the odds of choices for out-of-school English learning activities, so as to test ***Hypotheses 1*** to ***4*** by exploring the correlation between explanatory variables and the dependent variables. The reason for choosing logistic regression is that it is usually used for statistical modeling of individual decisions (Long, 1997). More importantly, logistic regression is theoretically compatible with RCT (Becker & Hecken, 2009) and has been proven to be primarily beneficial in testing hypotheses that are consistent with the RCT approach (Goldthorpe, 2006). As discussed above, RCT considers individuals' subjective cost-benefit calculations (e.g., anticipated learning benefits, perceived likelihood of success, etc.), and logistic regression precisely takes into account this "personal decision of preference in estimating conditioned probabilities" (p. 34). In other words, RCT can be combined with the logic and statistics of the logistic regression model (Becker, 2003).

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Therefore, with the use of logistic regression, the researcher is allowed to better analyze the relationship between subjective preferences and educational choices.

Specifically, to address ***Hypothesis 1***, educational choices were regressed on social origin alone to identify the total effects of social origin. To address ***Hypothesis 2***, students' English academic performance was added to the model to test the primary effect, with social origin being set as the key variable and English academic performance as the mediator variable. This step allowed us to identify the proportion of the social origin effect that was explained by academic performance. ***Hypothesis 3*** and ***Hypothesis 4*** dealt with secondary effects, and, thus, all models controlled for English academic performance. These two hypotheses contributed to an explanation of how the secondary effects contribute to the remaining social origin effects after controlling for academic ability. Therefore, I step wisely added the three subjective cost-benefit variables and three attitudinal variables toward policy into the model to assess the secondary effects. Finally, this study added all explanatory variables into the model to compare coefficients. The two dependent variables (i.e., EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning) were added to each model separately. All models controlled for gender, ethnicity, and registered residence.

Second, this study used the KHB method of decomposition to conduct causal mediation analysis, further quantifying the contribution of each explanatory variable to the social origin effects. The KHB method was developed by and named after three scholars – Karlson, Holm, and Breen (2012) – to compare the coefficients of non-linear logistic regression models,

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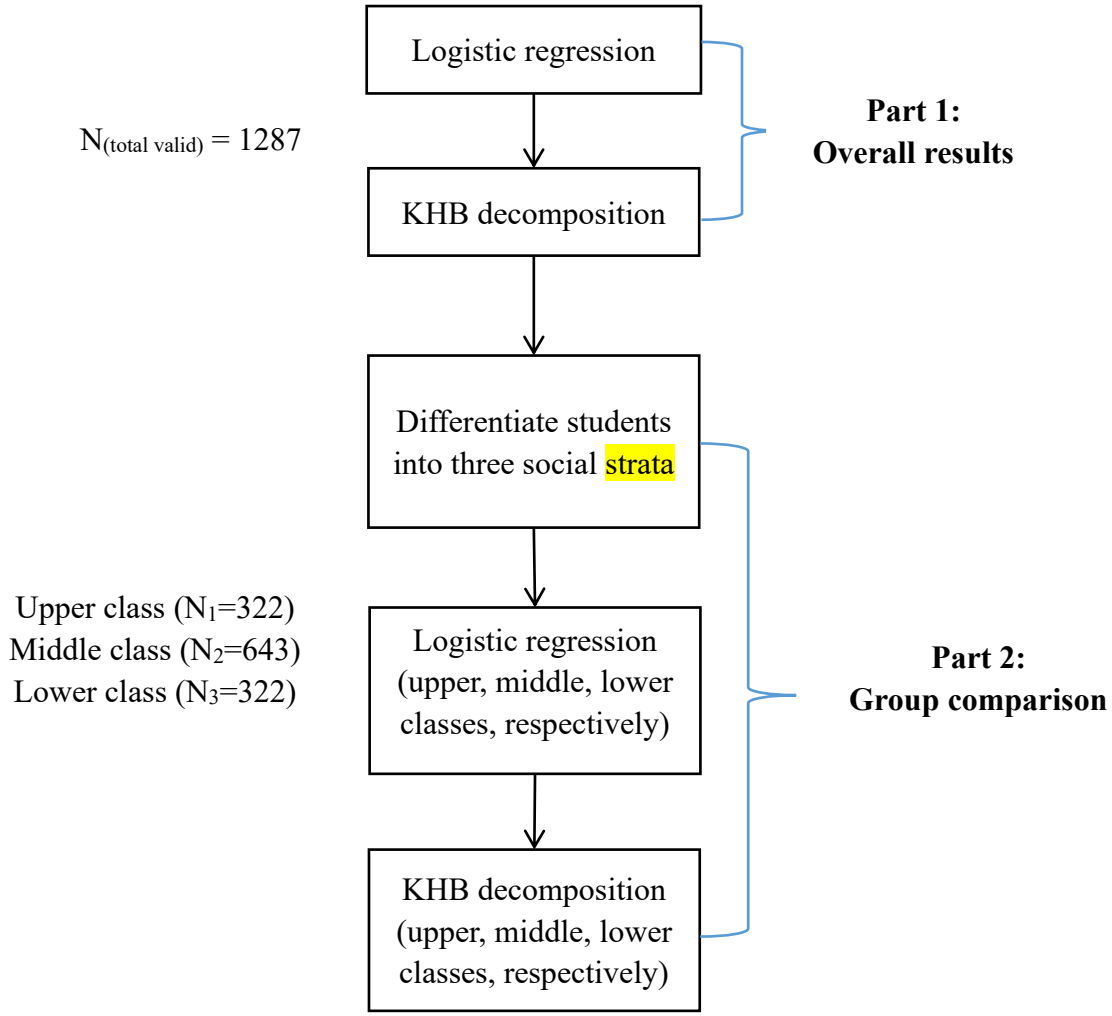
Figure 3.2

Quantitative data analysis



which is not possible in traditional logistic regressions. This method extends the decomposition properties into direct and indirect effects and further conduct causal mediation analysis (Breen et al., 2013; Karlson & Holm, 2011). Compared with other decomposition methods, another advantage of the KHB method is that it is very intuitive and can provide unbiased decomposition results (Karlson & Holm, 2011, p. 222). Therefore, following the KHB command elaborated in Kohler et al. (2011), this study tried to disentangle the contribution of each explanatory variable to the total effects of social origin.

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In Part 2, after obtaining the overall results, this study categorized students into three social strata (i.e., upper, middle, lower classes) according to their family ESCS values. ESCS was counted as a standardized continuous index in the calculations, and its values ranged from 4.31 to -3.24. The higher the ESCS value, the higher the social origin of the student. By referring to Entrich's (2018, p. 137) approach to social class division, this study ranked students' family ESCS values in descending order and then categorized the top 25% of students as the upper class (totally 322 students, with their ESCS values ranging from 4.31 to 1.61), the middle 50% as the middle class (totally 643 students, with their ESCS ranging from 1.59 to -1.52), and the bottom 25% as the lower class (totally 322 students, with their ESCS ranging from -1.53 to -3.24). The lower, middle, and upper classes were encoded as 0, 1, and 2, respectively. Likewise, stepwise logistic regression and the KHB decomposition were conducted again in each social class, respectively.

3.6.2 Qualitative data analysis

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim into English for analysis. Data were analyzed through the NVivo 12 platform. During data analysis, I used both deductive and inductive coding methods.

According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019, p. 264), deductive coding can be applied if the interview questions are driven by theories, in which case, the theoretical framework can be converted into a coding framework. As interview questions in this study were guided by RCT,

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I first used the deductive coding approach. This approach starts with an organizing structure or a predetermined framework for the codes (Azungah, 2018; Gill et al., 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, the researcher needs to first create a list of initial codes based on pre-existing theories or previous research findings before reviewing and coding the data (Armat et al., 2018; Bradley et al., 2007; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, this initial code list can be applied to the coding process to see what parts of the data fit the codes (Azungah, 2018). In this approach, the codes consist of theoretical concepts and themes drawn from the existing literature, which helps the researcher integrate the concepts and issues that are known to be important in the extant literature (Bradley et al., 2007; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Based on this approach, I structured an expected preliminary coding frame guided by RCT and the research questions before conducting the qualitative data analysis, identifying the initial general themes, sub-themes, and codes. Then, interview transcripts were put into the NVivo 12 platform to code the data according to this preliminary coding frame.

However, while this approach is quick and easy, it may be inflexible and biased in that the themes and codes are limited by the existing theoretical framework (Gill et al., 2008). For example, many issues related to the DRP in this study may have been new to the extant literature and lack prior research. Forcing these data into the coding framework would have led to data bias. Therefore, I also used inductive coding, an approach that allows the researcher to directly observe the specific raw data and then derive themes and patterns (Azungah, 2018; Gill et al., 2008). Specifically, during the coding process, if there are some

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Table 3.4

Coding frame

Broad themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Social Origin	Economic, Social,and Cultural capital (ESCS)	Family cultural atmosphere Parents' educational philosophy and aspirations Home English learning environment and resources
Subjective cost-benefit considerations	Anticipated English learning benefits	Achieving higher *Gaokao* grades Perceived English utility for future learning and career development (e.g., study abroad; get promotion) Intrinsic values (e.g., interest)
	Anticipated English learning success based on school education	Textbooks and learning materials Examination- and quality-oriented education
	Anti-subjective motivations	Low needs for self-actualization Limited exposure to English learning resources Financial constraints Time constraints
Attitudinal factors toward policy	English learning policy stance	Views on private tutoring restriction Views on homework reduction
	perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning	Anxiety toward educational involution Anxiety toward educational inequality
	family social capital invested in English learning	No alternative strategies to cope with the DRP Educational alternatives (e.g., study abroad or attend Sino-foreign school) to cope with the DRP

new codes emerge, or if some interesting things come up, instead of forcing data into the existing coding frame, the researcher needs to inductively analyze the data and then add new categories into the coding frame (Armat et al., 2018; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Through this method, I also added new codes and categories pertaining to each theme (as shown in Table 3.4), such as "parents' educational philosophy and aspirations" and "educational alternatives to cope with the DRP" to the initial coding frame when necessary. All in all, the

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integration of both deductive and inductive methods make the coding process more flexible and trustworthy – the deduction provides theory-based codes, while the inductive exploration of deductive codes ensures a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the data.

3.7 Trustworthiness

This section reviews multiple procedures that the study used to ensure data trustworthiness. As this study adopted the explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, I try to explain how I ensured the trustworthiness in quantitative and qualitative research, respectively.

Although both quantitative and qualitative research aim to achieve data trustworthiness, there are differences in the meaning of "trustworthiness" between these two kinds of research. In quantitative research, trustworthiness means reliability and validity, with the former referring to the consistency of a measure and the latter referring to the accuracy of a measure. By contrast, qualitative research focuses more on validity rather than reliability, and alternative terms of qualitative validity (e.g., authenticity and credibility) are also frequently used (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In addition, since factors like researcher subjectivity are unavoidable in qualitative research, achieving data validity in qualitative research does not necessarily guarantee "truth" or "certainty". As noted by Angen (2000, as cited in Creswell & Clark, 2018), qualitative research focuses on achieving credibility and authenticity but does not claim to yield absolute truth; whereas in quantitative research, validity implies truth. Therefore, in the process of ensuring the trustworthiness of quantitative results' trustworthiness, I followed rigorous rules and standards to calculate the reliability and

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validity of each research question in the questionnaire. By contrast, in the qualitative research stage, I did not try to prove any kind of absolute “truth” or “certainty”, but first recognized the fluidity, dynamics, and complexity of the research context and the research subjects, and then used two validation methods (i.e., disconfirming evidence and member checking) to restore as much as possible a complete and authentic research result.

In the following sections, I first describe the pilot study I conducted before the final study, during which process, I tested the reliability and validity of questionnaires, refined indicators and variables, and examined the feasibility of interview questions. Second, I discuss how I built rapport with gatekeepers and my student participants, so as to ensure that they can provide trustworthy responses. Finally, I introduce two procedures I employed in the qualitative phase to validate the accuracy of interview findings.

3.7.1 Conducting the pilot study

Before conducting the final study, I performed two rounds of pilot studies at the two schools selected for the main research. This preliminary testing served two critical methodological functions:. 1) validating the efficacy of questionnaires and 2) refining interview protocols. One thing worth noting is that the *Gaokao* in China is held in June every year. Therefore, students who took the pilot study graduated in 2023, while those who took the final study graduated in 2024. The reason for choosing two different cohorts of students was to ensure that students who took the pilot study would not repetitively take the final study, which could ensure the validity of primary data.

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According to Lackey and Wingate (1998), at least 10% of the final study sample size needs to be recruited for the pilot study, indicating that at least 50 samples are needed for the pilot study of this research. Therefore, in the first pilot study, I randomly sampled one class in each school, adding up to 78 students in total. To ensure the accuracy of the questionnaire, I excluded invalid questionnaires, namely blank questionnaires, unfinished questionnaires, and questionnaires with incomplete information or obvious errors. After careful screening, there were 63 valid questionnaires left. I tested the validity and reliability of these 63 questionnaires, and based on these results, I further refined my questionnaire questions. Then, I conducted the second round of pilot study with a total of 124 students and finally screened out 111 valid questionnaires. I tested the validity and reliability of the questionnaire again and then conducted the quantitative analysis. Based on quantitative results, I chose 9 students to pilot interviews. The next section reports the results of the pilot study.

3.7.1.1 Piloting the quantitative study

To better interpret the primary outcomes of the pilot study and to determine whether each variable/indicator was feasible to proceed with the main study, I summarized the inclusion and exclusion of variables or indicators in the two pilot studies as the following four categories by referring to the four criteria of In (2017, p. 604) and Thabane et al. (2010).

1. Termination of the study (cannot proceed with the main study)

The variable that could not proceed with the main study was “educational aspiration”. In the

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first pilot study, I used students' educational aspirations, namely the school type that students want to choose after graduation from high school, as one of the subjective motivational factors. However, almost all students said that they wanted to attend key universities (985 & 211), even including those with extremely low academic performances. I assume this was largely due to the fact that many students with poor academic performances were unwilling to admit in the questionnaire that they could only enter ordinary universities or even technical colleges. Therefore, in the second pilot study, I replaced this variable with "motive of social status maintenance". Referring to van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007, p. 399), I designed five questions to explore students' desires to avoid downward mobility and to indirectly measure students' educational aspirations from the perspectives of their anticipated highest educational degree, occupation, earnings, and social status in the future. The overall standardized Cronbach's *a* of "motive of social status maintenance" was 0.769, which indicated an acceptable level of reliability. This reliability was very close to that obtained by van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007). In addition, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was 0.674 and the significance (*p*-value) of Bartlett's test was less than 0.001, which indicated a relatively satisfied validity.

2. Can proceed with the main study after modifying the study design

The first modified item was "domestic helper (e.g., full/part-time maid)", which was used as one of the twelve indicators of family wealth possession in the first pilot study. The reason for the modification was that no student ticked this choice during the whole process of the first pilot study. This would probably have been because these two research schools were both

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public schools, and therefore, it was difficult to reach those extremely wealthy students who might attend international schools or directly study abroad after graduation rather than choosing public high schools and taking the *Gaokao*. Therefore, in the second pilot study, I changed "domestic helper" to "juice extractor", which was also an indicator of family wealth possession mentioned in PISA 2012 (OECD, 2014). The results of the second pilot study showed this well.

The second variable was "anticipated learning benefits". In the first pilot study, I originally used five indicators to measure students' anticipated English learning benefits. However, although the overall reliability (Cronbach's $a = 0.781$) was satisfied, the corrected item-total correlation (CITC) of the indicator "I might study abroad" was less than 0.4 (CITC = 0.384), and the index "Cronbach's *a* if item deleted" equaled 0.789, which was higher than the standardized Cronbach's *a* (0.781). This result suggested that the indicator "I might study abroad" was not good enough. Therefore, I deleted this indicator, and then Cronbach's *a* turned out to be 0.835, with all questions' CITC being more than 0.5 and Cronbach's *a* if an item deleted is less than the standardized 0.835. This result represented excellent reliability. The result of validity also showed well, with KMO equaling 0.698 and the *p*-value of Bartlett's test less than 0.001.

Third, I modified "family social capital invested in English learning" after the pilot studies. In the first pilot study, this variable failed to satisfy the reliability and validity. I assumed that this may have been because only two questions were used as indicators, resulting in

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incomplete data. Therefore, I added two more questions to measure family social capital invested in English learning: 1) How much do your parent(s) value English education? and 2) How often do your parent(s) check or provide instructions on your English homework? In the second pilot study, the results of reliability (Cronbach's $a = 0.733$) and validity (KMO = 0.718, $p < 0.001$) both showed well.

3. Not necessary to modify the study design, but requires thorough monitoring throughout the study procedures

"English learning policy stance" did not necessarily need design modification but may have required thorough monitoring throughout the final study process. The Cronbach's *a* was 0.648, suggesting that the reliability was just acceptable. As I only used two items to measure English learning policy stance, I tested the validity by referring to factor loading and communality. The factor loading of each question item was 0.86, which was larger than 0.4. The communality was 0.722, which indicated that the extracted factors have reflected more than 70% of the information of the original variables. Both values indicated a relatively good validity level.

The second was "perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning". Although the validity of this variable was satisfied (KMO = 0.667, $p < 0.001$), Cronbach's *a* was only 0.702, suggesting that the reliability level was just acceptable. Therefore, in the final study, it was necessary to first emphasize to the students the premise of this part of the questionnaire questions was the level of educational anxiety "brought about by the DRP". Although the

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words “brought about by the DRP” were explicitly written in my questionnaire, I still found some students forgot this premise while filling out the questionnaire. This would have brought statistical bias to the research results.

4. Can proceed without modifying the study design

The variable “anticipated probability of English learning success” could proceed with the main study without any modification. The Cronbach’s *a* was equal to 0.849, suggesting excellent reliability. The KMO was 0.717 and the *p*-value of Bartlett’s test was less than 0.001, indicating that the level of validity was well satisfied. In addition, the results of pilot studies showed that parental occupation, parental education, cultural possession, educational resources, and academic performance were also the items that could proceed with the final study without modifying the design. Overall, all variables and indicators satisfied the reliability and validity in the second round of the pilot study and showed similar or even improved statistical outcomes in the final study (see Table 3.2).

3.7.1.2 Piloting the qualitative study

According to students’ ESCS values, I purposefully chose five students from each socioeconomic group and sent out invitations for the pilot interviews to them. There were nine students who responded to me, and three of them agreed to take part in the pilot interviews. The three students were basically from different family social origins, had different academic performances, and made different choices for out-of-school English learning.

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There were three main aspects I mostly paid attention to during the interview process: 1) whether the selection criteria of participants need to be further improved, 2) whether there is any wording of the interview questions that needs to be further revised, and 3) the participants' feedback on the content of the interview questions. Based on these three-aspect considerations, I summarize the following two points.

First, I found that some students were clueless as to how to answer some of the interview questions, especially when the questions were too broad or too abstract (e.g., What do you think of the DRP?). Additionally, some students, even when faced with open-ended and simple questions (e.g., Why is learning English important to you?), still gave very brief answers or even stated that they had "no opinion" or "never thought about it before". Therefore, I further revised the wording of my interview questions by avoiding "yes-and-no" questions and using "yes-and-no" questions as the last resort. Also, I started each interview question with broad questions for the interviewees to give more open-ended responses and then narrowed them down with specific questions to clearly guide students to give more in-depth responses. During the whole process, I tried to be patient and prompted students to provide useful information as much useful information as possible.

3.7.2 Building rapport with participants

To ensure participants could provide trustworthy responses, establishing trust with the gatekeeper and building rapport with participants were of great significance.

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During the quantitative phase of the study, I needed to first contact the school's head teacher to obtain consent. Since School A was my alma mater, I first contacted my former English teacher. Through her introduction, I was able to contact the director of Grade 12. I spoke with the grade director about my research objectives and data collection process. In addition, I shared some interesting stories from my school days with her to build trust. Eventually, with her help, I had the chance to explain my purpose of visiting the headmasters of each class and then distributed the questionnaires to all classes in Grade 12. The collection of questionnaires at School B was accessed through my personal connections, as I had been an intern teacher in this school before.

In the qualitative phase, I endeavored to build rapport with participants who joined my interviews. There were two methods I used to build rapport with my student participants. First of all, I tried to draw a rapport when introducing myself to them. For example, for students in School A, I introduced myself as their senior schoolmate and told them that I used to spend my three-year high school life here as well. This shared experience created a sense of closeness between us. For students in school B, I told them that I had previously interned in Grade 12 of this school before, so I was familiar with their current academic life. Second, before starting the interviews, I would chat with my participants to help them relax. For example, I shared either of my happy or terrible learning experiences at high school to evoke empathy in them. Additionally, I also asked them some light-hearted questions to bring them closer, such as "Do you like this school?" , "Do you get along well with your classmates at

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school?" or "What do you usually like to do after school?", and so forth.

3.7.3 Validating the accuracy of the qualitative finding

Ensuring qualitative validity means that the researcher needs to check the obtained information during the data collection process and interpretations of the data are accurate, dependable, and confirmable (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Clark, 2018). This process is of utmost importance for qualitative research because qualitative research tends to be "interpretive", which means that some problems, such as the researcher's subjectivity, are unavoidable and may reduce the authenticity and credibility of the data. While qualitative research is unlikely to be unbiased by any means, there are various types of validity procedures that can help researchers ensure that their data is as accurate as possible. Creswell and Miller (2000, pp. 126–129) put forward nine different forms of validity procedures in qualitative inquiry. Informed by the study of Creswell and Miller (2000), I used three procedures to validate the accuracy of my interview findings.

The first method I employed was to actively search for "disconfirming evidence" from the obtained data at the end of the analysis. Disconfirming evidence can be regarded as a kind of "negative evidence" that is inconsistent with or disconfirms the preliminarily established themes by the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Such inconsistencies or incongruities may help develop richer, more comprehensive, and more in-depth insights into the data, largely increasing the data's authenticity and credibility. However, identifying disconfirming evidence can be a challenging task for the researcher, because it requires the

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researcher to engage deeply into the data, attempting to explore inconsistencies and complexities of the data in the process of finding confirming evidence (Booth et al., 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000). In addition, the amount of disconfirming evidence needs to be less than the amount of confirming evidence.

When researchers are presented with inconsistent or contradictory data, there may be a tendency to question data validity. However, as Antin et al. (2015) argued, such contradictions, in fact, do not necessarily mean "a threat to the validity" (p. 212). This is because, sometimes, the contradictory, ambiguous, or inconsistent discourses of participants' narratives may have actually revealed participants' ambivalence toward the discussed topic. As a result, instead of recklessly regarding disconfirming or conflicting discourses as invalid evidence, researchers need to further substantiate such contradictions or analyze them as a new theme. Arguably, the procedure of seeking out disconfirming evidence largely validates the authenticity and credibility of qualitative findings by shedding light on the complexity of people's lives and psychological states.

Therefore, after completing the initial data analysis and obtaining related themes, I tried to immerse myself more extensively in the data to seek out disconfirming evidence that was inconsistent with my preliminary themes. In the process, I kept myself as critical and self-reflective as possible, trying to identify student participants' complex attitudes and views on out-of-school English learning.

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Second, I used “member checking” to validate my findings. Member checking is a frequently used strategy in which the researcher takes the findings, including obtained information and the interpretation of data, back to the participants and asks them to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Therefore, after interpreting the interview data and coding related themes, I sent the interpreted data and coded themes to my participants through WeChat for feedback. In the process, I asked each student three questions: 1) Do you think the interpretations of the interview contents are complete and accurate? 2) Do you think the categorized themes make sense? 3) Is there anything else you want to add or argue? These three questions, first, helped me determine if I had accurately interpreted and summarized the findings. If the students felt that I had not expressed their experiences correctly, they could provide feedback so that I could address them when revising the findings. Additionally, these questions helped me validate the findings further by confirming the conflicting discourses or contradictory points that I mentioned in the first approach.

Finally, I tried to testify the “inter-coder agreement”, which helped validate the accuracy and reliability of findings in my research by calculating the Kappa coefficient through NVivo 12. The procedure of coding comparison involves creating a codebook and coding the same data by different coders to compare the consistency of codes and themes (Miles et al., 2020). Therefore, I first randomly chose three interview transcripts, with each one from the upper, middle, and lower classes, respectively; then, I invited one of my colleagues to help code these three interview transcripts using NVivo 12; finally, I calculated the Kappa coefficient to

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compare the agreement between our codes and themes. As shown in Table 3.5, all Kappa coefficients were above 0.70 ($\kappa > 0.70$), which indicated substantial agreement. This result further validated the reliability of my interview findings and added methodological rigor.

Table 3.5

Inter-coder agreement with Kappa coefficient

Code	File	Kappa	Agreement (%)	Disagreement (%)
Objective factors	Lower class	0.75	96.84	3.16
Objective factors	Middle class	0.87	95.74	4.26
Objective factors	Upper class	0.75	95.63	4.37
Social origin (ESCS)	Lower class	0.89	98.01	1.99
Social origin (ESCS)	Middle class	0.92	98.08	1.92
Social origin (ESCS)	Upper class	0.73	90.88	9.12
Subjective motivations	Lower class	0.78	94.35	5.65
Subjective motivations	Middle class	0.94	98.51	1.49
Subjective motivations	Upper class	0.95	99.02	0.98

3.8 Ethical considerations

This section discusses ethical issues in both the quantitative and qualitative phases. Ethical issues refer to a set of moral problems that occur at every stage of research, including planning the study, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting data, and publishing the study. By referring to the principles of ethical considerations in Connelly (2014) and Mirza et al. (2023), this study intended to address ethical issues from three main aspects: 1) informed consent and voluntary participation, 2) offering incentives to recruit participants, and 3) anonymity and confidentiality.

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3.8.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

Obtaining participants' consent prior to data collection is of vital importance during the research process. According to Connelly (2014, p. 54), informed consent consists of three parts. Firstly, consent should be given voluntarily. This indicates that participants need to engage in the research voluntarily without any coercion or deception and that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. As teachers have the right to decide whether or not students in their classes can participate in completing the questionnaire during the quantitative phase of the study, I went to the two research schools and attempted to first obtain voluntary consent from the principal of each school before proceeding with my quantitative data collection (see Appendix III for consent forms for schools). Afterward, I sent consent forms to the students in an attempt to obtain their voluntary agreement to participate in the research. In the end, all the participants in my research granted their consent (see Appendix IV for consent forms for students).

Secondly, the consent form should clearly explain to each participant what they will be asked to do in the research, such as research purposes and procedures. During the process, researchers need to ensure that participants can fully comprehend the research information (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Therefore, I also verbally explained explicitly the content of the questionnaire, the interview questions, and the points that might be followed up in the consent form to my research subjects.

Finally, the participants involved must be competent enough to give consent. Usually,

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participants who are under the age of 18 are considered as minors and may need a responsible adult to sign the consent form. In my research, students were all in Grade 12 and were 18 years and older. Therefore, students had the ability to decide whether or not they wanted to sign the consent form to participate in the research.

3.8.2 Offering incentives to recruit participants

Usually, there are three methods to recruit participants: voluntary participation, providing wages, and offering incentives (Grant & Sugarman, 2004, p. 718). Among all, offering incentives can be understood as an external benefit designed to motivate people to do what they otherwise might not do (Yung, 2015b), which is an effective means to attract participants and increase sample size.

However, the ethical implications of material incentives in research participation have been subject to considerable scholarly debate. Some scholars (e.g., Grady, 2005; Grant & Sugarman, 2004; Mirza et al., 2023, p. 444) argued that financial incentives may constitute undue influence, potentially distorting participants' motivations and compromising voluntary consent. Specifically, excessive incentives risk shifting participants' focus from the research to the compensation itself, thereby inducing uninformed or coerced participation. To mitigate these ethical concerns, Creswell (2012) and Gallo et al. (2024) suggested that the researcher needs to place reasonable limitations on the value of incentives, ensuring that incentives should not be too valuable to be a coercive inducement. Arguably, unethical problems arise not from incentives *per se* (Grant, 2015, p. 365) but from how the researcher uses incentives

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appropriately. Therefore, offering modest financial incentives, such as cash or gifts, can be an ethically acceptable means to encourage people to participate in the research.

Considering the low interview participation rate in the pilot study, I was aware of the importance of offering reasonable incentives to participants to attract them to take part in the interviews in the final study, especially during the senior year when students were busy preparing for the *Gaokao*. When recruiting my interview participants, I told students that those who were willing to participate in the interviews could get a delicate notebook (37 RMB) with my signature as a gift. Choosing such a small gift as incentives was because, for one thing, it ensured that the incentives only served as a token of appreciation for the participants' devoted energy and time rather than a kind of undue influence or coercive inducement; for another, it did not affect the students' responses in their interview, because small gifts were not likely to make the students feel that they attended the interview just to get a reward instead of being serious about providing useful information.

3.8.3 Anonymity and confidentiality

Confidentiality is a generic term that refers to the researcher eliminating, changing, pseudonymizing, or hiding all the obtained personally identifying information (e.g., name, address, and phone numbers, etc.) contained in the data to ensure that only the researcher can access the authentic data; anonymity can be a form of confidentiality that refers to either the researcher does not collect any personal information or in which the participants' identities are made impossible to trace based on their responses (Creswell, 2012; Kang & Hwang,

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2023; Saunders et al., 2015).

Maintaining rigorous data anonymity and confidentiality represents a critical methodological consideration throughout the research process. Not only does this process address ethical issues, but also enhance data quality. When participants are assured of complete privacy protections, they are more willing to provide the researcher with authentic, effective, and highly enriched information (Kang & Hwang, 2023). Therefore, before conducting the data collection, the researcher should clearly communicate with participants about the data anonymity and confidentiality, including both written and audio information (Mirza et al., 2023). However, Saunders et al. (2015) argued that sometimes protecting participants' privacy may require the researcher to sacrifice some of the integrity of the data, which poses a threat to data authenticity and richness. This is especially true in some special cases, such as medical research, in which the researcher has to disclose some private information for data analysis. It, thus, should be noted that ensuring data anonymity and confidentiality can be limited sometimes.

Based on the above discussion, I tried my best to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of both the quantitative and qualitative data. As the questionnaires in this research collected students' gender, ethnicity, and registered residence as control variables for the quantitative analysis, as well as collected their names, phone numbers, and WeChat numbers as identifiers to contact them during the interview phase, I took three steps to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Before the study began, I first discussed with all the students who

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agreed to participate in the study what they wished to keep anonymous and confidential, and then I promised them that I would respect their privacy by removing all personally identifying information from my dissertation. Secondly, in response to the anonymity of the students' names, I used pseudonymous English names in my article writing. Thirdly, to keep all the obtained data confidential, especially those with identifying information (e.g., ethnicity, phone numbers), I stored all the signed consent forms, questionnaires, interview transcripts, and audio recordings in locked files with password protection. Through these steps, I tried to maximize the protection of participants' privacy while also striving to report complete, integrative, and rich data.

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Chapter 4: Descriptive results

4.1 Introduction

As described in previous chapters, questionnaires in this research were used to collect both descriptive and statistical data. In this chapter, I first focus on illustrating the results from descriptive data in the questionnaires and analyzing the specifics of students' out-of-school participation in EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. These descriptive results not only offer important background information about high school students' choices but also help identify the general trend of out-of-school English learning under the DRP.

4.2 Types of English private tutoring

As shown in Table 4.1, out of the 1,287 valid samples, only 314 students attended EPT, taking up 24.4% of the observed population. Contrary to my initial expectations informed by previous research (Jin & Sun, 2022; Yang et al., 2024) which suggested parents would predominantly seek one-on-one home tutoring under DRP restrictions, large-group EPT (37.3%) remained the most prevalent EPT type among high school students. This result suggests that when available, the more economical large-group tutoring continues to be the preferred option for most high school students, despite policy constraints on private tutoring. The persistence of this preference highlights the importance of cost considerations in students' and families' decision-making regarding out-of-school education, even in a restricted educational market.

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Table 4.1

The types of EPT

Types	Number	Percentage
Large-group EPT	117	37.3%
Online EPT	71	22.6%
One-on-one EPT (both at home or in institutions)	61	19.4%
Small-group EPT	55	17.5%
Parental tutoring	7	2.2%
Others	3	1.0%
Total	314	100%

Nevertheless, the popularity of large-group EPT did not preclude the existence of underground expensive EPT. The data reveal a substantial participation in both one-on-one EPT (19.4%) and small-group EPT (17.5%), respectively. Although these two types of EPT were much more expensive than large-group EPT, their combined percentage of 36.9% was almost equal to that of large-group private tutoring (37.3%), indicating that these two types of tutoring might be highly popular among students with sufficient financial budgets.

Furthermore, in line with my expectations, online EPT demonstrated significant popularity (22.6%). The popularity of online EPT services may be attributed to both of the inherent scheduling flexibility of digital platforms and their relative insulation from DRP-related regulatory oversight (Yang et al., 2024). These characteristics position online EPT as a viable alternative to traditional offline tutoring modalities in the current policy environment.

4.3 Reasons for (not) taking English private tutoring

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Table 4.2 shows the percentage of the reasons for taking EPT based on the 314 samples. As expected, obtaining high scores in the *Gaokao* was the main reason (33.4%) why high school students attended EPT, which was followed by students' remediation (25.5%) and enrichment (21.7%) purposes[6]. However, a small number of students (4.1%) attended EPT due to their low faith in school English education.

Table 4.2

Reasons for taking EPT

Reasons	Number	Percentage
To get high scores in the *Gaokao*	105	33.4%
For remediation	80	25.5%
For enrichment	68	21.7%
My teachers/parents want me to take	27	8.6%
For interest	14	4.5%
My school English education cannot provide adequate help	13	4.1%
Peer effect	6	1.9%
Others	1	0.3%
Total	314	100%

[6] Remediation focuses on addressing academic deficiencies by helping struggling learners master foundational knowledge and skills they failed to acquire at school, while enrichment extends beyond school curricula to challenge high-achieving students through advanced content, critical thinking tasks, or creative applications. To ensure methodological precision, I explicitly differentiated these two learning objectives in the student questionnaires, providing clear definitions and illustrative examples to avoid ambiguity. Participants were instructed that multiple selections were permissible if their motivations for engaging in out-of-school English learning encompassed both remedial and enrichment purposes, thereby capturing the nuanced and often overlapping nature of their learning intentions.

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Interestingly, Interestingly, there were 4.5% students took EPT for interest rather than for academic necessity, which offers an important theoretical refinement to conventional conceptualizations of shadow education, demonstrating that, even under the intense academic pressure of the *Gaokao*, EPT can function not merely as an academic supplement but also as an enrichment activity motivated by genuine subject interest. Still, some students did not participate in EPT voluntarily, but due to the pressure from parents and teachers (8.6%) as well as peers (1.9%).

Table 4.3

Reasons for not taking EPT

Reasons	Number	Percentage
My school English education has provided sufficient training	189	19.4%
I do not think EPT can improve my English achievement	161	16.5%
I have no time because there is too much school homework	151	15.5%
I prefer to learn English by myself	143	14.7%
I have no time because I am having private tutoring of other subjects	114	11.7%
Private tutoring is too expensive	83	8.5%
I cannot find the channels to access EPT	73	7.5%
It is not necessary as I have good English grades	28	2.9%
Others	18	1.8%
I do not care about English learning as it is not important to me	13	1.3%
Total number of students	973	100%

By contrast, the reasons for students not taking EPT varied substantially (see Table 4.3). Out of the remaining 973 non-EPT participants, approximately 20% perceived their school-based English instruction as sufficiently effective, rendering EPT unnecessary. This demonstrates

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that improving the quality of school English education could be a potentially effective method to reduce students' reliance on external EPT services. Two additional predominant reasons for non-participation in EPT were that they "do not believe EPT can improve English performance" (16.5%) and that they "prefer to study by myself" (14.7%). Importantly, these two figures added up to approximately a third of the total, suggesting significant student skepticism toward the effectiveness of EPT and marked preference for independent learning. Taken together with the three reasons mentioned above, which added up to over half of the reasons, it can be concluded that school English education may have improved significantly under the DRP and that many students actually have more faith in school English education than in EPT.

The lack of time available for self-organization after school was also a dominant reason for non-participation in EPT – 15.5% reported excessive school homework loads, while 11.7% indicated they were already engaged in private tutoring for other core subjects, such as Mathematics, Physics, and Geography, leaving insufficient time for English learning. Notably, there were 7.5% of respondents reported being unable to access EPT in the marketplace, implying that the DRP has substantively limited the availability of such educational resources in the marketplace.

4.4 Types of other forms of out-of-school English learning

As presented in Table 4.4, a substantial majority of students (n=822, 63.87%) engaged in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, significantly surpassing the number

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participating in EPT (n=314; see Table 4.1), indicating that other forms of out-of-school English learning were a more predominant approach to English learning for high-school students. There may be two reasons accounting for this. Firstly, unlike fee-paying EPT, most other forms of out-of-school English learning activities require minimal or no financial investment, rendering them more economically viable for students and families. Secondly, the regulatory constraints imposed by the DRP may have constrained access to conventional EPT channels, particularly for students lacking social capital or informational resources to secure private tutoring. Consequently, these students appear to have shifted toward more accessible alternative learning methods.

Table 4.4

The types of other forms of out-of-school English learning

Types	Number	Percentage
Purchase English auxiliary materials and do exercises	217	26.4%
Do extensive reading through English books/newspapers	212	25.8%
Watch English videos/television channels	184	22.4%
Do intensive listening through English listening materials (e.g., VOA, BBC)	118	14.4%
Communicate with English native speakers	38	4.6%
Take English self-study lessons and tests (e.g., MOOCs, Duolingo)	21	2.6%
Others	18	2.2%
Take English learning projects (e.g., workshop, learning consultation)	14	1.7%
Total	822	100%

The types of other forms of out-of-school English learning activities were diversified. The

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statistics for “purchase English auxiliary materials” (26.4%) and “do extensive reading through newspapers/books” (25.8%) were exceptionally high, showing that high school students’ out-of-school English learning mainly focused on reading and writing exercises. English listening activities demonstrated comparatively lower engagement rates, though still substantial, with 22.4% of students watching English videos or television channels (e.g., Cable News Network, CNN) and 14.4% listening to authentic English radio broadcasts (e.g., Voice of America English News, VOA; British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC). Notably, productive oral practice represented the least common English activity, with merely 4.6% of respondents seeking interaction with native English speakers to enhance speaking proficiency.

4.5 Reasons for (not) attending other forms of out-of-school English learning

As evidenced in Table 4.5, the primary rationale for engaging in other forms of out-of-school English learning was enrichment (20.3%), surpassing instrumental motivations such as achieving high *Gaokao* scores (18.6%). Notably, interest-driven participation (17.0%) also exceeded remedial purposes (13.0%), a result that contrasts sharply with the predominant motivations for EPT attendance. Through comparison, we can conclude that high-school students’ attended EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning with fundamentally different objectives: while EPT was primarily utilized as a strategic tool for academic improvement and remediation, other forms of out-of-school English learning activities were more frequently pursued for language proficiency enrichment and personal interest.

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Furthermore, students engaging in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities identified several pedagogical benefits distinct from those offered by EPT or mainstream schooling. Notably, 11.1% of participants reported acquiring more authentic and idiomatic language proficiency through these activities, while 10.6% emphasized their value in enhancing social communication skills. Additionally, 7.1% perceived other forms of out-of-school English learning activities as more intrinsically motivating compared to both school education and EPT.

Table 4.5

Reasons for taking other forms of out-of-school English learning

Reasons	Number	Percentage
For enrichment	167	20.3%
In order to get high scores in the *Gaokao*	153	18.6%
For interest	140	17.0%
For remediation	107	13.0%
Out-of-school English learning activities allow me to learn more authentic and idiomatic English than in the classroom	91	11.1%
Learning English through social media improves both my English abilities and social skills	87	10.6%
Out-of-school English learning activities are more interesting than school learning and private tutoring	58	7.1%
My school English education does not provide enough help for my study	13	1.6%
Others	6	0.7%
Total	822	100%

Among the 465 students who did not participate in other forms of out-of-school English

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learning activities, time constraints emerged as the predominant barrier, accounting for nearly half of all reported reasons. As illustrated in Table 4.6, 32.0% of students reported that school homework loads were too excessive, and 12.9% viewed English learning activities as overly time-consuming. These results suggest that only when time is sufficient enough will students choose to participate in out-of-school English learning activities, otherwise, priority might be given to school education.

Table 4.6

Reasons for not taking other forms of out-of-school English learning

Reasons	Number	Percentage
I have no time because there is too much school homework	149	32.0%
I do not know where or how to find appropriate English learning resources	129	27.7%
English learning activities take up too much of my spare time	60	12.9%
English learning activities are not effective enough to improve my English achievement	41	8.8%
My school English education has provided sufficient training	27	5.8%
I do not care about English learning as it is not important to me	22	4.7%
I prefer EPT, as it is more systematic, effective, and instructional	21	4.5%
Others	12	2.6%
It is not necessary as I have good English grades	4	0.9%
Total	465	100%

In addition to time constraints, the analysis reveal two additional barriers to participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning. Firstly, despite having desires to engage in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, 27.7% of students reported difficulty in identifying and accessing appropriate English learning resources. Secondly, a subset of

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students demonstrated notable skepticism regarding pedagogical efficacy of other forms of out-of-school English learning, manifesting in three distinct ways: 8.8% of respondents directly questioned the effectiveness of such activities for enhancing English academic performance, 5.8% maintained that the English education provided within the school was more beneficial for their language enhancement, and 4.5% of students expressed an explicit preference for the more systematic, effective, and instructional EPT services.

4.6 Summary of the descriptive results

The above descriptive results provide us with general information of high school students' out-of-school English learning situations, systematically delineating both the types of engagement and the underlying reasons for participation. Regarding EPT participation, large-group EPT maintained its predominance as the most common EPT type despite DRP implementation. However, a significant proportion of students continued to enroll in more expensive tutoring types (i.e., one-on-one and small-group EPT), suggesting that economically advantaged families persisted in utilizing these more costly options to secure academic advantages within the constrained educational landscape Furthermore, analysis regarding other forms of out-of-school English learning activities demonstrated that reading, listening, and writing exercises were substantially more prevalent among high school students, markedly surpassing the popularity of speaking activities.

Students' engagement in out-of-school English learning activities can be attributed to multiple factors. The two primary motivations for students' involvement in EPT were

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academic remediation and *Gaokao* performance enhancement. Conversely, in contrast, other forms of out-of-school English learning activities were primarily driven by language proficiency enrichment and personal interest cultivation, though *Gaokao* preparation remained a primary consideration for some students.

Time constraints constituted a significant barrier to students' participation in both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. High school students often found themselves overwhelmed with academic responsibilities, which precluded them from allocating time to out-of-school English studies. Additionally, resource accessibility limitations, particularly under DRP regulations, further restricted engagement opportunities, creating structural impediments to participation.

An intriguing observation from the descriptive results is that students' satisfaction with school-based English education and skepticism regarding the effectiveness of the out-of-school English learning decreased their need for out-of-school English learning. This suggests that enhancing the quality of school English education or strengthening students' confidence in the effectiveness of school instruction may potentially diminish their dependence on external learning supports, thereby mitigating educational inequalities exacerbated by private supplementation.

Overall, the aforementioned descriptive results addressed ***RQ1*** as to what out-of-school English learning activities high school students choose and also illustrated why students make

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such learning choices. These initial findings laid the foundations for later-stage multivariate analysis. In the next chapter, I use both subjective cost-benefit beliefs and attitudinal variables toward policy to explain students' out-of-school English learning choices in more depth.

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Chapter 5: Statistical results

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting statistical outcomes. Through binary logistic regression and KHB decomposition modeling, this chapter shows how students made out-of-school English learning choices. By dividing students into upper, middle, and lower social classes through reference to Entrich's (2018, p. 137) method of class division, I also compare the differences and similarities among students from different social classes in terms of both subjective motivations and the degree influenced by attitudinal factors toward policy.

5.2 Accuracy prediction

Before conducting the logistic regression and KHB decomposition, I first tested the prediction accuracy of the RCT model used in this research. In terms of choices for EPT participation, as illustrated in Table 5.1, the model accurately predicted 68.6% of answers

Table 5.1

Accuracy predictions for EPT

Classification Table[a]					
			Predicted		
			EPT participation		Percentage
	Observed		No	Yes	Correct
Step 1	EPT	No	667	306	68.6
	participation	Yes	6	308	98.1
	Overall Percentage				75.8

Note. a. The cut value was .500.

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"No" and 98.1% of answers "Yes", and the total percentage of correct predictions was 75.8%. This indicates that for the 1,287 observations used in the model, the model had 75.8% chances correctly predicting whether or not a student chooses to take EPT.

Table 5.2

Accuracy predictions for other forms of out-of-school English learning

Classification Table[a]					
			Predicted		
			EPT participation		Percentage
	Observed		No	Yes	Correct
Step 1	Other forms of English activity participation	No	308	157	66.2
		Yes	97	725	88.2
	Overall Percentage				80.3

Note. a. The cut value is .500

Likewise, Table 5.2 shows the accuracy prediction probability of the model for other forms of out-of-school English learning. As can be seen, the model accurately predicted 66.2% of answer "No" and 88.2% of answer "Yes", and the total percentage of correct predictions was 80.3%. This indicates that for the 1,287 observations used in the model, the model had 80.3% chances correctly predicting whether or not a student chooses to take other forms of out-of-school English learning. Overall, The prediction accuracy of the model used in this research was relatively satisfactory.

5.3 Overall statistical analysis

The main purpose of this section is to provide the general trends and circumstances of high

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school students' out-of-school English choices for the valid sample of 1,287. The variable social origin, which represents family ESCS, was counted as a standardized continuous index in the calculations. First, I employed logistic regression to step wisely examine the influence of the different RCT components under control of ESCS as the main variable of interest. The logistic regression model first regressed on social origin alone to obtain the total effect of social origin (Model 1, ***Hypothesis 1***). Primary effects in the form of English language examination scores were then put into Model 2 to test ***Hypothesis 2***. In the following, while controlling for primary effects, I step wisely put subjective factors of cost-benefit considerations (i.e., anticipated English learning benefits, anticipated English learning success probability, motive of social status maintenance, Model 3) and attitudinal factors toward policy (i.e., English learning policy stance, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital in English learning, Model 4) into the model to test ***Hypothesis 3*** and ***Hypothesis 4***, respectively. I then tested all variables in Model 5. Gender, ethnicity, and residence served as control variables in all models. To compare coefficients between models, I reported the coefficient and effect decomposition as the average marginal effect (AME) – an index that reflects how many percentage points the probability of choosing an out-of-school English learning activity increases if the corresponding independent variable increases by one unit.

Next, I used the KHB decomposition approach to conduct causal mediation analysis. Following the command in Kohler et al. (2011), this study decomposed the total effects of social origin into primary and secondary effects, trying to gain a deeper understanding of the

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respective contribution of each explanatory variable.

5.3.1 Multivariate logistic regression on English private tutoring

In terms of EPT participation (see Table 5.3), Model 1 underscored a strong and positive relationship between students' choices for attending EPT and their family social origin (supporting ***Hypothesis 1***). On average, each standard deviation change in social origin resulted in a 5.6 percentage-point increase in the probability of a student choosing to attend EPT. While integrating English academic ability in Model 2, this average increase rose to 6.8 percentage points, indicating that the primary effect in the form of English academic ability exerted a significantly negative influence on EPT participation (supporting ***Hypothesis 2***). Specifically, a one-standard-deviation increase in family social origin led to higher English ability, but translated into a lower probability of participation in EPT of 0.5 percentage points. This finding indicates that, when only English academic performance is taken into account, the higher a student's English proficiency, the lower the probability of participating in EPT, which is consistent with the aforementioned descriptive results that most high school students' reasons for attending EPT are more related to remediating their academic scores.

Model 3 and Model 4 explained secondary effects – the effects of subjective cost-benefit considerations and attitudinal factors toward policy, respectively. In terms of cost-benefit considerations, as shown in Model 3, both anticipated English learning benefits and anticipated English learning success probability helped to explain the social origin effects and significantly influenced students' EPT participation (supporting ***Hypotheses 3a and 3b***).

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Specifically, each standard deviation increase in anticipated English learning benefits raised the probability of attending EPT by 2.2 percentage points, while each standard deviation increase in anticipated English learning success probability marginally reduced the likelihood of attending EPT by 1.3 percentage points. These two statistical outcomes suggest that high school students primarily enrolled in EPT due to two factors: their perceived English learning benefits and the lack of confidence in gaining desired English examination scores through school-based learning alone. Notably, the motives of social status maintenance did not significantly influence the students' EPT choices (rejecting ***Hypothesis 3c***), indicating that there was no strong evidence showing that students' educational aspirations for avoiding downward social mobility through EPT investment differed by family ESCS.

All the three attitudinal factors toward policy (i.e., English learning policy stance, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital in English learning) notably helped explain the effects of family social origin and caused it to largely reduce its statistical significance, indicating that the DRP may be particularly important for affecting EPT attendance (supporting ***Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c***). As illustrated in Model 4, the probability of participating in EPT decreased by 1.5 percentage points for each standard deviation increase in English learning policy stance, indicating that the more the students were supportive of the DRP, the less likely they were to attend EPT. In contrast, each standard deviation increase in educational anxiety and family social capital significantly raised the probability of attending EPT by 1.2 and 2.2 percentage points, respectively. It is obvious that the effects of family social capital was larger than that of the other two variables,

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Table 5.3

Multivariate logistic regression on EPT (displaying AME)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	b	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE
Social Origin	0.056***	0.011	0.068***	0.011	0.061***	0.011	0.039**	0.012	0.038**	0.012
Academic performance			-0.005***	0.001	-0.005***	0.001	-0.005***	0.001	-0.004***	0.001
Cost-benefit considerations										
Anticipated learning benefits					0.022***	0.005			0.017***	0.005
Anticipated learning success					-0.013**	0.004			-0.012**	0.004
Status maintenance					0.001	0.003			0.000	0.003
Attitudinal factors toward policy										
English learning policy stance							-0.015*	0.006	-0.014*	0.006
Educational anxiety							0.012*	0.005	0.012*	0.006
Family social capital							0.022**	0.005	0.020**	0.005
Control variables										
Gender	-0.004	0.030	-0.035	0.030	0.002	0.029	-0.025	0.029	0.002	0.029
Ethnicity	0.075*	0.032	0.074*	0.031	0.062*	0.031	0.048	0.032	0.030	0.032
Residence	-0.149***	0.042	-0.116**	0.042	-0.108**	0.041	-0.098*	0.041	-0.091*	0.041
Pseudo R^2	0.07		0.09		0.11		0.10		0.13	
N (valid cases)	1,287		1,287		1,287		1,287		1,287	

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

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Table 5.4

Multivariate logistic regression on other forms of out-of-school English learning (displaying AME)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	b	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE
Social Origin	0.060***	0.012	0.047***	0.012	0.024*	0.012	0.018	0.012	0.005	0.013
Academic performance			0.005***	0.001	0.002*	0.001	0.005***	0.001	0.002*	0.001
Cost-benefit considerations										
Anticipated learning benefits					0.035***	0.005			0.031***	0.005
Anticipated learning success					0.007	0.004			0.007	0.004
Status maintenance					-0.003	0.004			-0.004	0.004
Attitudinal factors toward policy										
English learning policy stance							-0.014*	0.007	-0.010	0.007
Educational anxiety							0.004	0.006	0.001	0.006
Family social capital							0.023***	0.005	0.018**	0.005
Control variables										
Gender	-0.196***	0.032	-0.161***	0.032	-0.127***	0.032	-0.158***	0.032	-0.131***	0.032
Ethnicity	0.030	0.035	0.032	0.034	0.003	0.033	0.001	0.034	0.015	0.033
Residence	0.025	0.043	-0.007	0.042	0.008	0.041	-0.010	0.042	-0.017	0.041
Pseudo R^2	0.07		0.09		0.11		0.10		0.13	
N (valid cases)	1,287		1,287		1,287		1,287		1,287	

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

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suggesting that under the DRP, family social connections play a more significant role in supporting students' EPT participation.

5.3.2 Multivariate logistic regression on other forms of out-of-school English learning

In terms of other forms of out-of-school English learning (see Table 5.4), as illustrated in Model 1, the probability of an individual's participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities increased by 6.0 percentage points for a standard-deviation change in the family social origin (supporting ***Hypotheses 1***). After integrating English academic ability in Model 2, this average increase was reduced to 4.7 percentage points. This means that an increase in family social origin led to higher English academic performance, which was then translated into a higher probability of participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities of 0.5 percentage points (supporting ***Hypotheses 2***). This finding reveals a statistically positive association between students' English proficiency levels and their likelihood of engaging in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, reinforcing the previously established descriptive results in Section 4.5 that most high school students pursued other forms of out-of-school English learning activities mostly for linguistic ability enrichment rather than merely remediating scholastic performances.

Integrating secondary effects step wisely into Model 3 and Model 4 resulted in a noticeable reduction in the social origin effects. This is particularly evident when attitudinal factors toward policy were put into the model, which inclusion caused the coefficient of social origin to lose its significance. As shown in Model 5, while controlling for the primary effects, the

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main effects came from students' anticipated English learning benefits and their family social capital invested in English learning under the DRP (supporting ***Hypotheses 3a and 4c***), with a one-standard-deviation increase in expected English benefits and family social capital leading to an increase in the probability of participation in out-of-school English learning activities by 3.1 and 1.8 percentage points, respectively. Other variables, however, did not help explain social origin effects significantly (rejecting ***Hypotheses 3b, 3c, 4a, and 4b***). These findings show that the participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities were less likely to be affected by the DRP in comparison with EPT participation.

5.3.3 KHB decomposition of explanatory variables

To quantify the contribution of each explanatory variable, the study further performed causal mediation analysis in STATA. It employed the KHB decomposition command in Kohler et al. (2011, pp. 431–432) to disentangle the respective percentage share of each explanatory variable's contribution to the total effects of social origin.

In terms of high school students' EPT choices (see Figure 5.1), family social capital emerged as the strongest positive mediator (28.3%), followed by anticipated English learning benefits (17.0%). English learning policy stance (10.0%) and perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning under the DRP (6.7%) demonstrated comparatively modest mediating effects. By contrast, students' ideal English academic performance and their high levels of anticipated probability of English learning success substantially reduced EPT participation likelihood, and these two variables contributed -16.4% and -13.6% to the social origin effect,

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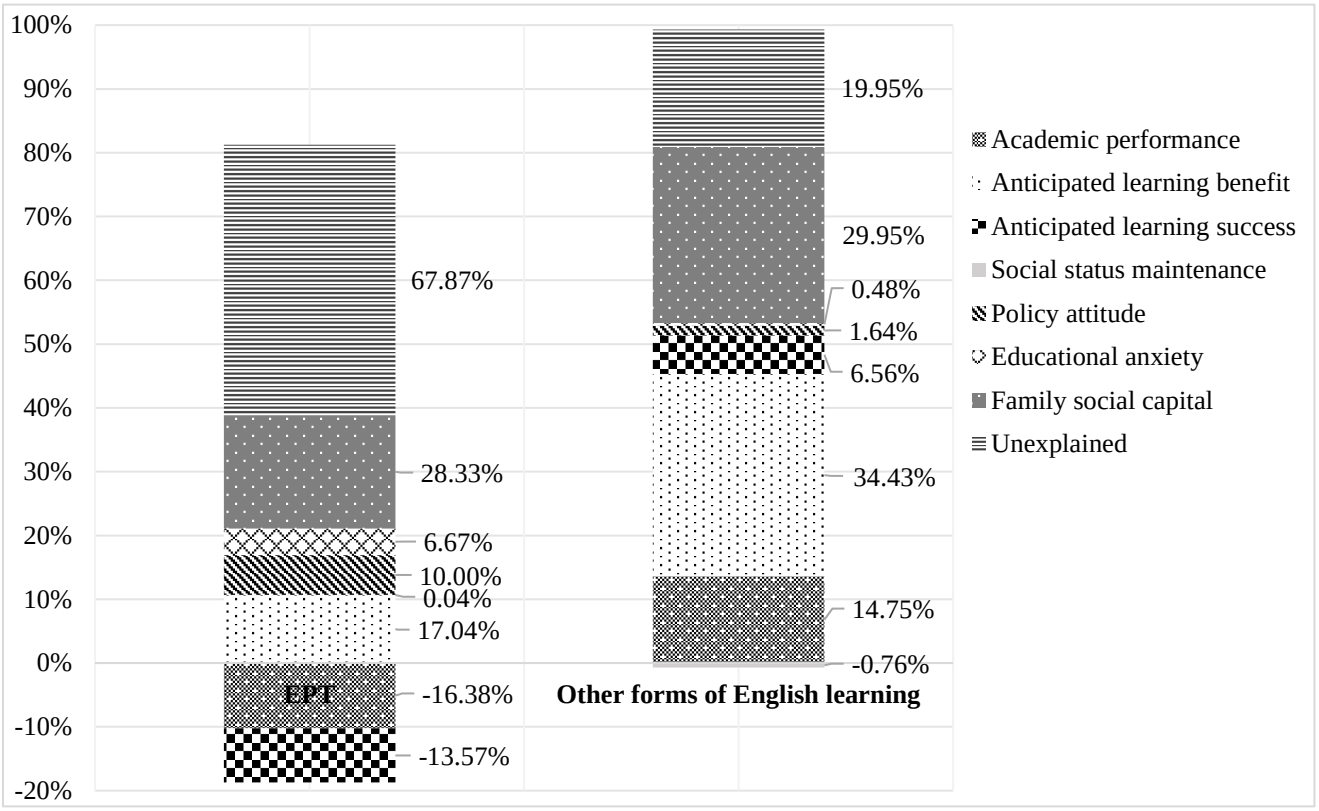
respectively.

Figure 5.1

KHB decomposition of the respective explanatory variable (showing shares)



Regarding the choices for other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, family social capital (30.0%) and anticipated English learning benefits (34.4%) emerged as the primary positive contributors, collectively accounting for nearly two-thirds of the observed social origin effects. In contrast to EPT participation where academic performance exerted negative mediating effects, academic performance positively contributed 14.8% to the social origin effect in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities.

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5.4 Comparison among different social strata

After obtaining the overall multivariate outcomes, the study then dug deeper into out-of-school English language learning among students from different social classes. By referring to Entrich's (2018, p. 137) approach to social class division, students' social origin in this section was categorized to upper, middle, and lower social strata according to ESCS values. The lower, middle, and upper classes were encoded as 0, 1, and 2, respectively. Finally, I categorized 322 upper-class students (top ESCS group), 643 middle-class students (medium ESCS group), and 322 lower-class students (bottom ESCS group).

In Section 5.4.1, I tested the correlation between social origin and out-of-school English learning choices, validating social origin's key role in influencing students' educational choices. In Sections 5.4.2 to 5.4.4, I tried to answer ***RQ3(1)*** by first conducting logistic regression to examine the effects of each RCT component, with coefficients of logistic regression being presented in the form of AME. Then, to quantify the contribution of respective variable, I calculated the percentage share of each variable's contribution to the explanation of the social difference using the KHB decomposition command in Kohler et al. (2011). Through presenting and analyzing the statistical results in each social class, I put forward corresponding conjectures that awaited verification in the interviews.

5.4.1 Univariate logistic regression

By differentiating students into three social classes, the following two tables illustrate the significant correlation between social origins and out-of-school English choices. Table 5.5

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shows that social origin played a significantly positive effect on students' EPT choices. Compared with lower-class students, middle-class students tended to be 1.44 times more likely to attend EPT (b = .366, p = .03) and upper-class students were 2.56 times more likely to attend EPT (b = .939, p < .001).

Table 5.5

Univariate logistic regression on EPT (social origin being categorical variable)

Variables in the Equation							
		b	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1a	Lower class (0)			17.140	2	<.001	
	Middle class (1)	.366	.220	2.754	1	.03	1.441
	Upper class (2)	.939	.238	15.596	1	<.001	2.558
	Constant	-1.580	.186	72.498	1	<.001	.206

Likewise, as shown in Table 5.6, social origin also exerted a significantly positive effect on students' choices for other forms of out-of-school English learning, with middle-class students being 2.06 times more likely (b = .723, p < .001) and upper-class students 3.95 times more likely (b = 1.373, p < .001) to take other forms of out-of-school English learning than lower-class students.

Table 5.6

Univariate logistic regression on other forms of out-of-school English learning (social origin being categorical variable)

Variables in the Equation						
	b	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)

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Step 1a	Lower class (0)			40.009	2	<.001	
	Middle class (1)	.723	.175	17.152	1	<.001	2.061
	Upper class (2)	1.373	.221	38.709	1	<.001	3.948
	Constant	-.107	.140	.590	1	.443	.898

As can be seen, with the increase in social class, students' probability of taking out-of-school English learning activities rose accordingly. These two findings validate that social origin acted as a key variable in influencing students' choices for both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning choices. In the following, I report and compare how social origin influenced students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects in each social class through logistic regression and KHB decomposition.

5.4.2 Upper-class students

As shown in Table 5.7, upper-class students' EPT choices were only influenced by secondary effects, with the primary effect in the form of English academic performances being insignificant. Regarding subjective cost-benefit considerations, both of anticipated learning benefits and anticipated learning success probability positively significantly helped explain the social origin effects. Specifically, a one-standard-deviation increase in family social origin led to higher levels of anticipated English learning benefits and success probability, and then translated into a higher probability of participation in EPT of 0.9 and 1.0 percentage points, respectively.

Among the three attitudinal factors toward policy, only family social capital demonstrated statistically significant effects on EPT participation, with each standard deviation increase

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corresponding to a 2.3 percentage point rise in enrollment probability. Notably, this mediator accounted for 26.7% of total effects, substantially exceeding the contributions of anticipated English learning benefits and anticipated English learning success probability, indicating that upper-class students' EPT participation were predominantly facilitated by their families' social connections under the DRP.

Table 5.7

Upper class (top ESCS group): Multivariate logistic regression on EPT/other forms of out-of-school English learning (displaying AME) and KHB decomposition (showing shares)

Variables	EPT			Other forms of English learning		
	b	SE	Share (%)	b	SE	Share (%)
Social Origin	0.056	0.062		0.039	0.053	
Academic performance	-0.006	0.009	-7.16	0.013*	0.011	13.23
Cost-benefit considerations						
Anticipated learning benefits	0.009*	0.012	9.73	0.017**	0.011	17.07
Anticipated learning success	0.010**	0.015	11.74	-0.001	0.005	-0.69
Social status maintenance	0.000	0.007	0.42	0.000	0.001	0.06
Policy influence						
Policy attitudes	-0.004	0.003	0.77	-0.002	0.004	1.98
Educational anxiety	0.000	0.002	0.33	0.000	0.002	0.37
Family social capital	0.023**	0.022	26.73	0.029**	0.019	29.21
Share $_{total}$			42.55			61.23
Control variables						
Gender	-0.007	0.066		-0.123*	0.055	
Ethnicity	0.086	0.073		-0.102	0.054	
Residence	-0.090	0.183		0.191	0.171	
Pseudo R^2		0.10			0.22	
N (valid cases)		322			322	

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

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The case for other forms of out-of-school English learning was bit different in that primary effect played a significantly positive role, with each standard deviation increase in social origin resulting in a higher level of English academic achievement and then leading to 1.3 percentage-point increase in the probability of a student choosing to attend other forms of out-of-school English learning. Anticipated English learning benefits and family social capital also exerted positive effects, with a one-standard-deviation increase in expected English benefits and family social capital leading to an increase in the probability of participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities by 1.7 and 2.9 percentage points, respectively.

Among the above significant statistical results, what is worth noting is that the effects of English academic achievement, anticipated English learning benefits, as well as anticipated English learning success probability, were all positive. This suggests that upper-class students may engage in out-of-school English learning primarily for enrichment rather than remediation. Specifically, upper-class students who demonstrated stronger English performance, recognized greater utility in English learning, and maintained higher confidence in examination success exhibited significantly greater engagement in out-of-school learning activities. As such, one of my conjectures is that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds engage in out-of-school English language learning not only to prepare for the *Gaokao* but also for other enrichment purposes (***Conjecture 1***). In other words, even when possessing strong academic foundations and high expectations of *Gaokao* success, upper-

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class students continue to invest in both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning to further enhance their linguistic competencies.

5.4.3 Middle-class students

For middle-class students (see Table 5.8), choices for EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning were both influenced by the subjective cost-benefit considerations and attitudinal factors toward policy.

In terms of EPT choices, the primary effect played a significant negative role, with each standard deviation increase in English academic performance declining the probability of attending EPT by 1.0 percentage point. This indicates that the lower the English academic performance a middle-class student obtained, the more likely he or she was to take the EPT. Additionally, anticipated learning success probability demonstrated an even stronger association, with each standard deviation increase declining the probability of attending EPT by 1.8 percentage points. Collectively, the negative contribution of these two mediators to the total effect was as high as 20.2% and 35.9%, respectively, which suggests that middle-class students' high English academic performance and high levels of anticipated English learning success probability both significantly diminished their likelihood of participating in EPT. Based on this, I conjecture that middle-class students who take the EPT are more likely to focus on remediation rather than enrichment (***Conjecture 2***). In other words, middle-class students who attended EPT might be those who had relatively poor English grades and lower levels of anticipated probability of English learning success in the *Gaokao*.

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By contrast, middle-class students who participated in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities seemed to be more for the purpose of enrichment rather than remediation, as the primary effect played a significantly positive role – the probability of participating in other forms of out-of-school learning activities increased by 1.5 percentage points for each standard deviation increase in English academic performance.

Table 5.8

Middle class (medium ESCS group): Multivariate logistic regression on EPT/other forms of out-of-school English learning (displaying AME) and KHB decomposition (showing shares)

Variables	EPT			Other forms of English learning		
	b	SE	Share (%)	b	SE	Share (%)
Social Origin	0.019	0.025		0.007	0.027	
Academic performance	-0.010*	0.001	-20.18	0.010*	0.002	20.11
Cost-benefit considerations						
Anticipated learning benefits	-0.012*	0.007	-22.87	-0.020***	0.011	-32.06
Anticipated learning success	-0.018**	0.006	-35.90	0.007	0.005	14.59
Social status maintenance	0.003	0.004	-1.95	-0.000	0.002	-0.81
Policy influence						
Policy attitudes	-0.015**	0.009	27.86	-0.002	0.002	3.90
Educational anxiety	0.008*	0.008	14.19	0.000	0.001	1.30
Family social capital	0.012*	0.007	22.29	0.027***	0.008	53.09
Share $_{total}$			-16.56			60.12
Control variables						
Gender	0.026	0.041		-0.106*	0.046	
Ethnicity	0.038	0.045		-0.022	0.048	
Residence	-0.094	0.049		-0.023	0.050	
Pseudo R^2	0.11			0.17		
N (valid cases)	643			643		

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Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

An interesting finding emerged regarding the significantly negative effects of anticipated English learning benefits on both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning participation. According to ***Hypothesis 3a***, I originally expected that the anticipated benefits of English learning for future educational and career advancement would positively influence students' English learning choices, because students who have recognized greater benefits would logically pursue more learning opportunities. However, for middle-class students, each standard deviation increase in anticipated English learning benefits for future educational and career development paradoxically decreased their probability of participation in EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning by 1.2 and 2.0 percentage points, respectively. This paradoxical pattern may reflect the characteristically instrumental, pragmatic, and even utilitarian orientation of middle-class educational strategies. As noted by Zhang (2020), middle-class students tend to be "the most anxious and ambitious" (p. 396). As a result, when making educational choices, they would choose the most cost-effective learning modes and educational strategies to best achieve their personal goals while maximizing risk avoidance. It can, thus, be conjectured that, middle-class students' cost-benefit considerations tend to be highly goal-oriented: once they have obtained ideal English examination scores and possessed quite enough confidence in achieving English learning success in the *Gaokao*, they strategically discontinue out-of-school English learning activities, despite recognizing the language's long-term value (***Conjecture 3***). This result is quite different from that of upper-class students who learned English not only for the *Gaokao* but also for other enrichment

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purposes.

Finally, compared with upper-class students, middle-class students' EPT choices tended to be more susceptible to the influences of the DRP. As can be seen, each standard deviation increase in the supportive English learning policy stance resulted in the decrease in probability of attending EPT by 1.5 percentage points, while each standard deviation increase in perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning raised students' probability of attending EPT by 0.8 percentage points. These two statistics indicate that middle-class students who were more strongly against the DRP and who had higher levels of perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning were more likely to attend EPT. Furthermore, family social capital emerged as a significant factor mediating middle-class students' participation in both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, positively contributing 22.29% and 53.09% to the total effects of social origin, respectively.

5.4.4 Lower-class students

In terms of lower-class students' EPT participation, as shown in Table 5.9, while higher English learning performance reduced the probability of attending EPT by 1.6 percentage points, increased anticipated English learning benefits raised the probability of attending EPT by 1.8 percentage points. Regarding other forms of out-of-school English learning, lower-class students' choices were only positively affected by anticipated English learning benefits, with a one-standard-deviation increase in anticipated English learning benefits corresponding to a marked increase in the probability of participating in other forms of out-of-school

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English learning activities by 4.2 percentage points. This mediator positively contributed 51.17% to the total effects of social origin.

Table 5.9

Lower class (bottom ESCS group): Multivariate logistic regression on EPT/other forms of out-of-school English learning (displaying AME) and KHB decomposition (showing shares)

Variables	EPT			Other forms of English learning		
	b	SE	Share (%)	b	SE	Share (%)
Social Origin	0.080	0.071		0.139	0.095	
Academic performance	-0.016*	0.002	-28.05	0.000	0.002	1.36
Cost-benefit considerations						
Anticipated learning benefits	0.018*	0.008	33.04	0.042***	0.008	57.17
Anticipated learning success	-0.000	0.007	-0.07	-0.008	0.009	-4.34
Social status maintenance	0.000	0.005	0.21	-0.004	0.007	-2.48
Policy influence						
Policy attitudes	-0.001	0.011	-0.38	-0.002	0.014	-0.38
Educational anxiety	0.012	0.010	7.59	-0.002	0.013	-1.53
Family social capital	0.014	0.009	23.00	0.004	0.012	4.52
Share $_{total}$			35.34			54.32
Control variables						
Gender	-0.069	0.054		-0.185*	0.073	
Ethnicity	-0.026	0.054		-0.083	0.072	
Residence	-0.028	0.071		-0.104	0.098	
Pseudo R^2	0.20			0.16		
N (valid cases)	322			322		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

As can be seen, among the three cost-benefit variables, anticipated English learning benefits were the sole significant predictor of lower-class students' out-of-school English learning. This limited predictive power suggests that lower-class students engage in substantially fewer

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subjective cost-benefit calculations compared to their middle- and upper-class peers when making English learning decisions. The constrained range of influential factors highlights the more circumscribed nature of educational decision-making among economically disadvantaged students.

Moreover, the analysis reveal distinct class-based patterns in attitudinal factors toward policy. Unlike their upper- and middle-class peers, lower-class students' choices for out-of-school English learning activities were not influenced by attitudinal factors toward policy at all. This indicates that, on the one hand, lower-class students neither developed consistent English learning policy stance nor did they experience heightened educational anxiety in English learning under the DRP. As a result, the implementation of the DRP may not have much of impacts on lower-class students' mindsets or actions when making English learning choices.

On the other hand, while family social capital significantly influenced both upper- and middle-class students' out-of-school English learning choices, this variable was found to be statistically insignificant among lower-class students. Although the primary objective of the DRP is to equalize educational opportunities across various social classes by restricting private tutoring, the pronounced positive effects of family social capital on upper- and middle-class students juxtaposed with its minimal impact on lower-class students suggest that policy restrictions alone may not be able to compensate for resource deficiencies at the familial level. As such, I conjecture that disparities in learning opportunities persist for lower-class students within the context of the DRP due to their lack of family social capital invested

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in English learning (***Conjecture 4***).

5.5 Summary of the statistical results

Overall, the above statistical analysis presented in Section 5.3 has effectively addressed ***RQ2***, while the analysis in Section 5.4 has responded to ***RQ3(1),*** showing us, how social origin contributed to high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary effects (i.e., English academic performance) and secondary effects (i.e., subjective cost-benefit considerations and attitudinal factors toward policy).

In Section 5.3, the overall results of both multivariate logistic regression and KHB decomposition reveal that family social origin was a crucial predictor of students' choices for out-of-school English learning (supporting ***Hypothesis 1***). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to participate in out-of-school English learning, including both EPT and other informal English learning activities.

Furthermore, the primary effect in the form of English academic performance was found to be a significant variable – while it negatively affected students' EPT participation, it exerted positive effects on the participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities (supporting ***Hypothesis 2***). Among the three subjective cost-benefit considerations, the motive of social status maintenance did not influence students' out-of-school English learning choices at all (rejecting ***Hypothesis 3c***). Finally, students' EPT participation was more likely to be influenced by the DRP compared to participation in other forms of out-of-school

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English learning activities.

In Section 5.4, by differentiating participants into the three social strata, I also compared the similarities and differences in the factors that influenced their out-of-school English language choices. On the one hand, primary effects exerted similar impacts on students' educational choices across social classes, with English academic performance positively correlating with EPT choices while negatively correlating with other forms of out-of-school English learning choices.

On the other hand, secondary effects exerted heterogeneous impacts on students' educational choices across social classes. Specifically, lower-class students seemed to have much less subjective cost-benefit considerations than upper- and middle-class students, with only anticipated English learning benefits being significant. Moreover, compared with upper- and lower-class counterparts, middle-class students were most likely to be influenced by the DRP.

Nevertheless, during the data analysis, I identified several values that merited further investigation, leading me to formulate four corresponding conjectures accordingly. In the subsequent chapter, I conduct a qualitative analysis to further explore and validate these conjectures, thereby providing a more comprehensive response to ***RQ3(1)*** and, therefore, address ***RQ3(2)***.

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Chapter 6: Social origin

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have discussed how social origins contributed to high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects. The statistical results show that social origin was a core variable influencing high school students' English learning choices, and that students from different social classes received varying degrees of influence from primary and secondary effects when making educational choices.

However, in Section 5.4, given that some statistical results are not consistent with my preliminary expectations, I formulated four conjectures derived from these statistical results, which I intended to explore further during the interviews:

> ***Conjecture 1***: Upper-class students engage in out-of-school English language learning not only to prepare for the *Gaokao* but also for other enrichment purposes.
>
> ***Conjecture 2***: Middle-class students who take the EPT are more likely to focus on remediation rather than enrichment.
>
> ***Conjecture 3***: Middle-class students' cost-benefit considerations tend to be highly goal-oriented: once they have obtained ideal English examination scores and possessed quite enough confidence in achieving English learning success in the *Gaokao*, they strategically discontinue out-of-school English learning activities, despite recognizing the language's long-term value.

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Conjecture 4: Disparities in learning opportunities persist for lower-class students due to their lack of family social capital invested in English learning.

As such, to more adequately explain factors that contribute to students' out-of-school English learning choices in respective social class, I conducted interviews with twelve high school students from each social class and then zoomed in on their social origins, researching further on their attitudes, beliefs, and other dynamic factors behind English learning choices. In the following, I describe the results of the interviews according to the coding scheme (see Chapter 3, Table 3.4), attempting to further answer ***RQ3(1)*** by testifying the four conjectures and to finally answer ***RQ(2)***.

6.2 An overview of the participants' background

Consistent with the methodological framework outlined previously, the study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select twelve participants from each social class for in-depth interviews. The sampling protocol ensured systematic representation across school contexts: all upper-class participants were recruited from School A, while all lower-class participants were drawn from School B. Middle-class participants were strategically sampled from both schools, resulting in a final distribution of 17 participants from School A and 19 from School B. All participants spoke Mandarin Chinese as their first language throughout the interviews to ensure linguistic comfort and data authenticity.

Table 6.1 shows the types of EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning in which

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Table 6.1

Participants' basic information regarding English learning choices

	Participants	School	Gender	Types of EPT	Types of other forms of out-of-school English learning	Social origin
1	Yoummelia	A	Female	Small-group tutoring, online English course (related to IELTS course and College English Test)	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC, take MOOCs, take English learning workshops and consultation, communicate with English native speakers	
2	Violet	A	Female	One-on-one home tutoring with a foreign teacher, small-group tutoring (IELTS course)	Watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC, communicate with English native speakers, attend Technology, Entertainment, Design Talks (TEDx) contest, attend the annual international conference of the Model United Nations (MUN)	High
3	Funky	A	Female	One-on-one tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC	
4	Cici	A	Female	Large-group tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC, communicate with English native speakers	
5	Rachel	A	Female	One-on-one tutoring (IELTS course)	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers,	

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					listen to VOA and BBC, communicate with English native speakers
6	Jazzy	A	Female	One-on-one tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC
7	Richard	A	Male	One-on-one tutoring, online English course	None
8	Bobby	A	Male	None (one-on-one home tutoring with a foreign teacher when he was young)	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, share audio recordings of English books online, listen to VOA and BBC, take English learning workshops, communicate with English native speakers, keep English diaries, hold English salon, attend TEDx contest, attend the annual international conference of the MUN
9	James	A	Male	None	Watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC, participate in overseas study tour (including USA, UK, and Japan)
10	Peter	A	Male	None	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, share audio recordings of English books online, listen to VOA and BBC, take MOOCs, communicate with English native speakers, attend TEDx contest, attend the annual international conference of the MUN

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11	Lily	A	Female	None	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC, communicate with English native speakers, attend the annual international conference of the MUN	
12	Karol	A	Female	None	Watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers	
13	Jason	A	Male	One-on-one tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, attend English seminars	
14	Jennifer	B	Female	Small-group tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, take English self-study tests and recite vocabulary through Duolingo	
15	Yvette	A	Female	One-on-one tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English television channels	
16	Amanda	A	Female	One-on-one tutoring	None (occasionally read English newspapers, only required by teachers)	
17	Shirley	B	Female	Large-group tutoring	None	Middle
18	Siri	A	Female	Large-group tutoring	None	
19	Victor	B	Male	None	Purchase English auxiliary materials, watch English movies, learn through translation apps	
20	Cherry	B	Female	None	Purchase English auxiliary materials, read English books and newspapers, listen to VOA and BBC	
21	Candy	B	Female	None	Watch English television channels, read English books and newspapers, listen to English radio programs	

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22	Larry	B	Male	None	None	
23	Forrest	B	Male	None	None	
24	Cora	A	Female	None	None	
25	David	B	Male	Large-group tutoring	Read English books, listen to English radio programs	
26	Zoe	B	Female	Large-group tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials	
27	Daisy	B	Female	Large-group tutoring	Purchase English auxiliary materials, listen to English radio programs	
28	Lynn	B	Male	Large-group tutoring	None	
29	Harriet	B	Female	Large-group tutoring	None	
30	Simon	B	Male	None	Purchase English auxiliary materials, read English newspapers, listen to English radio programs	Low
31	Linda	B	Female	None	Watch English channels	
32	Tina	B	Female	None	Purchase English auxiliary materials, read English newspapers	
33	Reggie	B	Male	None	None	
34	Wilson	B	Male	None	None	
35	Francis	B	Male	None	None	
36	Michel	B	Male	None	None	

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the 36 students participated. Quantitatively, even though many students participated in out-of-school English language learning, upper-class students were evidently exposed to more abundant resources and greater opportunities. Qualitatively, upper-class students engaged in more one-on-one and foreign-teacher-directed EPT, whereas middle- and lower-class students mostly attended large-class EPT. Arguably, compared with middle- and lower-class students, upper-class students tended to participate in more high-quality and much richer out-of-school English learning activities. I further discuss these two points in the following sections.

6.3 The participants' family social origin

Family social origin was the key variable in the quantitative analysis and played a significantly positive role in students' out-of-school English learning choices. In order to gain insight into how or in what ways social origin influences students' English learning choices, I further designed interview questions about social origin based on the conceptual framework to explore how family socioeconomic capital (e.g., educational attainment, occupational prestige, financial conditions, etc.) and cultural capital (e.g., home learning resources, reading habits, cultural communication, etc.) influence students' English learning choices.

Basic information regarding participant parents' occupation and education degree are presented in Table 6.2. Three main themes were generated: 1) family cultural atmosphere, 2) parents' educational philosophy and aspirations, and 3) family English learning resources. In the following, I analyze the participants' family social origin from these three aspects.

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Table 6.2

Occupation and education degree of participants' parents

	Participants	Father's occupation	Father's education degree	Mother's occupation	Mother's education degree	Social origin
1	Yoummelia	The president of a pharmaceutical company	Bachelor	Housewife (previously a white collar in a foreign company)	Bachelor	
2	Violet	University teacher and secretary	Master	High school teacher	Bachelor	
3	Funky	Engineer	Bachelor	High school teacher	Bachelor	
4	Cici	Sales manager in a foreign company	Master	Senior executive in a foreign company	Master	
5	Rachel	Civil aviation authority official	Bachelor	Government official in a cyber-security department	Master	High
6	Jazzy	Airport general manager	Bachelor	General manager of youth tourism	Bachelor	
7	Richard	Senior executive in a state-owned company	Master	Senior executive in a state-owned company	Master	
8	Bobby	Private entrepreneur	Bachelor	Private entrepreneur	Bachelor	
9	James	Engineer	Master	Accountant	Technical College	
10	Peter	University teacher and researcher	Master	Middle school teacher	Bachelor	

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11	Lily	Senior executive in a state-owned company	Master	Doctor	PhD	
12	Karol	Senior executive in a foreign company	Master	Bank senior manager	Bachelor	
13	Jason	The president of a pet products company	Bachelor	Housewife	High school	
14	Jennifer	Official of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention	Technical College	Runs a pharmaceutical business	Technical College	
15	Yvette	Military officer	Bachelor	Judge	Bachelor	
16	Amanda	Runs a kindergarten	Bachelor	Housewife	Technical College	
17	Shirley	Manager in a railway company	Bachelor	Housewife	High school	
18	Siri	Opened a store	High school	Primary school teacher	Technical College	Middle
19	Victor	Engineer	Technical College	Police	Technical College	
20	Cherry	Factor technical director	Bachelor	Factory warehouse management personnel	High school	
21	Candy	Runs restaurants	Technical College	Runs restaurants	Technical College	
22	Larry	Doctor	Bachelor	Opened a store	High school	
23	Forrest	Clerk in a state-owned company	High school	Primary school teacher	High school	
24	Cora	Primary school	Bachelor	Primary school teacher	Bachelor	

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		teacher				
25	David	Freight worker	Middle school	Housewife	Middle school	
26	Zoe	Agricultural laborer	Middle school	Agricultural laborer	Primary school	
27	Daisy	Runs a barbecue restaurant	High school	Runs a barbecue restaurant	Middle school	
28	Lynn	Agricultural laborer	Middle school	Agricultural laborer	High school	
29	Harriet	Driver	High school	Sale personnel	Middle school	
30	Simon	Police	High school	Government official	Technical College	
31	Linda	Runs a restaurant	Middle school	Housewife	Primary school	Low
32	Tina	The village secretary	Technical College	Agricultural laborer	High school	
33	Reggie	Agricultural laborer and factory worker	Uneducated	Agricultural laborer and factory worker	Uneducated	
34	Wilson	Factory worker	Middle school	Housekeeping staff	Middle school	
35	Francis	Set up breakfast stalls	Primary school	Set up breakfast stalls	Middle school	
36	Michel	Agricultural laborer	High school	Agricultural laborer	Primary school	

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6.3.1 Family cultural atmosphere

This section takes us to gain a deep understanding of students' family cultural atmosphere from three main aspects: 1) reading habits and book possession, 2) cultural and social communication, and 3) cultural learning activities, such as visiting museums and galleries.

6.3.1.1 Reading habits and book possession

Reading habits and the possession of books can be important indicators of the family cultural atmosphere. During interviews, I asked students to talk about their parents' recreational routines and lifestyle habits, and I found that all upper-class students' parents had good reading habits. For example:

> We have a wealth of books in the house. My mother particularly enjoys reading philosophy books, such as Hesse's "Siddhartha". Furthermore, my mother has a particular fondness for *Taoism*, so she often studies *Taoism* and *Zhuangzi* at home. She also likes humanities and social science books, as well as classic literature. [Violet]

> Both of my parents have reading habits. There's a wide variety of books at home covering various genres, ranging from historical and military books to foreign literature. Although most of the books are English-language publications and maybe too specialized for me to comprehend, this early and sustained exposure has undoubtedly fostered my reading habits from a young age. [Peter]

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Jazzy and Cici shared similar views by saying that their parents enjoyed reading a wide range of book genres, ranging from literary masterpieces to history book series and to military topics.

These excerpts show that, for upper-class parents, reading books was one of the most popular ways of entertainment after work or even an integral component of daily pastime. The reading materials encompassed diverse genres, which were not only restricted to their professions but were also related to literature, poetry, history, philosophy, and so forth. Although Yummelia and Rachel mentioned that their parents rarely had time to read books due to their busy work schedules, their parents had the habit of collecting books at home and would spare time listening to audiobooks as much as possible.

In contrast, while middle-class families also prioritized reading, the frequency and diversity of reading habits were notably less robust. During interviews, only half of the middle-class students' (Cora, Cherry, Jason, Shirley, and Siri) parents had regular reading habits at home. Among them, Jason and Cora mentioned that their parents loved reading history and literature, while other students noted that their parents tended to read more professionally related books. For example, Amanda's father ran a kindergarten and would occasionally read books related to "economics and employee management". Likewise, Cherry's father was a factory technical director, so he usually read "engineering and technology books" that helped him prepare for engineer certificate examinations. Nevertheless, Cherry added that, although her parents did not really like history and literature, they bought her many of these books:

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> My parents have bought me a wide variety of books, including world classics, history, and poetry. So, my reading and study habits have been very good since childhood.

Yvette and Jennifer were in a similar situation in that their parents, while not avid readers themselves, strongly encouraged them to read:

> My parents don't read as much; instead, they tend to watch news and videos. But I do think it's all okay. Even though they don't actively read, they highly encourage me to read from a young age and buy me many literature books to read. I was raised to be more of a reader. [Yvette]

> Although neither of my parents are big readers, they've never stopped me from reading extracurricular books, and they'll buy me whatever I want to read. [Jennifer]

Jennifer and Candy continued to mention that their grandparents were fonder of reading books than their parents, creating a rich reading home environment for them. As can be seen, compared with upper-class families, although the middle-class family reading atmosphere was less rich, parents still placed high importance on their children's reading habits.

Lower-class families' reading habits were even much less. Only Linda, Tina, and Zoe admitted their parents would occasionally read novels, news, or books related to their work. For most lower-class students, there was almost no reading atmosphere at home (Daisy, Lynn,

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Harriet, and Reggie). As Harriet said:

> My house has no book collection at all; it's essentially just books of my school curriculum.

Furthermore, Daisy and Reggie pointed out that the reason their parents did not read books was because their parents were not highly educated:

> Neither of my parents are highly educated. Usually, my mother plays *mahjong* after work, while my father spends his free time doing farm work. Neither of them has a reading habit. [Daisy]

> We never had much of a reading atmosphere at home. Neither of my parents had ever received an education, so they are simply illiterate; they couldn't even read or write their own names. [Reggie]

As can be seen, in contrast to upper- and middle-class households, which typically possessed a wealth of reading materials and established reading practices, lower-class families exhibited minimal reading habits, with many parents lacking formal education, resulting in a stark absence of reading habits at home.

6.3.1.2 Cultural and social communication

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According to Jaeger (2009, p. 1948), the extent to which parents communicate with their children on "cultural, social, and school topics" is also an important perspective of the family cultural atmosphere. Through interviews, this study notes that high-frequency cultural communication existed in many upper-class families. In addition to reading books themselves, upper-class parents would discuss with or even recommend books to their children, so as to transmit the family cultural capital:

> My father enjoys reading about history and the military on a daily basis. Occasionally, he shares fascinating historical and military stories with me. My mother enjoys reading literature. We usually discuss famous literary books like "Jane Eyre" and "Pride and Prejudice" together. [Lily]

> When I was young, my father enjoyed reading books with me, and my mother sometimes brought me along to listen to audiobooks while she was cooking. [Bobby]

> My mother often recommends good literary books and articles to me and shares her reading insights with me. [...] When I was very young, my mother often read storybooks and taught me to memorize ancient poems. [Karol]

Half of the upper-class students explained that their parents hoped to enhance their learning and cultural literacy through such cultural communication. As Jazzy and Lily illustrated:

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> As a liberal student, I find the history, politics, and ancient literature that my mother discusses with me to be quite beneficial for my cultural and literary knowledge, which has laid a strong learning foundation in liberal arts. [Jazzy]

> I believe my parents have purposefully created a literary home environment for me and nurtured my healthy reading habits. I have had a strong literary background since elementary school, so my language arts grades have always been satisfying, because I read the books required in school at a very young age. [Lily]

In addition to cultural communication, family communication on social topics was also found in many upper-class families. Bobby, Rachel, and Yummelia pointed out that their parents would share ideas about international news, social problems, and professional knowledge with them, helping them broaden horizons and build interest in future careers. For example, Bobby's father used to frequently expose him to "international news, including current affairs, politics, and military news" when he was young, which made him "aspire to pursue international political relations, diplomacy, or English-related programs in the future". Rachel shared similar experiences:

> My mother is well-educated, so she often teaches me about history and discusses political issues with me. My father also occasionally shares his insight into international situations and related topics. All of these have shaped my future career planning.

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Likewise, Yummelia's father ran a pharmaceutical company, and her mother used to be a white collar in a foreign company, so they often shared business knowledge with her:

> My parents usually share their experiences, ideas, and potential challenges they have encountered in running a company with me, which cultivates my interest in economics, finance, and business operations. I'm very interested in this field and eager to learn more about it in the future.

The above excerpts suggest that upper-class students typically grew up in a rich cultural home environment, where parental engagement in reading and the provision of extensive cultural and social learning resources are prevalent. This family environment enabled them to easily access related learning capital through daily parent-child communication and thus foster a profound appreciation for literature, philosophy, and the humanities.

In contrast, only three middle-class students (Cora, Candy, and Jason) described the cultural communication at home with their parents. For example:

> My father is more into painting, calligraphy, and literature, so he often tells me stories about history and literature. [Cora]

> My father is really into history and geography, frequently sharing stories about these subjects. Despite being a science student, I find myself quite engaged with history and

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> geography. [Jason]

However, none of them mentioned that such communication may have helped them develop future career planning.

In terms of social communication, Cherry thought she largely benefited from the conversation with her father, as he would use knowledge from books to discuss social issues with her, making her realize that "learning is valuable because it can be applied to real-life situations":

> When I talk to my father, he likes to use his academic knowledge to explain things in life or apply the knowledge he gains from books to help me solve my real-life problems, which I find quite interesting.

However, for other middle-class students, cultural and social communication seldom existed in their family environment. This was probably because their parents did not pay much attention to it. As Victor and Siri explained:

> Only when I was young would they recommend literature books to me. Nevertheless, it doesn't really matter if I don't read them since there is no mandatory requirement. [...] My parents are not really interested in this area. [Victor]

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> My parents aren't very strict about my literary or cultural knowledge. It seems they don't care about this as long as I do well in examinations, and that's all that matters. [Siri]

As can be seen, unlike upper-class parents who consciously cultivated their children's cultural and social knowledge through communication, middle-class parents did not seem to focus on this area intentionally, though they still more or less talked to their kids about relevant topics. However, the study did not find cultural or social communication among lower-class families.

6.3.1.3 Cultural learning activities: Visiting museums and galleries

Finally, the study used the frequency of carrying out family cultural learning activities, such as visiting museums and galleries, to measure the family cultural atmosphere. Many upper-class students (Yummelia, Violet, Funky, Lily, James, Karol, Bobby, and Peter) were found to travel to different cities and countries to visit museums and art galleries with their parents on vacations. As expressed by Violet:

> My family travels abroad almost every year. Whenever we visit a new country, we make it a point to explore a variety of local museums and galleries. We visited the British Museum during our trip to the United Kingdom and the Van Gogh exhibition during our visit to the United States. My mother is particularly fond of these, and she's very interested in history and art. [...] My parents took me to appreciate these paintings, and I loved listening to them tell me stories about the museum exhibits.

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Furthermore, Peter and Funky believed that familial engagement in cultural learning activities played a pivotal role in their artistic and intellectual development. Both participants highlighted how consistent exposure to museums, art galleries, and historical sites across various nations significantly enhanced their cultural literacy. Peter explicitly noted that such experiences "substantially enriched cultural education and aesthetic learning" while Funky attested to having "cultivated an early interest in art, archaeology, and history" through these activities. As can be seen, the deliberate cultivation of children's cultural capital in upper-class families extends beyond textual knowledge acquisition but is also realized through the philosophy of "walking outside and seeing the world".

For middle-class students, however, visiting museums and galleries seemed to be less frequent. Only Cora, Yvette, and Jason said their parents would regularly take them to visit museums and galleries. As illustrated by Yvette:

> My parents usually take me to museums, and I've visited almost all the local museums in Chengdu. My parents also take me to other cities to visit museums and galleries.

Cora and Jason also expressed that they enjoyed learning the history and cultural stories of the museum exhibits from their parents. By contrast, other middle-class students' parents seldom engaged their children in such cultural learning activities, unless their children asked them to do so:

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> My parents will take me to museums and art galleries if I'm interested, but they don't take the initiative to take me to those places. [Siri]

> My parents usually have their own commitments, and they don't take the initiative to involve me in any cultural learning activities like visiting museums. They probably don't consider it important. [Jennifer]

Jennifer even expressed that she had "never been to a museum or art gallery together with her parents before", and her parents rarely told her anything about museum exhibits. Arguably, middle-class parents did not put too much emphasis on family cultural activities as much as upper-class parents.

Such cultural learning activities rarely happened in lower-class families. As Reggie and Michel expressed, there was even no cultural learning activity in their families at all. Among all lower-class students, only David was an exception. He noted:

> Although my parents don't know much about culture and history, they pay high attention to this aspect of education. They often take me to visit cultural and historical sites, hoping to provide me with valuable learning experiences.

According to David, his parents were not highly educated and were not interested in history or literature themselves, but they "highly value cultural education", providing him with

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cultural learning resources as much as possible. This exerted positive effects on David's studies. David's story is an interesting finding in lower-class families, and I discuss his story further in the following sections.

6.3.2 Parents' educational philosophy and aspirations

Upper-class parents were found to be more open-minded and future-oriented regarding their children's education. For one thing, they did not put too much pressure on their children's academic performance or criticized children if their children failed the examination:

> My parents have never pressured me to attend a top-tier university but always emphasize that I just need to do my best. Even if I don't perform well in examinations or drop in the rankings, they allow me to reflect on the reasons independently. [Rachel]

> My parents encourage and praise me more than criticize me. If fail an examination, they usually use gentle guidance and encouragement rather than direct criticism. [Jazzy]

> There's absolutely no academic pressure at home, and my parents allow me to pursue whatever I like. [...] I never worry about how I'm going to explain myself to my parents if I fail the examination. [Karol]

For another, upper-class parents tended to value children's overall development over narrow academic achievement, prioritizing psychological well-being, physical health, and the

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cultivation of important competencies with long-term developmental benefits. For example, Cici, Jazzy, and James explained that their parents never put too much pressure on their learning because their parents always prioritized their well-being, positive mindset, and happiness. As James illustrated:

> As long as I'm happy and healthy, my parents don't pressure me to excel academically.

Violet also provided an example of her parents' relaxed, open-minded, and encouraging approach to education. She mentioned a time when she wanted to attend TEDx contest, an English speech event held by the school's international department, in her sophomore year of high school. During that period, she was under much academic pressure to prepare for the final examination, and thus many of her classmates and even teachers advised her not to participate in the TEDx contest, because they thought it would negatively impact her examination scores. However, Violet's parents showed unconditional support, encouragement, and respect for her participation in the TEDx contest:

> They believed it was a valuable opportunity to not only enhance my English proficiency but also help me cultivate critical thinking abilities and gain international insights. [...] They told me that these experiences I gained from the competition would be much more valuable than my examination scores.

As can be seen, Violet's parents had a long-term perspective and did not confine themselves

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to the *Gaokao*. Instead, they prioritized the long-term development of individual abilities. Similar to Violet, Karol and Peter also mentioned that their parents valued long-term competencies much more than test-taking skills:

> I have a very relaxed attitude toward my studies. It's not that I don't care, but because my family's educational philosophy always prioritize long-term learning over just sticking to the knowledge in high school textbooks. [...] Usually, my family is more concerned about my interpersonal and communication skills. [Karol]

> My parents value my overall development ability more than my examination scores. For example, my mother attaches great importance to my thinking ability. Therefore, when I was growing up, she always encouraged me to read extracurricular books and write reading notes. She would also engage in critical discussions with me to communicate about the book's content. [Peter]

The above excerpts reveal upper-class families' open-minded and future-oriented educational philosophy. Rather than focusing merely or excessively on examination scores, they valued more on children's long-term ability development.

In comparison, over half of the middle-class parents were very strict with their academic scores and tended to hold high educational expectations, which exerted huge academic pressure on students. As Jennifer and Forrest described:

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> My parents have very high expectations for me. If I fail an examination, they'll analyze the reasons with me very seriously and ask if I want to consider taking tutoring classes or requiring similar support. Although they don't criticize me harshly but instead provide subtle reminders, I'm still under huge pressure. I fear disappointing them. [Jennifer]

> Although my parents don't particularly emphasize my examination scores, they still have high expectations for my studies. They've invested a great deal of money and energy in my education. I'm under a lot of pressure because of their high expectations, and thus I always feel that I have to repay them by getting into a prestigious university. [Forrest]

As can be seen, these middle-class students tended to be under academic pressure due to their parents' high expectations, though their parents may not necessarily use overly harsh educational methods. However, other middle-class students experienced more intensified academic pressure due to more authoritarian and punitive parenting styles. For example, Cherry and Cora complained that their parents would employ coercive educational methods that explicitly aimed at "forcing" high examination performance, which made them feel extremely uncomfortable. As Cherry illustrated:

> My father is very strict with me and cares only about my academic performance, and at times, he harshly criticizes me when I perform poorly on examinations. [...] He even closely monitors my weekly and monthly examination performances, checking my scores and rankings every day. I have the feeling that I'm being watched, which, you know,

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> gives me a lot of pressure and makes me extremely uncomfortable.

A similar situation was expressed by Cora, whose parents would even criticize her when she did not score in the top three of her class:

> They're particularly strict with my examination scores, which eventually makes me very passive in my studies and also leads to a period of depression. Every time they ask me about my studies excessively, they'll make a big deal out of it, which leaves me feeling heartbroken and weary of studying. I always feel like my academic autonomy is suppressed.

Unlike many upper-class parents, Cora's parents seldom used encouragement toward her studies:

> They've never praised me when I perform well in the examination but instead educated me to avoid arrogance. However, when I perform poorly, they start criticizing me in a stormy manner.

The reason for middle-class parents' high emphasis on examination scores was probably because of, as Siri explained, their belief that "the *Gaokao* is the only way out". As such, in contrast to upper-class parents, their educational philosophy tended to prioritize academic performance more than many other things.

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For lower-class students, their parents had a much more relaxed educational philosophy. This was probably because, for one thing, some lower-class parents were not highly educated and did not highly value education. Consequently, they did not impose high academic expectations on their children. As Tina said, her father "does not show much interest" in her studies. Reggie and Lynn shared similar stories:

> I was raised with free-range parenting because my parents are functionally illiterate; they cannot read my academic grades. Even if the teachers send messages to them online, they cannot read them, so they don't inquire much about my academic grades. [...] Studies are never discussed in my family because neither of our parents cares much about it. [Reggie]

> My parents aren't well-educated, so they're even unaware of the high school academic life. Therefore, they're unable to provide me with any guidance or support in planning my life and studies. [...] They don't value education much, and they rarely discuss my studies with me. My mother might inquire about my grades after final examinations each semester, but my father hardly ever cares about my studies. [Lynn]

Lynn also lamented that his parents did not even make any demands on his studies; in fact, more often than not. As he said, it was himself who made learning demands on his parents:

> My middle school was poorly ranked, but my parents showed little concern for the

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> quality of education provided at the school and were not particularly interested in my academic progress. Consequently, I have to take the initiative to communicate with them and ask to enroll in tutoring classes independently.

For another, although many lower-class parents still held expectations for their children, they seldom exerted much academic pressure on their children as much as middle-class parents did. Instead, they believed that as long as their children tried their best, they did not insist their children attend a prestigious university. As Harriet and Zoe elaborated:

> My parents raise me leniently without imposing much pressure on me. Instead, they give me ample space to complete my studies independently. I believe such a free-range parenting approach to education is comfortable, because I'm not accustomed to the cramming style of education; I find it too restrictive and stifling. [Harriet]

> My family is quite supportive, never exerting too much academic pressure on me. The outcome of the *Gaokao* is not important to them as long as I've tried my best. [...] My parents definitely have expectations of me, but they never force me to attend a prestigious university. [Zoe]

Linda and Larry also mentioned that their parents never pressured them to attain academic achievements, because their parents, similar to many upper-class parents, prioritized their well-being, emotional state, and overall happiness. As Linda noted, performing poorly on

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examinations was considered acceptable within her family.

Only David expressed different experiences, saying that his parents had consistently required him to study diligently and applied a certain amount of pressure to motivate him to study hard:

> They often tell me that only when you get into an elite university can you have a better life. Their educational expectations are quite high, and they always desire me to perform well in the *Gaokao* and gain admission to a reputable university. If I don't do well in an examination, they'll encourage me to study harder, but sometimes they'll scold me for not doing well and criticize me for playing too much with my phone. [...] I grew up in this demanding environment.

As mentioned before, David's family environment was a bit different from other lower-class counterparts. Although his parents were not well educated, they placed high demands on him and aspired to a better life through education. Nevertheless, the other lower-class students from other families tended to experience a more relaxed family environment with less academic pressure from their parents.

6.3.3 Home English learning resources

Supporting children's learning at home is one of the most important aspects of parental educational involvement (Keyes, 2002). As such, the study included family English learning

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resources as the last aspect of social origin, exploring the English learning resources parents provided for their children and the extent to which parents engaged in their children's English learning.

Upper-class families were found to consistently and consciously cultivate a supportive English learning environment for their children, with a particularly noteworthy emphasis on cultural acquisition as an integral component of language learning. Over half of the upper-class students (Rachel, Cici, Yummelia, Peter, Violet, Lily, Karol, and Funky) reported experiential English language learning through international travel or study abroad programs, engaging in cultural immersion activities (e.g., visiting museums, as mentioned above). As Peter argued that "learning English is not aiming for examinations but for gaining a deeper understanding of the English culture that underlies it".

More importantly, many upper-class students mentioned that their parents would buy them bilingual storybooks, original English novels, and English newspapers for reading, and also encourage them to listen to English news and radios since they were kids:

> My parents used to purchase many original English books, newspapers, magazines, and other authentic English learning materials for me. We also preferred the original English version when we watched movies, sometimes with subtitles. [...] They take English learning very seriously, and although they themselves are not proficient in English, they've provided me with excellent resources and opportunities to learn English since I

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was a child. [Bobby]

My father doesn't use much English at work, but he also pays great attention to my English learning. During the holidays, he often tunes the television to the English channel and encourages me to listen to English news. He sometimes watches English channels with me. [Lily]

When I was in primary school, my mother played English tapes for me every morning while I was washing up and eating breakfast. I've maintained this learning habit until now. When I don't have classes on weekends, I listen to English news from sources like VOA and BBC and then watch English television channels such as CNN. [James]

The above excerpts show that many upper-class students were provided with abundant English reading and listening resources by their parents since they were young, and they have also maintained such learning habits as they have grown up.

Upper-class parents also paid attention to their children's English listening and speaking abilities. For example, Peter's parents were both university professors who taught English language learning, so his parents not only required him to read and write in English, but also tried to cultivate his English listening and speaking skills through authentic communication:

My family has a very strong English learning atmosphere because my parents always

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> communicate in English with me. They read original English books to me since I was young, and when I grew up they asked me to read English books and write book reviews on my own. They also require me to listen to English radios every day, during which process I'm encouraged to imitate the intonation of voice and practice my English speaking. As a result, I develop a fondness for languages and discovered my talent for language learning.

For many other upper-class students, although their parents may not be as proficient in English as Peter's parents, they also endeavored to send their children to EPT or training lessons to enhance their children's English listening and speaking proficiency at an early age:

> My mother attached great importance to my English education since I was a child. She enrolled me in English-speaking enlightenment training courses when I was in primary school. [...] She frequently encourages me to excel in English. [Jazzy]

> My parents sent me to EPT since I was in primary school, but I remember the EPT class was not focused on examinations but mainly focused on listening and speaking practices. [Lily]

Cici, Violet, Bobby, James, and Yummelia even mentioned that their parents invited foreign teachers to teach them oral English. As Violet and Bobby shared:

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> My mother engaged a British tutor for me at a young age, with the intention of enhancing my overall English proficiency, particularly English communicative abilities. I've been studying with the tutor ever since, and it's been nine years now. [...] Although I'm busy with my school work in the senior year of high school, I still spend about an hour every weekend discussing my daily life, experiences, and studies with her in English. [Violet]

> After my graduation from middle school, I had a one-on-one home EPT with a foreign teacher, who was a retired university professor. My typical study session with him involved reading classic literature, appreciating poetry, and reading the Bible. We also engaged in English communication of English literature. [Bobby]

Cici, Yummelia, and James also mentioned that their parents encouraged them to learn English by arranging one-on-one English speaking and listening classes with foreign teachers early from kindergarten and primary school. During the process, they honed their English skills by engaging in conversations with foreign teachers on various daily life topics, which they regarded as an exceptionally effective approach for enhancing their vocabulary and speaking abilities.

As can be seen, upper-class parents placed considerable emphasis on English education, conceptualizing it not merely as the acquisition of examination techniques, but rather as the development of comprehensive linguistic competencies. Arguably, such an enriched English learning environment provided sufficient space and resources for students' choices of English

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learning outside school.

By contrast, middle-class families tended to be more goal-oriented and utilitarian, focusing primarily on *Gaokao*-oriented English learning. As Jennifer said, all the English learning resources provided by her parents were for improving academic performance:

> The only reason they want me to learn English well is for my *Gaokao*. Therefore, they've invested in various additional English learning resources for me, such as EPT and purchasing practice books for the *Gaokao*. However, they don't provide other resources for my English education, like buying English newspapers for me to stay updated on current events or purchasing English literature to enhance my English reading ability. What they probably value most is my English examination scores in the *Gaokao*.

Likewise, Amanda, Cherry, and Jason said that their parents seldom paid attention to their English learning, unless they did poorly in English examinations. As Amanda explained:

> If I don't do well in the English examination, they'll ask me to attend EPT during vacations. They also encourage me to consult with teachers about learning methods and strategies. Other than that, my parents don't put forward any requirements for my English learning, and because their English proficiency is limited, there's an absent English learning environment at home.

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The above findings reveal a distinct contrast between middle-class and upper-class parental approaches to English education. Whereas upper-class families emphasized authentic language acquisition, middle-class parents exhibited an instrumental orientation focused predominantly on English examination performance. This pragmatic approach suggests that English education was valued primarily for its utility within the *Gaokao* framework in most middle-class families, with diminished perceived relevance thereafter. Furthermore, while middle-class households often possessed relatively abundant English learning resources (e.g., English literature and news media), many students (Shirley, Siri, Cherry, and Victor) indicated that these non-*Gaokao*-oriented English learning materials were only accessed through their own initiative rather than parental provision.

For lower-class families, they tended to face significant barriers to accessing English learning resources, primarily due to economic constraints. The lack of a supportive English learning environment was evident in most lower-class families, as they could not afford traveling abroad or attending EPT with foreign teachers, which severely limited exposure to the language. As Linda elaborated:

> The English learning atmosphere is almost non-existent at my home. For one thing, traveling abroad is too expensive for my family to afford at the moment. For another, reading English magazines, books, and news is not something we usually do, so we pay little attention to it.

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Among the twelve lower-class students, David's case emerged as an outlier, wherein his parents actively sought to cultivate an English-rich learning environment despite their financial precarity and limited formal education. Motivated by aspirations for upward social mobility, David's parents endeavored to compensate for social-class disadvantages by procuring English cultural resources, such as encouraging engagement with foreign media and investing in authentic English language learning materials, such as purchasing two Harry Potter novels in original English. As David recounted:

> Although my parents don't speak English, they consistently emphasize the value of authentic English acquisition. They encourage me to consume foreign films, read English periodicals, and even source authentic literature to supplement my learning.

Nevertheless, David himself seemed to show little interest in these English learning resources as he thought it was unhelpful for the *Gaokao*:

> My vocabulary isn't very extensive, so I still need to refer to the dictionary to fully understand these books. I don't read them because I think it's a hassle to keep checking the dictionary while reading, and it's also a waste of time as I have to prepare for the *Gaokao*.

The excerpts of David reveal that, even when lower-class parents adopt upper-class practices of home literacy investment, such as fostering a positive learning atmosphere by cultivating

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authentic English proficiency, these efforts often fall short due to the children's lack of genuine interest and practical concerns within examination-oriented systems.

6.4 Summary of family social origin

To gain a deeper understanding of how social origin influences students' out-of-school English learning choices, this chapter has employed three themes – *family cultural atmosphere*, *parents' educational philosophy and aspiration*, and *home English learning resources* – to conceptualize students' family social origin. In the following, I make sense of the impact of participants' family social origin on English learning choices by discussing and comparing the aforementioned three themes among different social strata.

First of all, the study utilized the *family cultural atmosphere* to explore family cultural capital, which is widely recognized as a key factor influencing students' educational gains and choices (Bourdieu & Passion, 1977; Wang & Huang, 2021). The findings reveal that upper-class families, in comparison to middle- and lower-class families, exhibited tendencies to 1) maintain regular reading habits and possess more books, 2) attach greater importance to family cultural and social communication, and 3) engage in more cultural learning activities (e.g., visiting museums and galleries). These aspects can be viewed as three steps through which upper-class families transfer family cultural capital. According to the conditions of cultural capital mentioned in Jaeger (2009, see pp. 1947–1948), I summarize these three steps as "create", "transmit", and "absorb and apply". Specifically, upper-class parents first showed great passion for reading literary and historical books, creating a rich, positive, and conducive cultural environment for their children. This cultural environment allowed the children to develop good reading and study habits by osmosis. Subsequently, to ensure that cultural

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capital can be transmitted, upper-class parents attached great importance to high-quality cultural and social interactions with their children. They dedicated ample time and effort to further enhancing their children's literary knowledge by recommending books, sharing reading experiences, and discussing social topics and news. Finally, with the idea of "going out and seeing the world", upper-class parents would expose their children to various museums and galleries worldwide, enabling their children to actively use and apply cultural knowledge to real-world settings, thereby enhancing their global perspective and ensuring the absorption of cultural capital.

As can be seen, upper-class families typically cultivated a culturally rich home environment that, whether consciously or unconsciously, nurtured children's positive reading and study habits as well as literary knowledge. This process laid a strong groundwork for upper-class students' academic learning by passing on cultural capital. The three steps mentioned above were seldom observed concurrently in middle- and lower-class families. While many middle-class parents also highly valued their children's reading and study habits, they did not consciously foster their children's literary knowledge through cultural and social communications or actively instruct children on applying cultural knowledge in practical situations through cultural learning activities. Lower-class families, such as Daisy's and Reggie's, where parents may be not well educated or even illiterate, had an even less conducive family cultural atmosphere. In such cases, there was limited transmission or utilization of cultural capital.

Second, *parents' educational philosophy and aspirations* were used to understand how parental beliefs about education impacted students' learning choices. The findings indicated that although upper-class parents held high expectations for their children, they tended to

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avoid placing excessive academic pressure on them or criticizing them harshly for examination failures. Instead, they demonstrated a more open-minded and future-oriented educational approach, prioritizing children's long-term ability development, such as critical thinking abilities and problem-solving skills. In such cases, upper-class students typically experienced a more relaxed approach to studying and engaged in out-of-school learning activities they enjoyed while preparing for the *Gaokao.* The aforementioned case of Violet's TEDx contest experience served as a prime illustration of this phenomenon. This observation somewhat problematizes the conventional notion that upper-class parents, who are typically highly educated and financially well-off, are more inclined to invest in private tutoring to boost their children's academic performance in high-stakes examinations (Dawson, 2010; Liu & Bray, 2020; Nath, 2008), so as to achieve status reproduction or elevation (Entrich & Lauterbach, 2021). The study suggests that the motivations driving upper-class students' participation in private tutoring often extend beyond academic improvement for high-stakes examinations, encompassing factors like personal interest and self-competency enhancement (also see Chapter 7).

By contrast, middle-class parents also held high expectations but appeared to be more stringent regarding their children's academic performance. While many middle-class parents did not necessarily employ harsh educational methods, such as punishment or reprimanding, a significant number of participants still reported experiencing excessive psychological pressure as a result of their parents' high educational expectations and overly achievement-oriented parenting styles. The prevalent notion of "the *Gaokao* is the only way out" among middle-class families has again testified to the argument by Zhang (2020) that middle-class parents are "the most anxious and ambitious" (p. 396). In this kind of upbringing, it is conceivable that middle-class students also subconsciously tend to be more utilitarian and

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goal-oriented when making out-of-school learning choices. Lower-class parents' educational philosophy was much simpler. The findings observe that many lower-class parents employed a free-range parenting approach without making any demands on children's academic performances.

The contrasting parenting style between middle- and lower-class families can be explained by the RRA mechanism, where parents and children desire to maintain the family's current social class (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). In such cases, while middle-class families have to pursue "higher" educational pathways to sustain or enhance their family's social standing, lower-class families face much less pressure to follow such pathways, as their family's social status is not contingent upon accessing higher levels of education (Barg, 2019; Thompson, 2016). This divergence reflects the role of education as a mechanism for social reproduction, wherein middle-class families leverage educational attainment to preserve their relative advantage, while lower-class families may not perceive the same necessity to do so.

Finally, the study utilized *home English learning resources* to examine home English learning atmosphere, and the importance parents attached to English education. The findings show that upper-class families tended to highly value children's English education, despite some parents not being proficient in English themselves. These families fostered a positive and supportive English learning environment for their children by encouraging English activities, such as 1) traveling or studying abroad to gain English culture, 2) reading original English books, 3) listening to English news, radios, and tapes, and 4) communicating in English at home, or, enrolling their children in English tutoring classes from a young age to enhance

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English listening and speaking abilities.

Previous research has predominantly examined the impact of family social origin on children's acquisition of English language skills through the lens of the home literacy environment, which refers to language- and literacy-related activities, such as home book sharing, access to language books, parental teaching of language literacy skills, and so forth (Burgess et al., 2002; Dong & Chow, 2022; Yeung & King, 2016). These literacy-related activities, though believed to positively mediate the effects of social origin on children's English language development in many previous studies (e.g., Jiang et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2022), have only focused on English reading and writing skills. Contrary to this focus, this study has uncovered that upper-class families not only exposed their children to literacy-related English learning resources and activities (e.g., reading English books and writing book reviews), but also made greater effort to offer children English listening and speaking resources (e.g., studying abroad, listening to English audio materials, and engaging in speaking tutoring classes). The cultivation of overall English language competencies was a key priority in upper-class households.

Growing up in such an immersive English learning environment within the family, where the focus was on acquiring authentic English language abilities and cultural knowledge rather than just examination skills, helped upper-class students develop a genuine interest in authentic English learning and also maintain such English learning habits outside school from a young age. This explains why many upper-class students, as indicated in Table 6.1, not only

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sustained learning habits like reading English books and listening to English news (e.g., VOA and BBC) under the pressure of such a busy and rigorous academic schedule in their final year of high school, but also engaged in various out-of-school English learning activities that were not directly relevant to the *Gaokao*, such as attending the international MUN conference, engaging in overseas study tours, communicating with English native speakers, and so on.

Nevertheless, the ample English learning resources available to upper-class students also signify their possession of significant home socioeconomic capital, a resource that is comparatively scarce in middle- and lower-class households. This indicates that it is almost impossible for middle- and especially lower-class families to provide a wealth of English learning resources (e.g., traveling abroad to gain English culture) as much as upper-class families do. Additionally, as mentioned before, middle-class families tended to be more practical and goal-oriented. While middle-class parents also valued English education, the home English learning resources provided tended to be more focused on examination preparation. This explains why the predominant choice for out-of-school English learning among middle-class students, as depicted in Table 6.1, was “purchasing auxiliary materials” to prepare for the *Gaokao*.

English learning resources were scarce in most lower-class families due to limited socioeconomic and cultural capital. Among the sampled lower-class cohort, David’s case uniquely illustrates the attempts of some lower-class parents to circumvent social-class

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barriers through proactive investment in English literacy resources – including English literature and periodicals – despite David's disengagement from non-*Gaokao*-oriented language learning. Numerous prior empirical studies (Jiang et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2022) posit that enriching home literacy environments may potentially help attenuate social origin inequities in language acquisition. However, David's reluctance to utilize these authentic language resources challenges such argument and underscores a critical contradiction: even when afforded material parity with privileged peers, disadvantaged learners may neglect non-examination-focused language practices due to the hegemonic influence of high-stakes examinations. Such instrumental prioritization extends beyond merely language reading and writing; it may also potentially inhibit lower-class students' participation in authentic English speaking development – a domain increasingly vital for global communicative competence yet marginalized in many public examinations.

David's examination-oriented mindset parallels Yung's (2020) research of Diana, an aspirational lower-class student who channeled familial sacrifices – including borrowing money from relatives for EPT participation – into optimizing examination performance as a conduit for upward social mobility. These cases epitomize the instrumental rationality pervading public high-stakes educational systems, wherein language assessment frameworks prioritize rote examination competencies over authentic language proficiency (Chung, 2013; Meng et al., 2021). As Yung argued, such pragmatism becomes particularly pronounced among a part of lower-class learners, for whom examination success constitutes the only way to circumvent intergenerational inequality.

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Chapter 7: Subjective cost-benefit considerations affecting participants' out-of-school English learning choices

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, I have discussed the role of social origin as a core variable in influencing students' out-of-school English learning choices. The quantitative results have suggested that students' subjective cost-benefit considerations mediated the effects of social origin on students' English learning choices, though with varying mediating effects across different social strata.

In this chapter, I discuss students' anticipated English learning benefits and anticipated probability of English learning success based on their views on school English education, through which, I also compare these two subjective cost-benefit considerations among different social classes.

7.2 Participants' perceived English learning benefits

Students' perceived learning benefits are crucial in students' cost-benefit considerations when making educational choices. However, previous studies (e.g., Bachsleitner et al., 2018; Becker & Hecken, 2009; Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010) have only considered instrumental or extrinsic benefits of an educational choice, such as potential occupational and economic prospects; while intrinsic benefits, such as interests and personal development, have been largely neglected. In the following, this study examines students' perceived benefits of learning English from both extrinsic and intrinsic perspectives.

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7.2.1 Achieving higher *Gaokao* scores

Achieving higher academic scores in the *Gaokao* must be the most commonly discussed instrumental or extrinsic learning benefit, which perception was particularly evident among middle-class students. When queried about the value of English language acquisition, middle-class respondents consistently foregrounded its pragmatic utility for academic advancement, with improved *Gaokao* scores emerging as the most frequently cited extrinsic benefit. As Jennifer said, her "only purpose" for learning English was for the *Gaokao*. Cora shared a similar view:

> English learning is extremely important primarily due to the substantial weighting of English examinations within the *Gaokao* scoring system. [Cora]

Furthermore, middle-class students' perceptions of English learning benefits remained predominantly examination-oriented when considering future applications. Case in point, Jason and Cherry exclusively associated English proficiency with academic requirements, particularly the mandatory College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and the College English Test Band 6 (CET-6)[7] administered by the Chinese Ministry of Education. They expressed apprehension that insufficient English skills might impede their university graduation, given

[7] College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 (CET-4 and CET-6) are compulsory national English tests in all tertiary education in China. CET is sponsored and hosted by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China every year, aiming to promote the English teaching in Chinese universities and to provide an objective and accurate measurement of the English proficiency of university students. Many universities have used the scores of CET-4 and CET-6 as one of the graduation criteria.

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that many universities utilize CET scores as graduation criteria. Notably, even Shirley – an academically high-performing student – viewed English learning as solely valuable for *Gaokao* success, stating she would likely discontinue English studies after graduating from high school due to its perceived lack of utility beyond standardized testing:

> I: From what aspects do you think English learning is beneficial to you？
>
> S: English is a compulsory examination subject in the *Gaokao*. Learning English helps me improve my overall *Gaokao* scores.
>
> I: What about other benefits besides the *Gaokao*?
>
> S: I haven't thought about it, actually. [...]. I don't think there's any other benefit.
>
> I: Will you continue to learn or use English in the future?
>
> S: I feel that I won't have many opportunities to use English in my future life. I'm studying English only for the *Gaokao*, and I don't think I'll be able to learn English on my own after I graduate from high school.
>
> I: I've seen your English transcripts, and I think you're pretty good at English. Have you ever thought about studying abroad in the future or something?
>
> S: It depends on whether there's a chance in the future, but I don't have a strong motivation for this My parents don't care too much about whether I can study abroad, either.

As can be seen, most middle-class students prioritized the English learning benefit of improving their *Gaokao* scores. This trend extended to a majority of lower-class participants

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(Linda, Lynn, Wilson, Reggie, Tina, Harriet, and Zoe), who explicitly linked English acquisition solely to *Gaokao* score improvement and anticipated discontinuing English studies post-examination. As exemplified by Harriet and Reggie, deficient English examination scores – which significantly depressed their composite results – served as the primary driver for their English language learning efforts:

> Studying English is, indeed, important because it's the only subject I struggle to learn well. Achieving a desirable score in English examination can help me gain admission to a better university. [Harriet]

> English learning is crucial because my English scores are abysmal. Every English language examination drags down my overall score significantly. [Reggie]

Simon even complained that he did not see any benefits of learning English, and he was "completely forced to learn English" because he had to take the *Gaokao*.

The above excerpts reveal most middle- and lower-class students' instrumental motivations for learning English. In contrast, there were only four upper-class students (Jazzy, Funky, Cici, and Richard) admitted that the "most important" benefit of learning English was to achieve higher *Gaokao* scores, while the rest of the upper-class students placed more importance on other benefits beyond the *Gaokao*. I discuss this in the following.

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7.2.2 Preparing for future learning and career development

The benefits of English language learning for future study abroad were cited by many upper-class students as one of the most important aspects, as they consistently identified English as the dominant global lingua franca, considering mastery essential for effective academic communication. As explained by Karol and James:

> The most crucial aspects of learning English for me is my aspiration to study abroad in the future. I also intend to reside overseas for a few years for work, making English a vital skill. [Karol]

> My aspiration to pursue graduate studies overseas has heightened my awareness of the critical role of English proficiency, serving as my primary motivation for current language acquisition efforts. [...] I'm also interested in participating in the American Study Abroad Program in the summer after the *Gaokao*. Superior English competence would not only enhance my competitiveness in this program but also facilitate preparatory groundwork for my subsequent international applications. [James]

To prepare for studying abroad, Rachel, Violet, and Yummelia explained that the type of EPT they attended was IELTS tutoring instead of *Gaokao*-oriented EPT. As Rachel elaborated:

> I: In your questionnaire, you said that you attended one-on-one EPT, is that right?
>
> R: Yes, but it's IELTS tutoring, not *Gaokao*-oriented EPT.

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I: Why don't you take *Gaokao*-oriented EPT?

R: I've had one or two *Gaokao*-oriented EPT sessions before, but I found it particularly tedious because my language skills are mechanically assessed by doing test papers. In contrast, the IELTS course emphasizes personal language skill enhancement. For instance, the IELTS writing and speaking sections are open-ended and highly flexible.

I: When did you start the IELTS tutoring?

R: I started taking it at the end of my sophomore year.

K: It's mainly to prepare for studying abroad in the future, right?

R: Yes, I believe that attending IELTS tutoring is like hitting two birds with one stone – it has not only greatly assisted me in enhancing language proficiency and preparing for studying abroad but also helped me prepare for the English language examination in the *Gaokao*.

These excerpts revealed distinct patterns of resistance toward *Gaokao*-oriented EPT among upper-class participants. Rachel explicitly rejected *Gaokao*-oriented EPT, criticizing their excessive focus on examination techniques as "pedagogically unjustified and unnecessary". Similarly, Violet and Yummelia, whose English performance already met academic requirements, strategically opted for alternative language preparation. They invested in IELTS tutoring and out-of-school speaking and listening practices to cultivate the linguistic competencies required for prospective international study, thereby demonstrating a clear preference for applied language acquisition over test-specific preparation.

In addition to studying abroad, English learning was also believed to bring promising

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occupational prospects for many upper-class students. As Lily elaborated:

> First and foremost, future employment is a crucial consideration. This is primarily due to the increasing importance of English proficiency in the work environment, including multinational companies, foreign enterprises, and even some state-owned enterprises, all of which require proficient English language skills.

Likewise, Funky and Karol expressed their strong aspirations to pursue employment in foreign companies, explicitly identifying English communication competence as a critical asset for future career advancement. As can be seen, many upper-class students emphasized the benefits of English learning for future academic and career development rather than limiting its utility to improving *Gaokao* scores. Their English learning was usually aimed at longer-term goals.

In contrast, a mere five middle-class students (Yvette, Siri, Amanda, Cora, and Candy) recognized English language acquisition as advantageous for their future educational and professional advancement. Siri articulated her desire for pursuing postgraduate studies overseas upon finishing her undergraduate degree, underscoring the pivotal role of English proficiency in her academic pursuits. However, Siri opted not to enroll in any IELTS courses as their upper-class counterparts did because she preferred to prioritize preparation for the *Gaokao* at present. For Amanda, while not aspiring to study abroad, she acknowledged the importance of English proficiency in her forthcoming academic endeavors:

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> In the university, numerous learning materials, literature, and articles are written in English. Therefore, English remains crucial; otherwise, I won't be able to comprehend them at all.

Yvette, Cora, and Candy considered English learning beneficial for their career development because they hoped to work for foreign companies. As Cora elaborated:

> No matter what I do in the future, I'm certain that English will be of great assistance to me. For example, if I conduct research in the future, even in an ordinary company, I'll definitely need to read literature in English. What's more, I believe I'll work for a foreign company in the future, and English is an essential communication tool.

Compared with upper-class students, the findings revealed a comparatively limited recognition of English language acquisition's long-term benefits among middle-class participants. Such recognition was even almost non-existent among lower-class students; only David briefly acknowledged the potential advantages of English for his future career development:

> I'll only find English useful for future career advancement if I work for a foreign company or if there's a mandatory requirement to learn English. Without such a requirement, I'd certainly focus my efforts on other pursuits.

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As discussed in Chapter 6, David's family learning environment and parenting style differed from those of other lower-class students, which may account for his unique perspective on long-term English learning benefits among the twelve lower-class participants. However, unlike upper-class counterparts who were proactively learning English to prepare for their future career advancement, David saw his potential future English learning as passively dependent on whether or not it was mandatory in the work environment.

Generally, regarding the instrumental benefits of English learning, middle- and lower-class students generally put more emphasis on the *Gaokao*, while upper-class students valued more on long-term learning and career development.

7.2.3 English learning driven by intrinsic values

Beyond instrumental motivations, a significant proportion of upper-class students emphasized the intrinsic values of English language acquisition. A representative case is Bobby, an academically proficient English learner whose participation in various out-of-school English learning activities, such as the Model United Nations (MUN) conference, was driven primarily by non-utilitarian objectives including broadening his international horizons and improving personal qualities:

> English is most crucial for expanding my personal knowledge and accessing various information, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the outside world and foster deeper

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> cross-cultural understanding. Just as I did when preparing for the MUN conference, I accessed a wealth of English-language materials on international platforms, enabling me to develop both comprehensive subject-matter expertise and advanced linguistic competencies. This immersive English learning experience not only improves my core language skills, such as English listening and writing, but also develops my English debating and communication skills, as well as cultivate my sense of political participation and social responsibility.

Bobby's engagement in these non-*Gaokao*-oriented English learning activities reflected his deliberate pursuit of global perspective-taking and personal development through English language acquisition, rather than examination-oriented outcomes. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, Bobby's previous participation in EPT with a foreign tutor, who imparted a wealth of knowledge through classic English literature, had a profound impact on his English learning. This experience has made him become "passionate about English learning" and has led him to realize that "English learning is not only a personal interest, but also a cultivation of humanistic sensibility and cultural literacy".

A similar view was shared by Peter, another English high achiever, who was intrinsically motivated to learn English to gain English cultural and global consciousness:

> I'm very eager to master English proficiency, not aiming to improve my English examination scores but to gain a deeper understanding of the English culture and

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> mindsets. I believe English serves as the initial stride in propelling me out of China onto the global stage. I've always aspired to be a global citizen with a global consciousness, and my ultimate goal is to have the ability to influence and effectively communicate my thoughts and ideas with people throughout the globe. From this aspect, English learning is of vital importance to me.

For Bobby and Peter, out-of-school English learning was highly conducive to improving their personal abilities, such as improving international communication skills, gaining international horizons, and acquiring English cultural and humanistic knowledge. Instead of focusing merely on the instrumental benefits of English learning for enhancing the *Gaokao* scores, it is evident that Bobby and Peter valued more on the intrinsic values of English learning.

Likewise, other upper-class students also expressed their genuine interest in participating in various out-of-school English learning, and they found these activities inherently engaging:

> I possess a keen interest in the English language, as I perceive that achieving proficiency in a foreign language not only provides a sense of fulfillment but also elevates my cognitive and cultural standing. [...] My engagement in out-of-school English learning is primarily motivated by a desire for personal enrichment, with a secondary aim of preparing for the *Gaokao*. [Yummelia]

> Participation in out-of-school English learning activities help me adjust my learning pace

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> and mindset, allowing me to approach the subject with a sense of relaxation and enjoyment. [Violet]

> I find possessing an authentic English pronunciation and strong English expression is quite attractive, and that's why I'm so interested in improving my English speaking skills through out-of-school English learning activities. I anticipate this will help enhance my personal allure. [Funky]

> My out-of-school English learning primarily focuses on English listening and speaking. I also spend time reading English literature when I'm available. These areas align with my interests and my plans for future studies abroad. [...] More importantly, I've also discovered my genuine enjoyment in learning English during the IELTS course. [James]

These excerpts reveal upper-class students' intrinsic motivations in learning English, driven by both personal interests and self-ability improvement. For middle- and lower-class students, however, only Cherry, Candy, and Zoe mentioned their personal interest for learning English, while none of them mentioned the other intrinsic values of English learning. Cherry explained her interest in English learning:

> In fact, my middle school was a foreign language school. At that time, we had an additional foreign language speaking class alongside our daily English class. I became deeply interested in English because my speaking teacher's pronunciation truly conveyed

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the beauty of the language to me. As a result, I developed a special fondness for the English class and found the subject incredibly captivating.

In such cases, she was eager to "use English to understand foreign history and culture" through out-of-school English learning and to "apply English in real-life situations".

7.3 Perceived schooling factors influencing participants' English learning success probability

Students' anticipated probability of English learning success in the *Gaokao* is another significant factor in cost-benefit considerations. As the perceived quality of school English education might largely influence students' anticipated probability of English learning success and, thus, determine their out-of-school English learning choices, the interviews were mainly conducted to understand three dimensions: 1) students' views on the quality of school English education, 2) students' reflections on how the school English education influenced their anticipated English learning success probability, and 3) students' rationale behind their choices for out-of-school English learning activities based on their perceptions of English learning success probability.

7.3.1 Comparisons of English education between Schools A and B

As the perceived quality of school English education plays a pivotal role in influencing students' anticipated English learning success probability, this section first compares the English education between the two schools from students' perspectives. Table 7.1 gives

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general information regarding the school English education modes between School A and School B. In the following, I discuss schooling factors in detail.

Table 7.1

Comparison of English education between Schools A and B

	School A	School B
Frequency of English day class	Every day	Every day
Frequency of English evening class	Once a week	Once a week
English class size	Small class (with around 15 to 20 students each)	Large class (with around 50 to 60 students each)
English textbooks and learning materials	Not all *Gaokao*-designated	All designated for the *Gaokao*
English speaking class	Yes	No
English listening practice	Yes	No
English learning activities (e.g., English speech contests)	Yes (conducted in all three years of high school)	Yes (only conducted in the freshman year of high school)
English education mode	More quality-oriented	More examination-oriented

7.3.1.1 Textbooks and learning materials

One of the most significant distinctions in English education between School A and School B laid in their English textbooks and corresponding learning materials. School A, a public foreign language high school, did not use *Gaokao*-designated English textbooks but, instead, independently selected their own textbooks. In contrast, School B was a public regular high school whose textbooks were *Gaokao*-designated. Through interviews, the study found that unlike the designated textbooks for the *Gaokao*, which were uniformly compiled by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the English textbook chosen by School A was the original

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British English textbook, which was more difficult, had a broader vocabulary range, and also placed a greater emphasis on teaching English cultural background knowledge and practical language communication skills.

Many of the participants from School A mentioned the "authenticity" of the content of their English textbooks. As shared by Bobby and Violet:

> Our English textbook contains numerous authentic English articles, vocabulary, and sentence patterns. [Bobby]

> Our school utilizes the original British textbook, which closely simulates the real English environment. It's not as dull as other examination-focused English textbooks. The textbook's recordings, articles, and vocabulary closely resemble the authentic English environment and cultural background. [Violet]

Yummelia, having previously participated in IELTS courses, expressed her belief that the authentic English vocabulary and oral expressions contained in the textbook "are frequently encountered in the IELTS examination". Arguably, in comparison to the *Gaokao*-designated textbooks utilized in School B, the original British English textbook employed in School A appeared to be more effective in facilitating learners' attainment of English proficiency that exceeded the requirements of the *Gaokao* English language examination.

Furthermore, School A was noted for its provision of a more extensive array of English

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learning materials, which aimed to "expand English knowledge, enhance English language skills, and also deepen the understanding of English culture" (Bobby) throughout the three-year high school studies. According to the perspectives of Peter, Lily, Funky, and Rachel, these out-of-school English learning resources encompass 1) English reading and writing materials, such as Helbling Reading, 21st Century Newspaper, and Global Reading, and 2) English speaking and listening activities, such as English dubbing competitions, English drama shows, English speech contests, and the MUN conferences. Cici contended that the English teaching and learning materials provided at the school "differ from those designated for the *Gaokao*, focusing instead on the enhancement of language abilities".

In contrast, at School B, Tina and Linda reported that their school only organized an English dubbing contest solely during their freshman year, and this initiative was discontinued in the sophomore and senior years due to the time constraints associated with preparing for the *Gaokao*. When compared to School A, it appears that School B offered significantly fewer, if any, out-of-school English learning resources for students. Furthermore, Jennifer noted that "nearly all knowledge points presented by English teachers are available in the textbooks". As Linda and Reggie lamented:

> To be honest, I don't think English learning is emphasized as much in our school as other subjects. As a science student, my teachers always prioritize the learning of science subjects, such as Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry. [Linda]
>
> There appears to be a lack of focus on expanding English knowledge at my school

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> because our English teachers simply adhere to the textbook content and administer examinations. [Reggie]

Although Larry mentioned that school English teachers would sometimes recommend English newspapers for them to read, most of the time, they "rarely have time to read" due to the voluminous exercise books and papers they must complete to acquire test-taking skills and tactics.

7.3.1.2 Examination- and quality-oriented education

The English education in School A tended to be more quality-oriented and student-centered. In School A, English classes were conducted in small-class sizes, with around 15 to 20 students each. In such cases, teachers could "have a better understanding of each student's learning progress" (Funky), "address each student's learning needs more effectively and attentively" (Cici), as well as "provide more personalized pedagogical strategies" (Violet). However, English classes in School B were large-class sizes with around 50 to 60 students. Due to the large class size, the English teaching tended to be more teacher-directed. Harriet and Candy complained that the English learning atmosphere in their classes was not conducive enough:

> My English teacher isn't very good at managing such a large class. She organizes the English class in a scattered way, which results in the lesson plan never being executed well. [Harriet]

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> Sometimes, when we want her (the English teacher) to explain a certain question, she pretends to not hear it. We don't know if she really doesn't hear or if she's just faking it because there are too many of my classmates asking questions. [Candy]

Furthermore, English education in School A placed significant emphasis on English proficiency alongside test-taking skills. As Lily argued, her English teacher "highly values the cultivation of students' English proficiency rather than rote memorization or test-taking strategies":

> My English teacher never forces us to do test papers or practice test-taking skills; instead, she creates an immersive English learning environment and encourages us to expand our vocabulary by reading English books and newspapers.

To avoid rote learning, Bobby and Jason said that their English teachers would also engage them in English cultural stories to help them learn English more authentically and naturally:

> During English lessons when my English teacher teaches a specific knowledge point, such as vocabulary or grammar, she also shares stories related to English culture with us. This approach helps us become more flexible in remembering the relevant knowledge points instead of relying on rote memorization. [Bobby]
>
> Before delving into grammar concepts, my English teacher will first encourage extensive

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> practice in listening and speaking to help us become familiar with the English culture and context and to develop our language senses. [Jason]

During the teaching process, English teachers in School A all "consciously avoiding Chinese as an instructional medium to cultivate students' English cognitive orientations" (Yvette). As can be seen, this immersive environment in School A serves dual pedagogical functions: it not only develops linguistic competence but also facilitates cross-cultural understanding by exposing learners to alternative cultural perspectives. The sustained exposure to authentic target-language input can be effective in developing students' acquisition of idiomatic expressions and natural language use.

The development of speaking and listening competencies was also of paramount importance at School A. According to Cora, Rachel, Yummelia, and Karol, School A offered two to three dedicated English listening and speaking lessons each week. During these sessions, students engaged in various activities designed to enhance their listening and speaking skills, including listening to English audio recordings and tapes, imitating intonation and pronunciation, participating in debates and speeches, and engaging in regular discussions on English topics. The small English class sizes further augmented the opportunities for individual student participation in listening and oral practice:

> As our English class size is small, our English teacher gives us ample time to practice listening and speaking independently, rather than solely focusing on teaching grammar

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> and vocabulary or doing daily examination exercises like other schools. [Yummelia]

> Small-class English teaching is effective, and I enjoy it. [...] In each listening and speaking class, our English teacher will guide us in practicing speaking through topic presentations and enhancing listening by imitating the voice intonation from the English tapes. [Rachel]

Although English speaking is not tested in the *Gaokao*, students from School A revealed that the school still organized English speaking examinations once a month to assess their English speaking abilities and help them progress. This fully reflected the great emphasis on quality-oriented English education in School A.

In contrast, English education in School B tended to be highly examination-oriented. There were no specific speaking lessons or examinations in School B, and great emphasis was only oriented toward "vocabulary recitation and grammar memorization" (Daisy). Linda further explained:

> The English education is highly examination-oriented in our school. Apart from the morning reading and listening sessions twice a week, the remaining time is entirely dedicated to enhancing examination skills. [Linda]

7.3.2 Perceptions of school English education

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The teaching of examination skills at school might be the most crucial factor influencing students' anticipated probability of English learning success in the *Gaokao*. It is often assumed that the better the quality of the teaching of test-taking skills in a school, the higher the students' assessment of their school education effectiveness (Yung, 2020b) and, thus, the higher levels of students' anticipated learning success probability in the high-stakes examinations. However, through interviews, the study surprisingly found that two-thirds of upper-class students (Yummelia, Cici, Lily, Peter, Bobby, James, Rachel, Karol, and Violet) expressed strong preference for quality-oriented English pedagogy, valuing it above examination-oriented instruction. As argued by Cici, Lily, and Yummelia:

> The school is doing a commendable job of teaching English, which not only equips us with the skills to take examinations but also nurtures our interest in learning English and enhances our overall language competency. [Cici]

> I truly appreciate the excellent English teaching at my school. [...] In such an English education mode, not only do I feel that my English abilities and self-confidence have greatly improved, but I've also been able to achieve high scores on my English examinations effortlessly. [Lily]

> The small English class system provides a relaxed, interactive, and engaging learning environment for us. [...] I truly appreciate this teaching method as it not only helps me improve my English examination scores quickly but also provides a strong foundation

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> for my future studies abroad. [Yummelia]

The above excerpts show Cici's, Lily's, and Yummelia's preferences for quality-oriented English education, which were perceived by them to be highly effective in both improving overall English language abilities and increasing their anticipated probability of achieving English learning success in the *Gaokao*. Bobby shared similar views that the immersive quality-oriented English learning in the school gave him the confidence to succeed the *Gaokao* without taking EPT:

> The abundant instructional materials my English teacher provided have laid a solid foundation for me to complete in-class English studies without the need for EPT. In other words, I'm not anxious about the English examination at all, but instead, I feel confident in achieving excellent scores in the *Gaokao* by following the guidance of my English teacher.

Peter, Rachel, James, and Violet unanimously expressed that the school's English education had given them adequate academic confidence and that they did not need any other out-of-school English learning activities for *Gaokao* purposes.

As can be seen, even though the English education provided at School A was not heavily focused on examinations, a significant number of upper-class students still perceived it as effective in increasing their English learning success probability in the *Gaokao*, in which

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circumstances they did not need extra out-of-school academic support. This explains why, as shown in Table 6.1, many upper-class students did not engage in *Gaokao*-oriented EPT or other forms of out-of-school English learning activities.

Nevertheless, Jazzy and Richard were the only two exceptions among upper-class participants, who expressed their anxiety and concerns toward such quality-oriented English teaching in the senior year of high school:

> Sometimes, I feel that my school English education bothers me a little bit because it focuses less on examination preparation. [...] I don't believe that this type of learning is beneficial for the *Gaokao*. As a senior in high school, I prefer the school's English education to be more examination-oriented. After all, achieving higher scores can ultimately enhance one's chances of gaining admission to prestigious universities. [Jazzy]

> The current method of teaching English at school is not very effective or helpful to me. That's because the school's English education is more oriented toward knowledge beyond the *Gaokao*, and I think the logic of the lessons is somewhat unclear. [Richard]

As a result, among the twelve upper-class participants, Jazzy and Richard were the only two who attended one-on-one EPT for examination enhancement. The concerns of Jazzy and Richard on school English education were accorded with that of Amanda, Cora, Siri, Jason,

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and Yvette, who were also School A students but were from the middle class. For example, Jason complained that he was not particularly fond of the current English teaching methods:

> I prefer to learn theoretical and grammatical rules at the beginning and then focus on application. I believe this approach is a more systematic way of learning English. However, the English education in my school prioritizes cultivating language senses and overall abilities, and I struggle to retain knowledge using this approach. [...] I prefer examination-oriented education because, ultimately, we need to excel in the *Gaokao*, which assesses our proficiency in grammar and test-taking skills. [Jason]

While Amanda, Siri, and Yvette acknowledged that their school's quality-oriented English instruction had substantially improved their general language proficiency, the absence of explicit test-taking strategy instruction generated considerable anxiety. This affective response motivated their compensatory enrollment in EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, primarily to address perceived gaps in examination performance. As Amanda elaborated:

> I receive one-on-one EPT, which allows for more detailed teaching of test-taking skills. Even though the class size is small at my school, there are instances where the teacher may not be able to provide individualized support for each student's examination mistakes. In contrast, the content of the one-on-one EPT is solely focused on examination questions and test-taking techniques, and I can receive individual guidance.

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[Amanda]

As can be seen, for middle-class students from School A, although they thought highly of the quality of school English education, the inadequate examination-oriented teaching contributed to a decline in their anticipated probability of English learning success and, thus, prompted them to participate in *Gaokao*-oriented English learning outside school. This, again, showed middle-class students' more goal-oriented, utilitarian, and practical learning motivations than most upper-class students.

The rest of the middle-class students, including Jennifer, Shirley, Victor, Cherry, Candy, Larry, and Forrest, came from School B, where examination-oriented English education was dominant. Shirley, Larry, and Forrest considered such examination-oriented English education as highly effective in boosting their anticipated English learning success probability in the *Gaokao*. As Shirley and Forrest explained:

> I personally agree that high school English education should focus more on test-taking skills and not necessarily require us to read too many English newspapers or books for self-expansion and enhancement. [Shirley]

> Honestly, this type of spoon-fed and examination-oriented English education in my school is, indeed, beneficial for the *Gaokao*, as it contributes to our academic success within a limited time. I believe it's indeed the most successful form of education.

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[Forrest]

However, despite the fact that the examination-oriented teaching in School B improved students' readiness for the *Gaokao* to some extent, other middle-class students from School B still held low levels of anticipated probability of English learning success due to the low-quality but high-pressure school English education:

> English learning in my school is quite dull due to the abundance of examinations. Our school English teachers often lack innovative teaching methods, resorting to simply assigning test papers and providing feedback. Studying English in this way can be ineffective and way too exhausting. [Jennifer]

> Whenever my English teacher explains questions, the emphasis is solely on the test-taking skills rather than the logical approach to answering the questions. She always struggles to articulate her thoughts clearly when teaching, leaving us confused about her intended messages, which has resulted in our demotivated learning attitudes. [Victor]

> It's quite frustrating because we only have six hours of rest time each week, and the academic pressure is extremely high. [...] English learning in my school is always about mechanically doing test papers repeatedly, which doesn't contribute much to our knowledge levels. Sometimes, I feel overwhelmingly exhausted and find it difficult to handle the situation. [Cherry]

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These excerpts indicate that many middle-class students from School B were skeptical of the quality of school English education, which adversely affected their anticipated English learning success probability, prompting them to seek out-of-school English instruction after school, despite the fact that test-taking skills were adequately addressed within the school curriculum.

Similarly, lower-class students from School B shared concerns about the quality of school English education. Echoing the sentiments of their middle-class counterparts, these students noted that, while examination skills were emphasized in the school curriculum, the pedagogical approaches employed by English teachers were predominantly confined to traditional methods such as “lectures and examinations” (Lynn). Consequently, the English learning atmosphere was “dull and tedious” (Daisy). As Wilson and Harriet lamented:

> I find the English instruction in my school to be ineffective, as the teaching style is outdated and lacks adaptability. It feels like we are stuck in the past, with a dull classroom atmosphere where the teacher lectures and we simply memorize key knowledge points. I find it hard to learn this way. [Wilson]

> The school is doing a lousy job teaching English. The professionalism of English teachers at my school is highly questionable; they don’t even seem to have systematic teaching plans, which is quite frustrating. [...] I often don’t understand the test-taking

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> skills of my English teacher because her explanation is always convoluted, making it difficult for us to comprehend. [Harriet]

As a result, both Wilson and Harriet lamented that they did not listen much to what the English teacher taught in English class now but, instead, used class time to memorize vocabulary on their own unless the teacher taught particularly important grammar points.

Upon cross-stratum analysis of student narratives, three preliminary inferences can be drawn. First of all, the majority of upper-class students, with the exception of Jazzy and Richard, predominantly expressed approval and appreciation for the quality-oriented English instruction provided at School A, which was believed as a significant factor in enhancing their anticipated probability of English learning success in the *Gaokao*. As a result, most upper-class students engaged in out-of-school English learning activities not solely for *Gaokao* preparation but also for genuine language skill development.

Secondly, middle-class students demonstrated significantly stronger orientation toward examination-oriented English learning than their upper-class peers, regardless of whether they attended School A or School B. The lack of adequate emphasis on test-taking skills at School A and the perceived low quality of school English instruction at School B contributed to many middle-class students having lower expectations of success probability in the *Gaokao*, prompting compensatory enrollment in out-of-school English programs primarily for examination preparation.

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Finally, lower-class students, all of whom attended School B, similarly regarded the quality of their English education as subpar, thereby exhibiting low anticipated probability of achieving English learning success in the *Gaokao.* Paradoxically, as indicated in Table 6.1, lower-class students' recognition of school instructional deficiencies did not translate into out-of-school English learning participation, unlike their middle-class counterparts. This observation raises an important question: why did students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds refrain from seeking alternative methods to enhance their academic achievements despite recognizing the inadequacies of English language instruction in their school? In the subsequent section, this study delves deeper into lower-class students' learning experiences, seeking to elucidate the factors that impede their intrinsic motivation for out-of-school English learning.

7.4 Reasons for lacking subjective cost-benefit considerations

The quantitative results already showed that lower-class students' subjective cost-benefit considerations played a relatively weak role in their educational choices compared to their upper- and middle-class counterparts, with only anticipated English learning benefits being marginally significant. Therefore, by conducting interviews, this section further discusses both external and internal factors hindering lower-class students' subjective cost-benefit considerations toward engaging in out-of-school English learning activities.

7.4.1 Low needs for self-actualization

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The study first identified a phenomenon of low needs for self-actualization among certain lower-class students, who demonstrated a lack of interest and attention in actively pursuing English learning achievements beyond the school environment:

> I don't care about learning English, nor do I want to take the EPT. [...] Taking tutoring is purely a waste of time for me. Although my English performances are not at the top, I personally believe that this subject is essentially useless. [Michel]

> I don't study English after school at all, because I don't think English helps me much in my everyday life. I typically use the available time to rest after class, and I don't actively strive to improve my academic scores. [Francis]

The above excerpts illustrate certain lower-class students' notably "passive", "negative", or even "indifferent" attitudes toward English learning. Michel even explicitly conveyed his lack of interest in transcending social classes through the *Gaokao*, stating that "I never spend time after school learning English". Such low needs for self-actualization reflects a pragmatic and survival-oriented cognitive schema – a rational adaptation to material constraints and anticipated future limitations. Crucially, lower-class students demonstrate a clear and rational awareness that their future occupational pathways (e.g., domestic labor or local employment) are unlikely to require English proficiency, unlike the globalized professional spheres (e.g., multinational corporations) accessible to their upper-class peers. This pragmatic assessment underscores a distinct cognitive rationality shaped by structural disadvantage, rather than a

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deficiency in reasoning. As such, lower-class students did not actively participate in out-of-school English learning, despite their potential recognition of the inadequacies in the quality of English education provided in schools.

7.4.2 Limited exposure to English learning resources

Furthermore, the study found that due to informational deficits, many lower-class students lacked exposure to and thus awareness of the broader applications of English beyond school-based learning. While upper- and middle-class counterparts were often extensively exposed to a wealth of English learning materials and opportunities, including the reading of English literature and interactions with native speakers of the language, many lower-class students expressed that they had never heard of any out-of-school English learning activities (Reggie, Lynn, Francis, Tina, Michel, and Wilson):

> As I grew up, I never imagined that I'd be reading English newspapers, original English books, English news, or anything of the sort after school. I've never thought about it. [Lynn]

> I've never heard of any English learning activities, as I don't have access to proper English learning information, and I struggle to find English resources. [Reggie]

> My parents never told me any information about English learning or provided me with any English learning resources; you know, my family environment is not very good, so

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> I've never even considered it. [Tina]

Lynn, who participated in large-group EPT, continued express that EPT was "the only way" he currently knew about and had access to improve academic performance. Otherwise, he may not have had alternative opportunities to enhance English skills. These excerpts show lower-class students' contextually constrained access to English learning, leading to their comparatively narrower perceptions of English learning's utility compared with upper- and middle-class peers.

7.4.3 Financial constraints

Financial constraints also significantly constrained lower-class students' access to EPT. As evidenced in Table 6.1, only three lower-class students (Daisy, Lynn, and Harriet) participated in EPT, exclusively selecting large-group formats due to financial accessibility. Reggie's and Francis's account exemplify these economic constraints:

> I've never considered taking EPT. With two elder sisters and a younger brother, my family struggles to cover our basic school tuition, making EPT unfeasible. [Reggie]

> Although I don't perform well in English examinations, I avoid EPT due to its prohibitive costs. Particularly, high-quality one-on-one tutoring is quite costly. [Francis]

Michel also emphasized his preferences for attending school-organized free English learning

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activities over attending fee-paying EPT. Despite recognizing his own language deficiencies, he considered the risk of financial loss from investing in EPT outweighed potential academic gains:

> I don't want to rely too much on EPT to enhance my grades, considering its high cost. My parents suggested me to attend large-group EPT, but I don't want to spend money for uncertain outcomes. What if I spend money on EPT but it doesn't work? [Michel]

As can be seen, lower-class students often faced financial barriers that prevented them from accessing expensive high-quality tutoring. More importantly, although certain lower-class students, such as Michel, actually had the means and abilities to purchase some affordable large-group tutoring, yet they mostly opted not to engage take these opportunities. This phenomenon can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, many lower-class students exhibited a lack of intrinsic motivation and aspiration toward English learning, which diminishes their desire to attend EPT. In this context, "financial constraints" may serve as a rationalization or an excuse for their absence, masking a deeper issue related to their lack of intrinsic motivations. Secondly, lower-class students tended to be more risk-averse when making educational decisions. They often subconsciously filtered out options they perceived as risky, despite an understanding that higher risks could meanwhile yield greater returns. Consequently, considering the potential risk of poor performance and failure in examinations after the financial investment in EPT, they simply chose not to take the risk and also forwent the high returns associated with it.

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7.4.4 Time constraints

Over half of the lower-class students (Lynn, Michel, Reggie, Wilson, Linda, Simon, and Francis) considered participating in out-of-school English learning activities time-consuming because they needed to spend quite a lot of time consolidating knowledge taught in school and completing homework.

> Essentially, I don't have much free time because I focus mostly on completing schoolwork and internalizing the taught content in class. [Lynn]

> Attending out-of-school English learning activities is time-consuming, and I rarely have time to do so since I need to finish my English homework. [Wilson]

> I considered taking EPT before, but I soon realized that after taking the EPT, I wouldn't have time to finish my homework on Sundays. So, I just supplement my English learning on my own after school. [Linda]

All of Lynn, Wilson, and Linda were English underachievers who expressed in the interviews that they sometimes even struggled to complete school English homework, let alone have extra time attending out-of-school English learning activities.

While Lynn's, Wilson's, and Linda's lack of additional time for out-of-school English

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learning activities was attributed to their challenges with personal learning abilities, Michel's limited availability was due to familial obligations:

> I have to help my parents do farm work during summer and winter vacations, so I don't have enough time, opportunity, or confidence to participate in out-of-school English learning activities.

Michel's parents were both farmers, who received meager salaries despite their diligent efforts in farming. He explained that he had to assist his parents with farm tasks after school to supplement the family's earnings, leaving him with limited time to study English. Reggie faced a comparable situation; his parents also worked as farmers, and they occasionally did odd jobs at construction sites to supplement their modest incomes. Due to the financial constraints faced by his family, Reggie said he was compelled to accompany his parents to construction sites to assist with tasks like moving bricks and doing heavy labor, which prevented him from dedicating time to English studies after school. The situations of Michel and Reggie exemplify how lower-income parents' rigorous and inflexible work schedules not only impeded their engagement in their children's educational activities but also significantly diminish the time available for their children's academic learning.

7.5 Summary of subjective cost-benefit considerations

This chapter examined how students' anticipated English learning benefits and perceived English learning success probability influenced their out-of-school English learning choices.

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It also confirmed ***Conjectures 1***, ***2***, and ***3*** proposed earlier in the quantitative research. In the following, by integrating the quantitative results and the three conjectures, I make sense of students' subjective motivations.

First of all, this chapter identified three themes to examine students' anticipated English learning benefits in greater depth: 1) examination-oriented benefits: *achieving higher Gaokao scores*, 2) future utility benefits: *preparing for future learning and career development*, and 3) intrinsic benefits: such as *interests, self-competency improvement, and expanding horizons*, etc. The first two themes were related to extrinsic and instrumental values of English learning, while the third one focused on intrinsic values of English learning. Previous research (e.g., Kwo & Bray, 2014; Yung, 2015a) has suggested that Grade 12 students primarily attend EPT with the goal of enhancing their examination scores. However, this study uncovered that the motivation of Grade 12 students toward EPT participation being driven by examination-oriented benefits was predominantly evident among middle-class students, with minimal presence among those from upper socioeconomic backgrounds.

Second, students' anticipated English learning success probability was analyzed according to their perception of the quality of school English education, which was categorized into two themes: 1) *textbooks and learning materials*, and 2) *examination- and quality-oriented education modes*. In School A, the approach to English education was predominantly quality-oriented, characterized by the utilization of advanced and authentic textbooks and learning resources, a diverse array of English learning activities, and an increased emphasis on

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speaking and listening competencies. Conversely, School B prioritized an examination-oriented model of English education, with all textbooks and learning materials specifically tailored to prepare students for the *Gaokao*. While previous studies (e.g., Choi, 2009; Yung, 2020b) suggested that students tend to favor EPT over school English education, primarily due to the former's stronger focus on test-taking skills, the findings of this study revealed that such preferences were predominantly observed among middle- and lower-class students. In contrast, a majority of upper-class students (except Jazzy and Richard) actually preferred the quality-oriented school English education to examination-oriented EPT.

As can be seen, students from different social origins tended to have different anticipated English learning benefits and success probability and thus make different educational choices. For most upper-class students, their English learning choices, whether EPT or other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, were mostly driven by future utility benefits and intrinsic benefits. For one reason, upper-class students tended to have higher academic achievements, which diminished their need for additional academic support in preparation for the *Gaokao*. In line with the study of Chan (2019), this study found no substantial evidence indicating that high English achievers necessarily choose to attend EPT to secure their competitive edges in high-stakes examinations. Instead, this study revealed that students with high English proficiency, especially those from the upper class, participated in EPT primarily driven by personal interest, a desire for personal language competency improvement, and considerations related to their future academic and professional trajectories.

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For another reason, upper-class students, who all came from School A, predominantly found the quality-oriented English education satisfactory. Their positive perceptions of school English education were not solely rooted in its focus on examination skills but rather its high priority on improving English language proficiency. Many upper-class students perceived such quality-oriented English education as highly effective in fostering their overall language abilities and enhancing their confidence in the *Gaokao*. Consequently, their choices of English learning activities extended beyond mere preparation for the *Gaokao*.

These two reasons confirm ***Conjecture 1*** that most upper-class students participate in out-of-school English learning activities to enrich their linguistic competency rather than merely remediate examination scores. This explains the significantly positive effects of anticipated English learning benefits and success probability in the quantitative results in Table 5.7.

Regarding middle-class students, interviews revealed their utilitarian cost-benefit considerations, which were primarily driven by instrumental learning motivations. Unlike upper-class students, middle-class students' anticipated English learning benefits were predominantly examination-oriented. In other words, for middle-class students, the primary benefit of acquiring English language skills was the enhancement of their *Gaokao* scores. Meanwhile, whether middle-class students came from School A or School B, their perceived English learning success probability largely depended on the teaching quality of test-taking skills at schools.

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An interesting finding here is that while the majority of middle-class students from both schools who participated in EPT cited a lack of self-confidence in their school's English instruction, the underlying factors contributing to this deficiency were markedly different. For middle-class students at School A, their diminished self-confidence arose from the recognition that, despite the high quality and effectiveness of the school's English instruction, the curriculum was excessively focused on enhancing language proficiency at the expense of developing essential test-taking skills. In other words, middle-class students from School A expressed satisfaction with their English instruction but identified certain shortcomings in addressing their examination-oriented learning needs. Conversely, middle-class students at School B reported a profound lack of self-confidence due to their perception that the English instruction provided at their school was entirely ineffective, unhelpful, and unsatisfactory. A substantial number of these students even believed they would fare better if they pursued independent learning.

These starkly contrasting perceptions of students from the two schools coincide with the findings of Chan and Bray (2014) and Hamid et al. (2018), respectively, which underscores the diverse motivations for student engagement in EPT across different school contexts. According to Chan and Bray (2014), students' awareness of the deficiencies in their school education – including a lack of emphasis on examination skills, inadequate training in critical thinking, and outdated teaching materials – serves as "push" factors driving them toward private tutoring (just like middle-class students at School A). In contrast, Hamid et al. (2018)

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identified that the substandard and ineffective school English education provided in rural or suburban areas is a fundamental reason for students' participation in EPT (just like middle-class students at School B). These findings suggest that the role of EPT varies significantly based on the context of the school environment. Arguably, for middle-class students from School A, EPT functioned as a "supplementary resource" to their mainstream English education, enhancing their overall learning experience, whereas for those from School B, EPT represented the only "viable alternative" to compensate for the inadequacies of their school English instruction.

This divergence in perceptions of school English instruction not only highlights the importance of school education quality, but also illustrates a broader trend in the educational motivations of students, emphasizing the varying degrees of engagement and commitment to English language learning across different socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, despite all being English high achievers, those from the upper class (e.g., Yummelia, Violet, and Rachel) actively engaged in EPT, such as IELTS courses, to enhance their English language competencies and to prepare for their future academic pursuits, while those from the middle class (e.g., Shirley, Siri, and Cora) currently exhibited a lesser concern for future English language acquisition, limiting their learning primarily to the preparation for the *Gaokao*. Once middle-class students achieved satisfactory English scores, they tended to discontinue English learning outside of school hours. This explains the significantly negative statistics of subjective cost-benefit considerations in Table 5.8, indicating that many middle-class students participated in EPT mostly for remediating their English examination scores rather than

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enriching their language abilities. The above discussion support the validation of ***Conjecture 2*** and ***Conjecture 3***.

Finally, to better explain the insignificant cost-benefit factors in Table 5.9, interviews focused on exploring factors contributing to the lack of subjective English learning motivations among lower-class students. Whilst lower-class students shared the same view as their middle-class counterparts from School B that the quality of English language teaching in school was poor, they did not participate in too many out-of-school English learning activities to remediate their English performances as middle-class peers did. This is largely due to the lack of family social, economic, and cultural capital, lower-class students were likely to have *low needs of self-actualization*, *limited exposrure to English learning resources*, *financial constraints*, and *time constraints*.

As such, on the one hand, lower-class students tended to focus only on examination-oriented English learning benefits, which subsequently reduced their intrinsic motivations to learn the language. On the other hand, despite lower-class students' low anticipated probability of achieving success in English learning in the *Gaokao*, they lacked sufficient learning resources, financial support, and time to participate in out-of-school English learning activities.

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Chapter 8: Attitudinal policy factors affecting the participants' out-of-school English learning choices

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 7, I have discussed how subjective cost-benefit considerations influenced students' out-of-school English learning choices. In this chapter, I focus on discussing attitudinal factors toward policy that influence students' educational choices, including English learning policy stance, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital invested in English learning. Although the DRP primarily aims at the nine-year compulsory educational stage, high school students in the interviews still expressed that the high school education system and private tutoring industry were also significantly impacted by the DRP. As elaborated by Cici and Amanda:

> To my knowledge, many tutoring institutions at the high school stage nowadays also refrain from openly promoting tutoring activities; they tend to be more discreet in their approach to tutoring. [Cici]

> Many of my classmates are currently seeking private tutors independently because high school education is also significantly impacted by the DRP. It's now challenging to find standardized tutoring classes in the market. Therefore, some of my friends with good grades and I are all privately taking one-on-one EPT at home every weekend. [Amanda]

Although the DRP primarily aims at the compulsory education stage, high school education

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has also been unavoidably affected. In the quantitative results, policy factors showed varying mediating effects across different social strata, which were especially significant for middle-class students. In the following, I provide details explaining these attitudinal factors toward policy.

8.2 English learning policy stance

For middle-class students, the quantitative results have shown that the less they supported the DRP's intervention in English learning, the more likely they were to attend EPT, and vice versa. However, this trend was not observed among upper- or lower-class cohorts. In the following, I primarily focus on explaining middle-class students' English learning policy stance from two perspectives: 1) attitudes toward homework reduction and 2) attitudes toward EPT restriction.

8.2.1 Policy stance toward English homework reduction

Regarding policy stance toward homework reduction, the majority of students from all social classes demonstrated skepticism and resistance. They argued that assigning appropriately adequate homework was essential for helping them effectively consolidate knowledge after school, especially during the academically demanding senior year of high school. This consensus across socioeconomic strata suggests a deeply ingrained cultural value placed on diligent study and academic rigor. As Shirley and Candy elaborated:

I still wish my teacher to assign suitable homework because sometimes I tend to be

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> playful and lack self-discipline. If the teacher assigns appropriately adequate homework, at least I won't be wasting my time entirely. [Shirley]

> For us high school students, reducing homework can't effectively address the issue of examination-oriented stress. Except for a few highly talented students, most of us have to improve our scores through consistent exercises and repeated drills. For me, I need to reinforce knowledge through homework and engage in sufficient exercises to become familiar with the test-taking skills. [Candy]

According to Shirley and Candy, insufficient homework made them feel "insecure" when preparing for the *Gaokao*. Yvette, Cherry, Larry, Forrest, and Cora expressed similar views by arguing that a reduced amount of homework might result in less effective learning outcomes, as it prevented them from establishing a clear focus on their learning objectives. These students also pointed out that, even in the absence of assigned homework from their teachers, they would independently seek out workbooks to complete, driven by the intense pressure to achieve high scores in the *Gaokao*:

> Highly motivated and elite classmates often perceive the assigned homework as inadequate and take the initiative to undertake supplementary exercises. Only those who lack intrinsic learning motivation refuse to learn, irrespective of the teacher's attempts to foster their engagement. [Cherry]

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Among the three social classes, only Lily, Jennifer, and Lynn uniquely advocated for reducing homework in alignment with the DRP. According to Jennifer, who came from the middle class, proposing a personalized learning approach following the reduction of homework:

> I believe homework reduction helps foster personalized learning. For underachieving students, a decreased homework load facilitates internalizing the material taught in class. Conversely, for high-achieving students, less homework affords them the opportunity to identify their weaknesses, ultimately enriching their academic performance through additional practice and revision.

From Jennifer's account, her call for reduced homework did not imply that the additional time should be allocated to leisure. Rather, she suggested that students with extra time and capabilities should remain engaged in personalized learning activities to enhance their academic performance. In other words, Jennifer's view did not advocate for increased leisure and rest time but rather for a reallocation of study time to address individual academic needs.

Lily, an upper-class student, resonated with Jennifer's views on personalized learning while also highlighting the adverse effects of excessive homework on her sleep schedule:

> I highly support the idea of decreasing heavy homework to allow for more personalized learning. Moreover, this measure gives us more sleep time. [Lily]

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Lynn, who came from the lower class, even admitted to selectively completing "necessary" assignments:

> Honestly speaking, I don't complete all of my homework; I only select and finish the assignments that I deem necessary. When teachers assign excessive homework, I'll copy the answers to questions I've already mastered and focus my time on the assignments I find challenging. This approach reduces my stress, allowing me more time to rest. [Lynn]

The data reveal nuanced variations in students' perspectives on homework reduction that appeared to correlate with socioeconomic background. While all three participants expressed support for reduced homework burdens, their underlying rationales reflected distinct class-based orientations toward education.

Specifically, Jennifer's (middle-class) endorsement of personalized learning over rest reflects an instrumental approach to academic achievement, consistent with middle-class families' strategic investments in education as a means of status maintenance or upward mobility. This orientation may stem from the competitive pressures characterizing middle-class educational trajectories, where differentiation through academic excellence is paramount. Conversely, Lynn's (lower-class) primary emphasis on rest as the benefit of homework reduction suggests that academic responsibilities must be balanced with other life demands for lower-class students. This perspective highlights how structural disadvantages can shape educational priorities. Finally, Lily's (upper-class) balanced advocacy for both personalized learning and

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rest exemplifies the privilege of secure socioeconomic positioning. Her holistic approach reflects an educational paradigm where academic achievement, while highly valued, is not perceived as the exclusive pathway to future success – a luxury afforded by existing cultural and economic capital.

8.2.2 Policy stance toward English private tutoring restriction

In terms of EPT restriction, all middle-class participants expressed opposition. For example, Yvette and Jason considered EPT highly efficient in helping them acquire exam-taking skills and, thus, gain academic excellence:

> Due to my low English proficiency, I rely on one-on-one EPT to enhance my English grades. This personalized approach is more effective than school instruction in identifying my learning gaps and addressing my specific needs. The tutor focuses on topics not covered in school and develops customized examination questions, enabling me to better understand the concepts I've overlooked. [Yvette]

> The EPT is highly efficient, focusing directly on the examination preparation. I tend to be a bit impatient, so I really need such a quick, short-cut, and examination-oriented style of teaching. [Jason]

As such, according to Yvette, the restriction on EPT deprived students of an effective way of gaining academic excellence. Shirley shared similar concerns by saying that given the

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“severity of the current educational environment” and her “perceived deficiency in learning aptitude”, the absence of EPT after school will likely hinder her ability to perform successfully on examinations.

Additionally, other middle-class students worried that restricting tutoring was unfair to them. As Cora elaborated:

> We grow up in a life of tutoring, and restricting it makes me very uncomfortable and psychologically empty. Although I’ve already obtained a relatively satisfactory English grade, this merely indicates that I’ve assimilated approximately 90% of the knowledge presented in class, and I must compensate for the remaining 10% of knowledge gaps through self-directed study, practice, or additional tutoring. [Cora]

Cora believed that the decision to attend EPT should be “at her discretion”. Although she was not currently enrolled in the EPT due to her satisfactory performance in English, she contended that this did not “preclude the potential need for the EPT in the future”. Therefore, she argued that imposing limitations on the EPT was unwarranted and unfair. Siri and Victor shared the same views with Cora by arguing that:

> Tutoring must be a voluntary opportunity for us to enhance our grades. No one is obligating us to participate, nor should we be forced to refrain from doing so. [Siri]

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> Tutoring provides a voluntary platform for us who genuinely require academic assistance. Therefore, I'm not in favor of restricting EPT, as I don't consider it fair. [Victor]

Under such circumstances, students such as Jennifer and Amanda argued that if they did not have access to EPT, they would definitely consider alternative methods to compensate for it, such as inviting home tutors or purchasing online tutoring lessons.

The vast majority of upper- and lower-class students opposed the idea of restraining EPT, while a few held different perspectives. For example, Karol, James, and Bobby felt that academic EPT toward *Gaokao* preparation was basically ineffective, so they believed that the DRP had no obvious impact on them. As Karol and Bobby elaborated:

> I regard EPT support as merely a temporary solution. Although tutors may cover various grammar concepts, you're likely to forget them over time. [...] EPT primarily focuses on examination-related topics, which can be quite tedious and stressful. Hence, I don't think restraining tutoring makes too much difference to me since I don't particularly enjoy or need it. [Karol]

> I don't care whether EPT is restricted, as I have no interest in it whatsoever. Most EPT focuses on rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar. However, the most crucial aspect of learning English is its practical application, rather than engaging in monotonous

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> and repetitive drills. Therefore, I fail to see the value in dedicating substantial time to something lacking appeal and practicality. [Bobby]

These statements illustrate a certain indifference among some upper-class students toward the DRP. In contrast, a few lower-class students like Daisy, Lynn, and Reggie expressed strong support for the DRP in restricting EPT, viewing it as an equalizer for them to attain the same education as other students. Reggie explained his views:

> Prior to the DRP, EPT centers were ubiquitous, and many of my classmates attended these lessons every weekend. Unfortunately, my family couldn't afford high-quality EPT, making me feel inferior to my peers. The restrictions on EPT now present an opportunity for me to receive an English education on par with that of other classmates.

This contrast highlights the differing perceptions of the DRP's implications across socioeconomic strata. While some upper-class students dismissed the need for EPT, believing it to be unengaging and ineffective, certain lower-class students viewed the policy as a critical step toward achieving equitable educational opportunities. For middle-class students, restricting private tutoring largely impeded their chances to succeed in the *Gaokao*.

8.3 Perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning

The DRP aims to alleviate students' academic pressure by restricting private tutoring. However, this approach has been met with skepticism by many high school students, especially middle-class students, who argued that such restrictions may paradoxically

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intensify their anxiety toward 1) educational involution and 2) educational inequality.

8.3.1 Perceived anxiety of educational involution

Numerous middle-class students expressed concerns that the DRP would intensify educational involution. This apprehension primarily arose from the fact that China's educational system has not undergone substantial reform, with modifications being limited predominantly to tutoring and homework – only a minor component of the overall educational system. As such, Cora and Larry lamented that the DRP only addressed the symptoms rather than the root cause:

> I believe that the DRP is ineffective. The volume of candidates competing in the *Gaokao* is consistently substantial, and the level of competition remains intense. To excel, we must take the initiative to complete adequate homework, even if the school doesn't give it. We also have to find alternative access to attend private tutoring for remediation, despite the restrictions. The DRP only invite panic, anxiety, and educational involution. [Cora]

> There are numerous individuals aspiring to advance their social classes by excelling in the *Gaokao*, and thus everyone aims to traverse this "one-way bridge". Unless the DRP reduces the number of students taking the *Gaokao*, it's nothing but the phenomenon of increased educational involution. [Larry]

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Amanda shared the same viewpoint, pointing out that “the root cause of the intense educational involution is the unchanged nature of the competition”, which means that “the *Gaokao* continues to be the exclusive means of evaluating students’ capabilities”. Consequently, Amanda indicated that everyone persisted in engaging in the educational rat race, despite any reductions in homework and tutoring.

Another factor contributing to middle-class students’ anxiety surrounding educational involution was the transformation of overt competition into a more insidious form due to the DRP. As previously noted, the private tutoring industry at the high school stage has also been affected by the DRP, resulting in diminished access to standardized tutoring classes in the marketplace. In this context, Jason and Amanda, both of whom participated in one-on-one EPT, articulated that their decision to engage in one-on-one EPT was precisely motivated by the perceived prevalence of covert one-on-one EPT participation among their peers, leading to their concerns about falling behind academically in an increasingly opaque competitive environment:

> On the surface, the DRP restrains private tutoring in the marketplace, but many of my classmates still engage in tutoring covertly. Honestly speaking, I’m now experiencing growing mental and psychological pressure, and that’s why I’ve also attended one-on-one home EPT. [Jason]

> As far as I know, the DRP hasn’t completely discontinued private tutoring; at least, the

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> one-on-one EPT I'm attending now is still operational. It seems that tutoring institutions are not permitted officially, but no one is taking any action if these tutoring classes continue to run privately. This type of behind-the-scenes educational involution adds more pressure on me. [Amanda]

Jason continued to complain that such an environment where everyone was competing secretly was quite "annoying" because it had resulted in "less vacation time and more anxiety". These excerpts show that, at the high school stage, although formal standardized tutoring institutions were more or less restricted from functioning in the marketplace, there was a lack of enforcement regarding privately conducted tutoring sessions. This covert form of competition largely exacerbated educational involution.

Yvette and Cherry further explained their anxiety about educational involution by positing that private tutoring itself was not the primary driver of educational involution; rather, it was the restriction imposed by the DRP that heightened awareness of educational disparities, and consequently amplified concerns about academic competition and exacerbated educational involution. Yvette articulated her viewpoint:

> Before the DRP, private tutoring was so deeply embedded in our learning routines that it felt like an integral part of our lives. Each of us had personal learning pace and schedules, and we had never even contemplated how tutoring might contribute to academic stress or educational involution. However, after the DRP's implementation,

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> these issues have come to the forefront of our consciousness, compelling us to recognize tutoring's potential role in fostering competition and stress.

Cherry expressed a similar view to Yvette, elaborating that the policy has created an epistemic vacuum in the educational landscape, wherein, the uncertainty surrounding covert academic practices has amplified competitive anxieties and educational involution beyond their pre-policy levels. According to Cherry, being aware of the possibility of covert tutoring under the DRP, even schoolteachers have begun to exert explicit additional academic pressure on students by emphasizing that "the DRP only alleviates pressure for those disinclined to learn, and lack of diligence will result in falling behind" and "some students may appear less studious at school under the DRP, but their at-home study habits remain unknown. Everyone is studying secretly and quietly".

In such a case, Yvette suggested that the state should not be overly concerned regarding the potential academic pressure stemming from private tutoring because such concerns at the high school level were somewhat overstated:

> As high school students, we're more mature and capable of making rational decisions than younger children. In my opinion, we can recognize our genuine need for tutoring, assess our available time and energy, and effectively communicate our views to our parents about the necessity of attending tutoring rather than mindlessly participating in it. Therefore, imposing restrictions on tutoring at the high school level is not a wise option.

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The excerpts of Yvette and Cherry's narratives elucidate a paradoxical consequence of the DRP, wherein policy interventions designed to mitigate educational involution have inadvertently exacerbated perceptions of academic competition through heightened awareness of structural inequalities. In other words, the introduction of the DRP has inadvertently thrust the issues of academic stress and educational involution into the spotlight. This sudden policy shift has prompted middle-class students to critically examine the role of private tutoring in their educational experiences, leading to an increased awareness of its potential impact on competition and anxiety levels.

8.3.2 Perceived anxiety of educational inequality

Middle-class students, such as Yvette, Jennifer, and Shirley, indicated that their participation in EPT was also due to their fear that the DRP would bring about educational inequality, leading to their less competitive edges. This is because when tutoring was restricted, wealthier families still had access to various resources to ensure their children receive tutoring. This situation could "exacerbate educational disparity and class divisions in the long run" (Shirley). As Yvette illustrated:

> Initially, we all have the same amount of opportunities, but after decreasing the homework and restraining easily accessible private tutoring in the market, affluent families are afforded greater advantages by accessing top-notch and expensive tutoring services, bringing significant inequality to average families like mine.

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In such a case, Yvette shared that although large-group EPT costed less than 2,000 RMB per semester, making it more affordable for her family, the diminished access to large-group EPT in the market and her fear of educational inequality prompted her to choose the expensive one-on-one EPT for remediation like her upper-class counterparts, which costed around 1,200 RMB per lesson.

Likewise, dissatisfied with the quality of the school education and unable to secure access to one-on-one private tutoring as upper-class counterparts could under the DRP, Jennifer's parents decided to withdraw her from School B six months prior to the *Gaokao* and subsequently enrolled her in a full-time private intensive training school[8]. The school employed a small-class tutoring model (around 10 students per class), wherein tutors developed customized learning plans for each student to facilitate their *Gaokao* preparation . However, the tuition fees for this private training school were significantly higher than those of a regular public high school[9], amounting to approximately 30,000 RMB per year.

As can be seen, certain middle-class students, concerned that the educational benefits afforded to upper-class students through the DRP may create an inequitable advantage, opted

[8] The school was formerly a private tutoring institution, but then underwent a transformation into a school in response to the regulatory constraints imposed on private tutoring by the DRP. This school provides a full-time and closed tutoring services, with its curriculum specifically designed to prepare students for the *Gaokao*. The primary focus of the school is to support repeat and intermediate students in achieving academic excellence in the *Gaokao*.

[9] The tuition fee of a regular public high school only charges about 5,000 to 6,000 RMB per year.

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to engage in similar expensive one-on-one or small-group tutoring arrangements as their upper-class peers, despite the potential perception of such tutoring as financially burdensome. The above two sections (i.e., Section 8.3.1 and Section 8.3.2) have systematically delineated how educational anxiety operated as a critical mediating factor shaping middle-class students' out-of-school English learning decisions. This stands in marked contrast to the responses observed among upper- and lower-class student cohorts, who exhibited more heterogeneous English learning policy stance.

For upper-class respondents, such as Yummelia, Richard, and Karol, they demonstrated relative insensitivity to policy-induced anxiety in English learning, a phenomenon attributable to their families' substantial social capital reserves (as detailed in Section 8.4). This robust socioeconomic positioning effectively buffered against potentially adverse impacts of the DRP, resulting in much less educational anxiety – as exemplified by Richard's reports of not "feeling particularly strongly about the policy". As Yummelia and Karol elaborated:

> The DRP doesn't affect me much, and I'm not anxious about the outcome of this policy either. [...] I can work in my father's company regardless of my *Gaokao* score. I'm happy if the academic pressure can be eased under the DRP. [Yummelia]

> I wouldn't say I have much anxiety under the DRP. I'm just acknowledging that I don't play as much as I did during my freshman and sophomore years of high school. [Karol]

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Among lower-class students, two contrasting attitudes toward educational inequality emerged. For lower-class individuals like Linda, Tina, Zoe, and David, the awareness of their wealthier peers engaging in home-based EPT fostered feelings of "helplessness and inferiority" (Tina). Zoe articulated this sentiment:

> One of my roommates receives one-on-one home tutoring, which my family cannot afford. [...] I think this is unfair. I don't think the DRP is effective; instead, it exacerbates my feelings of inferiority compared to my roommates.

Conversely, other lower-class students reported that the DRP successfully alleviated their educational anxiety:

> We were in tutoring classes every weekend in the past, which left me with only occasional opportunities for peaceful sleep. However, now that there are no standardized tutoring classes available in the market, I believe this significantly reduces my anxiety. It allows me to enjoy my weekends by participating in activities I prefer. [Simon]

> I feel less anxious under the DRP, I guess. After all, we no longer need to attend additional tutoring classes; everyone is enjoying their weekends, and the level of educational anxiety is not as high as it once was. [Reggie]

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As can be seen, middle-class students emerged as the group most acutely concerned about potential educational involution and systemic inequalities exacerbated by the DRP. This pronounced anxiety served as a critical determinant significantly shaping their decisions regarding out-of-school English learning engagements.

8.4 Family social capital invested in English education

The quantitative analysis presented in Section 5.4 demonstrated that family social capital functioned as a statistically significant mediating variable for out-of-school English learning decisions among upper- and middle-class students, while exhibiting negligible effects for their lower-class counterparts. Building upon these empirical findings, this section conducts a qualitative exploration of three key dimensions: 1) the strategic mobilization of family social capital by upper- and middle-class students in structuring their out-of-school English learning opportunities, 2) the exceptional cases where lower-class students successfully activated familial resources despite structural constraints, and 3) the systemic barriers impeding most lower-class families from effectively converting their social capital into educational advantages.

8.4.1 Obtain additional English learning support by leveraging social relations

In this section, I elaborate on students' utilization of family social capital to access EPT under the DRP from two main aspects: 1) parental tutoring and 2) receiving EPT from social relations.

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8.4.1.1 Parental tutoring

The regulatory constraints on private tutoring have precipitated a heightened reliance on formal schooling and parental participation in students' academic development. Although the policy's impact on high school tutoring has been less pronounced compared to primary and middle school sectors, qualitative data from this study reveal that a subset of high school students' parents have intensified their involvement in their children's English language education as a compensatory strategy.

Among upper-class students, Lily, Violet, Karol, Siri, and Peter expressed that their parents would actively get involved in their English learning and directly provide instructions when necessary. Lily's case was particularly noteworthy – her mother, an accomplished physician with exceptional English proficiency – played a crucial role in Lily's English education within the context of the DRP:

> I: Do your parents get involved in your English learning under the DRP? Such as regularly checking up on your English homework or providing instructions for you?
>
> L: My mother does because she possesses excellent English proficiency.
>
> I: Can you elaborate on that? You can give some examples.
>
> L: I think my mother mainly helps me with difficult grammatical concepts. You know, the English education I receive at school focus more on speaking and listening skills, and my grammar is relatively poor.
>
> I: That sounds great! How does your mother help you prepare for the English

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examination?

L: My mother rarely provides explicit examination tutoring for me. Instead, she teaches me English reading methods to quickly comprehend complex texts, which enhances both of my reading and thinking abilities. [...] She also encourages me to review English journal articles and to accumulate good sentences and vocabulary. If it's during vacation, we'll do it together sometimes.

These excerpts demonstrate Lily's mother's incredibly supportive stances toward her English studies, which can be one of the explanations for why Lily did not engage in EPT outside the school under the DRP. As Lily further elaborated:

I initially considered attending EPT to improve my grammar skills. However, given the DRP's restrictions and my mother's proficient English skills, I decided against subscribing to additional EPT services.

In a similar vein, Karol's father, who had professional working experience overseas, possessed a high level of English proficiency, enabling him to provide effective English tutoring at home for her:

My father is just like a foreign private tutor for me. We usually allocate a specific time each week to have conversations in English, during which he corrects my grammar and wording, a practice I also find to be beneficial for my writing skills [...] Since there are

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fewer tutoring options available in the market under the DRP, I rely on my father more for support. He's my primary resource for English language assistance on weekends.

As can be seen, for high school students whose parents were proficient in English, parental English tutoring served as an effective means of supplementing school English learning within the context of the DRP framework. These above excerpts also underscore the complex interplay between policy constraints, parental capabilities, and student decision-making regarding out-of-school English education.

8.4.1.2 Accessing English private tutoring through professional and interpersonal relationships

While upper-class families often had the means to access EPT – whether through expensive one-on-one home tutoring or parental tutoring – many middle- and lower-class families lacked these resources and abilities. Nevertheless, qualitative findings demonstrate that resource-constrained families employed alternative strategies, most notably leveraging family social connections to facilitate access to EPT, effectively circumventing some of the limitations imposed by the DRP.

Over half of the middle-class students expressed that their parents possessed social relations to provide them with EPT under the DRP. For instance, Jason and Yvette accessed one-on-one EPT through their parents' professional networks, showing the potential of professional relationships to serve educational objectives.

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> My current one-on-one English tutor is a client of my father's pet products company. My father's business activities often bring him into contact with a diverse range of people. My English tutor is a retired English teacher who has been a regular customer at my father's store, which has facilitated their acquaintance over time. Acknowledging the significance of improving my English proficiency in my senior year of high school and the restriction imposed by the DRP, my father organized me to receive personalized English tutoring at the tutor's home. [Jason]

> My father holds the position of a military officer. Utilizing his connections within the military community, he identified an English professor willing to provide tutoring services. This arrangement proved to be instrumental in improving my proficiency in the English language. [Yvette]

In contrast, David and Harriet were the only two lower-class students identified in my interviews whose families possessed the interpersonal connections necessary to provide English learning support outside of school. Both individuals sought assistance from relatives with educational backgrounds to arrange out-of-school English sessions at minimal cost, as they perceived EPT as an additional financial burden. The remaining lower-class students who attended EPT, such as Lynn, Zoe, and Daisy, were very low achievers in English, and they attended the fee-paying EPT organized by their own English teachers at the request of the grade's head teacher.

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Overall, these above examples illustrate how middle- and lower-class parents navigated challenges posed by the DRP to provide their children with access to English learning opportunities through social relations.

8.4.2 Formulating alternative educational strategies through parent-child discussion

Parent-child discussion about school matters and future learning plans has also been conceptualized by many scholars (e.g., Byun et al., 2012; Tan & Fang, 2023) as an important aspect of family social capital. In the interviews, the study employed the parent-child discussion about educational alternatives to explore family social capital in greater depth. In the following, I discuss different alternative strategies adopted by families among the three social strata.

8.4.2.1 Studying abroad and attending Sino-foreign university

Privileged families frequently consider less competitive educational pathways, such as studying abroad or attending Sino-foreign joint venture universities[10], as alternatives to the traditional *Gaokao* route. Such strategic planning reflects the deployment of family social capital to navigate the uncertainties in larger educational context while ensuring favorable

[10] Sino-foreign joint venture universities, such as Duke Kunshan University and New York University Shanghai, have relatively lower admission requirements than many key domestic universities. However, the tuition fees (approximately 100,000 to 200,000 RMB per year) are much higher than domestic public universities (approximately 4,000 to 8,000 RMB per year).

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English learning outcomes.

Karol's case exemplifies how family social capital influences English learning decision-making. Despite her suboptimal English performance, Karol did not seek EPT for remediation. Instead, through discussions with her parents, she opted for an alternative educational trajectory:

> My academic performance, particularly in English, may not meet the admission criteria for elite domestic universities. The constraints imposed by the DRP have also discouraged me from pursuing underground one-on-one EPT because I'm lazy. In response, my parents have proposed enrolling in a Sino-foreign joint venture university as a viable alternative. Should my *Gaokao* results prove insufficient for this option, we'll consider studying abroad as a cost-effective solution.

This excerpt illustrates how upper-class families leveraged their social capital invested in English learning to navigate the educational landscape altered by the DRP, exploring alternatives that circumvent the highly competitive domestic university admission process. Karol further elaborated on her parents' approach to academic support:

> I've observed that many of my peers experience significant parental pressure to maximize their academic potential, often resulting in heightened learning anxiety. In contrast, my parents adopt a much gentler approach. While they may not push me to

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> achieve my potential, they consistently provide me with support by discussing with me about alternative educational pathways that make me more comfortable, so as to ensure I meet at least minimum academic standards.

This parental strategy demonstrates a balanced approach to academic achievement, potentially mitigating the competitive stress associated with the *Gaokao* competition while ensuring access to quality higher education opportunities. It also reflects a sophisticated deployment of family social capital, where parents utilize their knowledge and resources to identify and secure alternative educational pathways that align with their children's capabilities and preferences.

This approach of developing alternative educational plans through parent-child discussion was consistently observed among other upper-class students. Yummelia's and Violet's account further illustrated this strategy:

> My parents have talked about future alternative educational choices with me for many times. Although they want me to prioritize taking the *Gaokao* seriously, they've also devised Plan B and Plan C. If I fail the *Gaokao*, their backup plans include having me study abroad and eventually take over the family's medicine company. [Yummelia]

> My parents have proactively devised a Plan B of enrolling me in Sino-foreign joint universities. As teachers themselves, they possess access to underground tutoring

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> resources under the DRP, yet have chosen not to stress me out about my *Gaokao* scores. Instead, they strategically enrolled me in an IELTS course during my sophomore year. We've already applied to Duke Kunshan University and New York University Shanghai as contingency options should my *Gaokao* results prove unsatisfactory. [Violet]

Other students, such as Funky, Richard, Lily, James, Peter, Jason, and Candy, reported similar strategic discussions with their parents regarding alternative educational trajectories. Peter also posited that the comparatively lenient admission criteria of Sino-foreign joint venture universities not only facilitated his adherence to the DRP's regulation of abstaining from academic tutoring, but also that the international context of these universities could significantly enhance his English proficiency and academic capabilities. This enhancement, he believed, would better position him for the pursuit of graduate studies overseas in the future. Peter characterized this alternative educational strategy as a "comprehensive strategic adaptation" to the DRP framework.

The above excerpts collectively underscore the pivotal role of family social capital in mediating educational decision-making processes. The findings reveal how economically advantaged families strategically mobilized their knowledge, material resources, and social networks to identify and pursue alternative educational pathways, such as attending Sino-foreign joint universities, that effectively neutralized potential uncetainties on their children's academic pursuits. This strategic deployment of family social capital in English learning reflect how families rationalized the most satisfactory educational plan to secure competitive educational advantages, thereby reproducing class-based inequalities within the reformed

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educational landscape.

8.4.2.2 Choosing less competitive but promising majors

Another frequently discussed alternative strategy was exploring niche or emerging majors, especially those less competitive but potentially promising fields of study that align with future job market trends. Such parent-child discussion was mostly evident in many middle-class families. The DRP's restrictions on private tutoring have prompted middle-class families to reconsider their educational strategies and explore alternatives that do not rely heavily on out-of-school education. This approach reflects middle-class families' efforts to adapt to the changing educational landscape brought about by the DRP and the evolving labor market dynamics in China. As Cherry and Amanda elaborated:

> My parents are now researching some potentially promising majors in less prestigious universities at home, just in case I fail the *Gaokao*. With the DRP in place, we can't rely on intensive tutoring to boost my scores, so we're looking at other options. [Cherry]

> Since I'm preparing for the *Gaokao*, my father reads many books on university majors. He's also looking into promising yet less saturated jobs in the labor market that might not require top *Gaokao* scores. It's like he's become my personal education consultant since we can't rely on private tutors anymore. [Amanda]

This proactive approach demonstrates how middle-class families prepared contingency plans

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that extend beyond conventional pursuits of elite universities and hyper-competitive majors. Through systematic exploration of alternative educational trajectories – including potentially promising but less competitive fields of study – parents are positioned to deliver more nuanced guidance to their children. This guidance enables students to formulate educational decisions regarding education-career pathways that strategically reconcile their academic capabilities with emergent labor market demands.

Furthermore, many middle-class parents started to pay more attention to exploring their children's academic interest, so as to better choose university majors:

> Before the DRP, our conversations were only about which tutoring centers to enroll in. Now, we dedicate more time to discussing my academic interests and identifying a more sustainable path forward. [Yvette]

As can be seen, certain middle-class families employed an adaptive approach to future education-career planning by considering promising but less competitive university majors in an attempt to strike a balance between their children's academic capabilities, personal interests, and future career prospects. Through this multidimensional calculus, middle-class families navigated policy constraints to secure a viable path to higher education and future employment in labor markets that maintained upward mobility potential, even if the *Gaokao* scores fell short of expectations. This transition from a mere emphasis on examination preparation to a more comprehensive strategy for education-career planning reflects a

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significant change in the way middle-class families approach education under the DRP.

8.4.3 Reasons for lacking family social capital in English learning

In contrast to upper- and middle-class families, the majority of lower-class families were deficient in sufficient family social capital to access additional out-of-school English learning opportunities under the DRP. This deficiency hindered their ability to secure extra English learning support through social networks or to develop alternative educational strategies through parent-child discussions. Nevertheless, most of them presented a "go-with-the-flow" or "laid-back" attitude, neither worrying too much about the potential failure of the *Gaokao* nor seeking alternative ways to remedy the situation too actively. Through interviews, over two-thirds of lower-class students exhibited such a state. As Reggie said:

> My parents lack the interpersonal connections necessary to help me secure a private tutor or access additional English learning resources, as their friends predominantly come from rural backgrounds and lack formal education. But I don't think any of this truly matters, and I'll choose to work instead if I fail the *Gaokao*. [Reggie]

Compared with their highly goal-oriented and anxious middle-class counterparts, most lower-class students seemed to lack the agency to seek alternative learning strategies and did not consider the lack of family social capital invested in English learning a significant issue, generally holding laid-back attitudes toward the *Gaokao*.

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Among all lower-class participants, only Zoe and Daisy actively sought alternative educational pathways in response to the potential failure of the *Gaokao*. However, their narratives highlight how structural constraints imposed by insufficient family social capital ultimately undermined these aspirations. Zoe expressed feelings of helplessness and negativity about her future:

> My family lacks sufficient social capital to help me access high-quality EPT and we haven't discussed any alternative plans in case I perform poorly in the *Gaokao*. [...] If I fail the *Gaokao*, I'll just resign myself to my fate and take it one step at a time.

Arguably, by restricting affordable and easily accessible private tutoring options in the marketplace, the DRP has deprived the only academic support for lower-class students like Zoe, who lacked sufficient family social capital in English learning. Daisy also expressed her concerns while exploring alternative educational pathways:

> I wish to study abroad if I fail the *Gaokao*, but I haven't prepared anything because I don't know how to prepare. [...] I haven't talked to my parents about the idea yet because I'm unsure if they will support me in studying abroad.

When I revisited Daisy a few months later when the *Gaokao* was over to enquire about her educational choices, I found that she had ultimately given up the idea of studying abroad, because she thought "overseas study would overburden my family who do not have any

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experience in this field or any interpersonal connections that can provide relevant information". As can be seen, although Daisy demonstrated initiative in considering alternative pathways like studying abroad, her aspirations were ultimately constrained by limited family social capital invested in English learning, both in terms of informational resources and social connections.

Collectively, these cases demonstrate how the intersection of DRP regulations and pre-existing social capital deficiencies creates a doubly disadvantaged position for lower-class students. While demonstrating comparable educational aspirations to their more advantaged peers, their capacity to actualize alternative educational pathways remains systematically constrained by structural inequalities.

8.5 Summary of attitudinal factors toward policy

This chapter has examined how attitudinal factors toward policy, including English learning policy stance, perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, and family social capital in English learning, shaped students' out-of-school English learning choices. In the following, by integrating the quantitative results, I make sense of these attitudinal factors toward policy.

First of all, the study employed two aspects to examine students' English learning policy stance: 1) *approval of English homework reduction* and 2) *approval of EPT restrictions*. Through interviews, findings indicated that students from both upper- and lower-class backgrounds expressed similar unsupportive English learning policy stance as their middle-

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class counterparts. This raises the question of why the variable “English learning policy stance” appeared to significantly influence only the EPT choices of middle-class students in Section 5.4.

This observation can be elucidated through the following points. For upper-class students, their engagement in EPT classes was largely unrelated to the *Gaokao*, and they possessed ample familial capital to mitigate the adverse effects of the policy. Consequently, their dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed on EPT and the reduction of homework did not substantially alter their educational choices.

Conversely, for lower-class students, they faced distinct challenges; primarily, their participation in out-of-school English learning was already limited by financial constraints and insufficient resources, rendering the DRP’s impacts minimal. In other words, whether or not the DRP is implemented, lower-class students seldom engage in EPT. Furthermore, lower-class students lacked the necessary familial capital to buffer against the negative repercussions of the policy. In such cases, their English learning policy stance rarely influenced their educational choices.

Compared to upper- and lower-class peers, middle-class students, while having relatively less familial capital than upper-class students to access high-quality, one-on-one EPT related to the *Gaokao*, were more goal-oriented and motivated to succeed in the examination compared to their lower-class counterparts. Thus, their English learning policy stance played a

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significant role in shaping their out-of-school English learning choices.

Arguably, while upper-class students may remain unaffected by the DRP due to their ample resources, lower-class students were largely constrained by their socioeconomic conditions associated with their social status, which diminishes the overall impact of the policy on their educational experiences. Middle-class students, characterized by unique motivations and relatively restricted resources, experienced a more pronounced influence of English learning policy stance in shaping their educational decisions.

Second, middle-class students' EPT choices were also significantly influenced by their perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning, which primarily stemmed from two factors: 1) *anxiety of educational involution* and 2) *anxiety of educational inequality*. Regarding the anxiety of educational involution, the primary concern lay in the fact that, despite the DRP's aim to alleviate academic pressure, the education system continues to rely solely on *Gaokao* scores for talent selection (Shi & Yung, 2025). Consequently, with diminished access to overt tutoring options in the market, students resorted to covert forms of EPT, which further exacerbated educational anxiety.

Moreover, an interesting finding of educational involution arose from Yvette's and Cherry's perspectives (see Section 8.3.1). Their viewpoints can be likened to the famous psychological phenomenon of "ironic process theory" or "white bear problem", where deliberate attempts to suppress certain thoughts can often paradoxically increase their occurrence and significance

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in one's mind (Wegner et al., 1987). In the context of the DRP, the policy's explicit aim to reduce academic pressure by restricting private tutoring may inadvertently amplify students' awareness of and preoccupation with educational competition. Just as telling someone not to think about a white bear often leads to increased thoughts about white bears, the DRP's explicit restrictions on private tutoring seem to have heightened students' focus on academic performances and the perceived advantages of out-of-school education. In such cases, the direct suppression of educational practices, such as private tutoring, may not effectively reduce academic stress or competition but rather redirect these pressures into new, potentially less visible channels. This insight not only explains one of the core reasons for educational involution under the DRP, but also underscores the complexity of addressing educational involution. These observations raise critical questions about the efficacy of top-down policy interventions in addressing complex educational issues.

Regarding the anxiety of educational inequality, the study highlighted that covert forms of EPT under the DRP have made many middle-class students acutely aware of the potential existence of educational inequality. As such, in an effort to avoid falling behind their peers, some middle-class students like Yvette and Jennifer may feel compelled to engage in costly one-on-one EPT or to enroll in private training school, emulating their upper-class counterparts. This decision was predominantly driven by their fear of educational inequality brought about by the DRP, even if they perceived such tutoring as somewhat financially burdensome for their families. Such response to the perceived educational inequality of the middle class demonstrates the persistence of competitive anxiety within the Chinese

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education system, even in the face of regulatory efforts to reduce academic burden. It also highlights the unintended consequences of the DRP, potentially widening the gap between those who can afford alternative forms of educational support and those who cannot.

Overall, the situation of perceived anxiety in English learning highlights a critical paradox within the DRP: while intended to reduce academic pressure, it paradoxically perpetuates anxiety among middle-class students who feel they must compete within the educational system that still prioritizes examination performance. The reliance on *Gaokao* scores as the primary metric for academic success creates a high-stakes environment where students feel compelled to seek out private tutoring, regardless of its cost. Thus, the DRP may inadvertently reinforce educational involution and inequality rather than mitigate them, as students from different social origins respond to the pressures of a competitive educational landscape.

Finally, as one of the important forms of family capital, social capital plays a pivotal role in shaping students' educational attainment, choices, and aspirations (Berends, 2019; Byun et al., 2012; Coleman, 1988). The study, thus, employed two primary perspectives to explore how students utilized family social capital to navigate educational challenges, particularly in response to the potential *Gaokao* failure under the DRP: 1) *leveraging social relations for English learning support* and 2) *formulating alternative educational strategies through parent-child discussion*. The study revealed that these two aspects significantly influenced high-school students' out-of-school English learning choices.

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Specifically, upper-class families predominantly utilized their social capital through parental involvement in home English tutoring and by exploring alternative educational pathways, such as studying abroad or attending Sino-foreign joint venture universities. On the one hand, parental tutoring mitigated students' concerns about the lack of EPT under the DRP; on the other hand, the availability of other educational options, such as studying abroad, also enabled them to rationally make more favorable study choices under the constraints of the DRP. The abundance of social capital in upper-class families not only facilitated the development of coping strategies for educational challenges posed by the DRP, but also well explained upper-class students' reduced reliance on *Gaokao*-oriented EPT (see Chapter 7) and increased focus on EPT such as IELTS courses to improve their language competencies and prepare for their future studies.

In contrast, many middle-class and a small number of lower-class students focused their choices more on accessing EPT through social connections and choosing less competitive but promising university majors. With the constraints of the DRP, many middle-class and some lower-class families had the ability to access high-quality EPT covertly through either professional or interpersonal relationships. Particularly for lower-class students like Harriet and David, the ability to leverage social capital for educational purposes was not just a matter of convenience; it could be a vital strategy for overcoming socioeconomic barriers.

Additionally, the strategy of exploring niche or emerging university majors exemplifies a

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nuanced response to China's changing educational and economic environment post-DRP. It demonstrates how certain middle- and lower-class families used their social capital to gather relevant information about university majors, analyze prevailing trends in labor markets, and make informed decisions regarding their children's educational trajectories. This adaptive approach highlights the unintended consequences of the DRP, pushing families to think more creatively and strategically about education and career planning to better align with labor market demands. This shift may ultimately contribute to the development of a more stratified workforce in the future.

Nevertheless, family social capital invested in English learning was markedly insufficient for the majority of lower-class families, corroborating the insignificant role of family social capital indicated in Table 5.9. The apparent acceptance of inadequate family social capital and limited learning options by lower-class students like Zoe and Reggie suggests that the existing social inequalities may arise from students' rationalized educational choices. While upper- and middle-class families can mobilize their family social capital to create alternative learning opportunities, lower-class families' limited social networks and resources effectively narrow their children's educational horizons, potentially leading to the internalization of reduced educational aspirations when making educational choices. Additionally, the contrast between Daisy's initial aspirations for studying abroad and her eventual resignation also highlights how the absence of family social capital can lead to the gradual abandonment of educational alternatives, even when students initially show proactive attitudes.

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All these stories confirm ***Conjecture 4*** that the inequality of educational opportunities persists under the DRP. This finding aligns with Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, where limited social capital not only restricts actual opportunities but also shapes students' perceptions of what is possible or "reasonable" for them to pursue, ultimately entrenching existing disparities and limiting the potential for upward mobility.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of utilizing social connections to provide educational support underlines the multifaceted nature of capital in addressing educational inequities. While financial capital is crucial, social capital can be an equally powerful asset, enabling families to navigate and mitigate the limitations imposed by their economic circumstances. As such, fostering strong community networks and relationships can play a significant role in promoting educational equity and supporting the academic success of all students.

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Chapter 9: Conclusion and implications

9.1 Introduction

Drawing on RCT, the study studied the out-of-school English learning choices made by high school students from different social classes in Mainland China. In previous chapters, Chapter 4 provided the general background information regarding the types of and reasons for students' participation in out-of-school English learning activities. Chapter 5 tested the four hypotheses through logistic regression and KHB decomposition, examining how social origins statistically influenced students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 conducted an in-depth exploration of students' experiences through semi-structured interviews, testifying the four conjectures. The qualitative analysis offered a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the ways in which social origin influenced the disparities in out-of-school English learning choices among high school students from various social classes.

This chapter summarizes and discusses all the key findings and provides implications for school educators and policymakers. First, I structure all my findings following my research questions. By discussing what the quantitative results show and then how the qualitative findings explain or unpack the quantitative results, I also put an emphasis on how these outcomes can be explained by the theoretical framework. Second, through critical discussions of quantitative and qualitative outcomes, I also reconceptualize RCT. In the end, this chapter discusses research limitations and proposes future research directions.

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9.2 Integration and discussion of quantitative and qualitative findings to research questions

The study aimed to understand high school students' out-of-school English learning choices under the DRP, which were guided by the following three overarching research questions:

RQ1: What types of out-of-school English learning activities do high school students in Mainland China choose and why under the DRP?

RQ2: In general, how does social origin shape high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects?

RQ3: By differentiating students into upper, middle, and lower social class:

(1) How does social origin differentially shape high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects?

(2) What factors related to social origin help to explain the inequality in educational decision-making among the three social classes?

In the following, as shown in Figure 9.1, I integrate, summarize, and discuss key findings from both quantitative data in Chapters 4 and 5 and qualitative data in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, to try to unpack the three research questions, respectively.

9.2.1 Findings to *RQ1*

In Chapter 4, I analyzed the types of and the reasons for students' out-of-school English learning choices, which has addressed ***RQ1***. The descriptive analysis yields a significant

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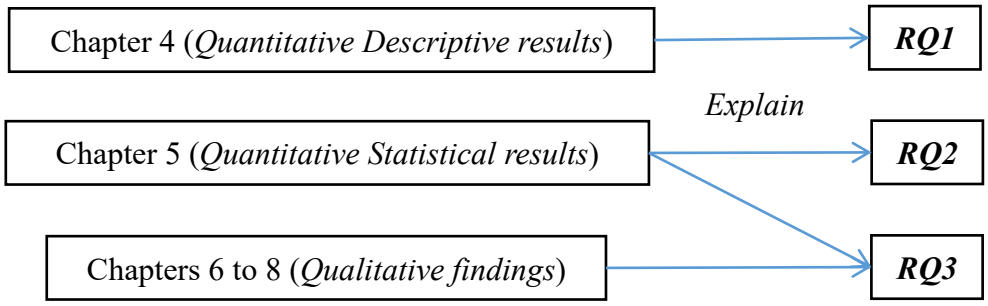
Figure 9.1

The explanation of research questions by chapters



finding: among the 1,287 valid samples, only 314 participants, representing 24.4%, engaged in EPT under the DRP. This comparatively low percentage observed in this study stands in stark contrast to earlier research that documented a significantly higher prevalence of EPT participation among Grade 12 students in China, with 68.6% and 72.4% of sampled Grade 12 students participating in EPT in Shanghai (Lu, 2021) and Hong Kong (Bray et al., 2014, p. 31), respectively. This finding implies that the implementation of the DRP may have effectively diminished both the availability and accessibility of EPT in the marketplace.

In terms of types, a very large number of students participated in one-on-one and small-group EPT, with the combined percentages of the two amounting to 36.9%, which was comparable to the percentage of large-group EPT (37.3%). This suggests that while large-group EPT remains the most common type of tutoring for high school students, economically advantaged families may also enhance their children's competitive edge through expensive one-on-one and small-group tutoring under the DRP. Since much of the previous literature (e.g., Xue & Li, 2023; L. Zhang, 2022) indicated this phenomenon of one-on-one and small-group tutoring

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practices under the DRP, there have been few empirical studies that have confirmed this. The empirical finding of this study expands the existing literature by adding to our knowledge that although the DRP may have inadvertently contributed to the emergence of increasingly more one-on-one and small-class tutoring.

Regarding the types of other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, it has become evident that students predominantly gravitate towards exercises focused on reading, listening, and writing, with negligible participation in speaking activities. This trend is not particularly surprising. Similar to other Asian countries where English is taught as a foreign language, the English education in China remains heavily skewed toward examination success (Zhang & Yan, 2018). As exemplified in the *Gaokao*, where 65% of English language assessments are allocated to reading, 20% to listening, and 15% to writing, while explicitly excluding speaking (Su, 2024). This imbalance underscores a persistent deficiency in English language education in China, wherein receptive skills (reading and listening) are prioritized at the expense of productive skills (writing and speaking).

As such, although many students reported in questionnaires that they engaged in various out-of-school English activities not solely for *Gaokao* preparation but also for genuine development of their language proficiency and language interest, their approaches to language improvement predominantly mirrored the *Gaokao*'s structure. Consequently, few students actively sought to develop their English proficiency or cultivate their language interest through speaking practice.

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This disproportionate emphasis on specific language skills within the educational assessment framework has led to significant underdevelopment of Chinese students' overall language competencies, particularly in speaking. As noted by Meng et al. (2021), China uniquely exhibits a phenomenon in which examinees' oral English scores are consistently the lowest among the four language skills in the IELTS assessments. Despite governmental efforts to incorporate speaking assessments into the *Gaokao* and to reduce the focus on written components, these initiatives have faced substantial resistance at regional levels and have not yet been implemented nationally (Butler et al., 2022).

The absent role of oral English in the high-stakes examinations not only exerts a negative washback on both mainstream and shadow education (Allen, 2016; Choi, 2009), but also reflects a broader systemic issue within the educational environment – students' decision-making processes regarding their self-directed language learning are, consciously or unconsciously, limited by such prevailing norms and expectations. Many students may have never considered developing their speaking skills outside of school, as this aspect has historically been marginalized in both curriculum design and daily classroom practice. Consequently, the lack of emphasis on English speaking skills in educational settings perpetuates a cycle where students do not prioritize it in their self-directed English learning after school, ultimately exacerbating gaps in their overall English proficiency. It can be argued that the disproportionate assessment of receptive versus productive language skills in the *Gaokao* has inadvertently shaped students' approach to language learning, thereby

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constraining their scope of independent educational choices.

Another meaningful finding in Chapter 4 are the significantly varied reasons for engaging in EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. Participants primarily sought EPT for purposes of "remediation" and "achieving satisfactory scores in the *Gaokao*", suggesting a reactive attitude to English learning when participation in EPT, where most students' participation in EPT may be driven more by the pressures of assessment rather than a genuine interest in the language itself. The observed higher proportion of "remediation" over "enrichment" further enhances our understanding that the "supplementation" aspect of shadow education, from students' perspectives, is often more about addressing learning deficiencies than fostering enrichment. This finding aligns with and provides empirical statistics for the conclusion drawn by Zhang and Bray (2013) who noted that even "many higher achievers interviewed indicated that they sought tutoring for remedial purposes" (p. 90). Conversely, other forms of out-of-school English learning activities were pursued mostly for "enrichment", "personal language skills enhancement", and "personal interest", which represents a more proactive learning attitude. These findings imply a crucial complementary relationship between school education, academic private tutoring, and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities.

Interestingly, in addition to time constraints, a predominant rationale among students for abstaining from EPT was the perception that the English education provided in schools was sufficiently effective, rendering out-of-school English learning support unnecessary. This

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finding not only contests the widely held belief that students predominantly prefer private tutoring over mainstream education (Gunasekara, 2009; Kim et al., 2021; Yung, 2021), but also suggests that participation in private tutoring is inextricably associated with the quality of English instruction within schools. This perspective resonates with Hamid et al.'s (2018, p. 868) observation that students' enrollment in EPT arises not from intrinsic faith in its pedagogical value but from their eroding confidence in school English education. It can be argued that enhancing the quality of school-based English education could potentially reduce the demand for EPT, underscoring the necessity for policymakers to reorient efforts toward strengthening school-based language instruction as a sustainable strategy to mitigate educational inequities perpetuated by privatized tutoring markets.

To conclude, findings pertaining to ***RQ1*** reveal that while large-group EPT remained the most popular tutoring type among high school students to remediate their academic performances, one-on-one and small-group EPT were also highly welcomed. Although a significant number of students engaged in various other forms of out-of-school English learning for enrichment purposes, their focus predominantly remained on reading, writing, and listening skills, with speaking practices being largely overlooked. Finally, the demanding academic schedules in the senior year of high school and students' perceived high-quality school English education were identified as two primary factors contributing to many students' lack of participation in out-of-school English learning activities.

9.2.2 Findings to *RQ2*

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In Chapter 5, I conducted logistic regression and KHB decomposition to explore how social origin affected students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects, which has answered ***RQ2***. First of all, accorded with previous empirical studies (e.g., Bachsleitner et al., 2018; Liu, 2019; Matsuoka, 2018), this study has also confirmed social origin's pivotal role in determining students' educational choices, which may potentially result in educational inequalities.

Many scholars (e.g., Bray, 2023; Mahmud & Kenayathulla, 2018) highlighted geographical location as a key factor contributing to educational disparities linked to social origins, because families from different socioeconomic backgrounds tend to live in different regions, districts, and suburbs. Bray (2023) characterized this concept as "economic geography" (p. 349), suggesting that socioeconomic disparities manifest spatially. This is especially true in China, where geographical location significantly mediates the effects of socioeconomic factors on education (Wu & Tarc, 2024).

Specifically, the "economic geography" within Chinese educational landscape is predominantly manifested through two key dimensions. For one thing, there exists a pronounced urban-rural disparity in the allocation of educational resources (Sun et al., 2023; Wu & Tarc, 2024), with urban schools possessing greater funding, superior facilities, and more qualified teaching staff compared to their rural counterparts. For another, the real estate market also demonstrates considerable stratification, as properties located in proximity to prestigious schools command notably higher prices (Chiang, 2019; Gong & Sun, 2023). As a

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result, numerous affluent families secure access to elite schools by purchasing or renting residential properties (Wu, 2012). Collectively, these dual mechanisms systematically marginalize socioeconomically disadvantaged rural students, effectively excluding them from attending prestigious schools and accessing high-quality educational resources for academic advancement.

Despite the Chinese government's school equalization policies, such as near-by allocation and detracking, elite schools – especially those private ones – may still negotiate ways to maximize the enrolment of high-achieving students from affluent families (see Zhang & Bray, 2018). As such, it is a ubiquitous phenomenon in China that prestigious schools predominantly enroll economically advantaged students from urban areas, while lower-class rural students have no other option but to attend lower-ranking schools (Li, 2019). This stratification further exacerbates existing inequalities in educational access and outcomes.

As in the context of this study, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds predominantly attended School A, which was situated in an affluent downtown area characterized by a wealth of extracurricular learning resources. These students' economic circumstances enabled them to engage in and finance out-of-school English learning opportunities as they desired. Conversely, students attending School B resided in more isolated suburban areas, where they faced not only limited out-of-school learning options but also economic constraints that restricted their purchasing power for such activities. From this perspective, this study argues that social origins not only directly affect the purchasing power

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of out-of-school learning resources but also indirectly affect the acquisition of learning opportunities through geographical locations.

The primary effect of social origin, as measured by English academic performance, significantly influenced high school students' out-of-school English learning choices: while it negatively correlated with the participation in EPT, it positively correlated with the participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. The differing primary effects have again corroborated previous descriptive findings that while most high school students attend EPT for remediation, they participate in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities for enrichment.

Whether primary effects are important for the explanation of persistent social inequality has always been a subject of considerable debate in prior research. Some scholars (e.g., Boudon, 1974; Erikson & Rudolphi, 2010; Schindler & Lörz, 2012) argued that primary effects are predominantly relevant during early educational stages and that secondary effects become more crucial when children grow up. This is because by the time students reach higher educational levels, "class differences in early demonstrated academic ability are likely to have been reduced" (van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007, p. 412), but available educational options facing them are likely to expand (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Thompson, 2016). In such cases, as what the RRA mechanism indicates, students from privileged and disadvantaged families, despite having identical academic abilities, exhibit different levels of educational aspirations and thus make varying educational decisions through rational cost-benefit

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considerations (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), thereby further exacerbating educational inequalities. This perspective underscores the significance of secondary effects in the form of rational cost-benefit considerations at higher educational stages.

Conversely, other scholars (e.g., Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010; Nash, 2005, 2006; Stocké, 2007) criticized the overemphasis on secondary effects, asserting that primary effects are far more significant in explaining social disparities in access to education. This is because, when quantifying primary effects simply as academic performances, researchers tend to overlook the fact that it is actually differences in cognitive habitus resulting from early childhood socialization in classified family environments that contribute to differences in academic achievement (Nath, 2005, 2006). Given that cognitive habitus continuously impacts individual actions, we cannot simply identify an educational decision as "purely rational" (Nath, 2005, p. 288) when variance in cognitive schema is assumed to be controlled. As Stocké (2007) critiqued, secondary effects posited by RCT fall short of explaining education inequality, because "class inequality in educational outcomes is obviously not mainly the result of rational decision-making" (p. 516).

Whilst there are valid arguments on both sides, the findings of this study partially confute both perspectives. The significance of primary effects in this study indicates that achievement-related inequality arising from primary effects continues to play a non-negligible role in students' educational decision-making, even though students are at a high level of educational transition point (i.e., Grade 12). However, despite the significance,

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primary effects, indeed, contribute lesser to educational inequality than secondary effects (see Figure 5.1). It can be argued that both primary and secondary effects are crucial in explaining educational inequality through decision-making. Scholars should not refrain from isolating primary effects from secondary effects when analyzing educational inequality through the lens of RCT, irrespective of students' current educational stage.

In terms of the secondary effects of social origin, the multivariate analysis highlights the decisive roles of anticipated English learning benefits and family social capital in influencing high school students' choices for both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities. For one thing, privileged students were more likely to realize the potential benefits of English learning for future educational and career advancement, which might be due to their higher levels of educational perceptions and cognitive shcema shaped by the academically enriched and resource-rich environments provided by their families (see Section 9.2.3.1). For another, under the DRP, they tended to have more family social capital to obtain various English learning resources, even including many underground one-on-one or home tutoring resources as some scholars (e.g., Jin & Sun, 2022; Xue & Li, 2023; Yang et al., 2024) have implied. Arguably, forward-looking learning benefit considerations and the adequate possession of social capital appear to serve as a threshold for engagement in out-of-school English learning activities, which inevitably excludes underprivileged families.

Another notable commonality between the two types of choices is the insignificant effects of the motive of social status maintenance, indicating that there are no differences in students'

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educational aspirations for avoiding downward social mobility according to their family ESCS. Although some prior studies (e.g., Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010; Stocké, 2007) have challenged the RRA mechanism of RCT by arguing that students from advantaged social backgrounds are comparatively less concerned with maintaining their current socioeconomic positions, the statistics observed in this study are consistent with those of Bachsleitner et al. (2018) and Müller and Klein (2023), empirically reaffirming the assumption of RRA that all individuals from different social classes are equally concerned with social mobility.

It is true that, despite exhibiting comparable academic abilities, children from less financially advantaged backgrounds tend to take up less ambitious and expensive educational options than their more advantaged counterparts (Goldthorpe, 2007; Jackson, 2012; Jakob & Combet, 2020), because maintaining a lower socioeconomic status in this meritocratic society requires less education than maintaining a higher one. However, this does not mean that children from less advantaged backgrounds undervalue education. Rather, this study argues that since students' motives of social status maintenance do not substantially contribute to status differentials in out-of-school English learning choices, we have reason to believe that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds possess a desire to achieve personal educational goals through educational decision-making that is equally strong as that of their advantaged counterparts. The constrained educational choices of lower-class students are likely attributable to other factors (see Section 9.2.3.3).

What differentiates the two types of choices is that ETP choices were particularly influenced

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by students' English learning policy stance and their perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning. This finding empirically validates prior studies (e.g., Jin & Sun, 2022; Yin & Lai, 2021; Yuan, 2022), demonstrating that the DRP might have paradoxically provoked students' resistance to the policy, thereby exacerbating their educational anxiety levels and prompting them to increasingly attend EPT for compensate and psychological comfort. As noted by Lee et al. (2010), the rampant of shadow education is because parents and students subjectively perceive it to have positive impacts on academic achievements and develop psychological anxiety about not using it. Once this deeply rooted belief in the power of shadow education has emerged in society, it cannot be simply eradicated (Liu & Bray, 2022). Therefore, DRP's explicit restriction on private tutoring may paradoxically make individuals fear its potentially adverse impacts, perpetuating and exacerbating their psychological anxiety and resistance.

Furthermore, contrary to previous research (e.g., Bachsleitner et al., 2018; Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010; Stocké, 2007), which held that the levels of perceived success probability exert positive effects on students' learning choices, the study argues that anticipated probability of English learning success only positively correlates with other forms of out-of-school English learning choices while it negatively influenced EPT choices.

Overall, the above findings pertaining to ***RQ2*** underscore the importance of social origin in shaping high school students' choices regarding out-of-school English learning, wherein both primary and secondary effects offer insightful and varied perspectives for understanding the

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influence of social origin. However, the extent to which these primary and secondary effects impact EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning activities differs significantly. This variation indicates that the relevance of these effects is also contingent upon factors such as the types of educational choices made.

These insights contribute to our understanding of educational inequality from two distinct perspectives. First, it has been traditionally posited that the strongest determinant of class differentials in shadow education participation and opportunities is family financial resources (Byun, 2010; Byun & Kim, 2010), because private tutoring is a fee-paying learning activity and, thus, wealthier families are more likely to afford the private tutoring service than economically disadvantaged families (Dawson, 2010; Li, 2023; Zwier et al., 2020). However, this study reveals that huge class differentials also exist in students' participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities and that the strongest determinant contributing to such differences might not be family financial resources, because most of these out-of-school learning activities, such as listening to VOA and BBC, are readily available online and at no cost.

Second, despite the Chinese government's efforts to equalize students' out-of-school learning opportunities through the DRP (Lu et al., 2022), the phenomena of unequal educational opportunities and social stratification persist due to social origins. This is the direct evidence that the DRP has not yet completely addressed the inequality of educational opportunities outside school. Unless the government can balance the educational resources among different

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schools, regions, and districts, such inequality can be somewhat alleviated.

9.2.3 Findings to *RQ3*

To adequately address ***RQ3***, this study conducted both statistical analyses (i.e., Chapter 5) to testify the correlations among variables and carried out the in-depth interviews (i.e., Chapters 6 to 8) to further explore how social background characteristics differentially influenced high school students' educational choices among different social strata.

The relationship between family social origins and children's educational outcomes has long been a significant area of inquiry, with the question of "why" these causal effects remain critical. Different studies have provided varying explanations. The most prevalent explanation is Bourdieu and Passion's (1977) cultural and social reproduction theory, which posits that upper-class families endowed with rich cultural capital can provide their children with resources and experiences that promote educational success. Another popular explanation is home literacy environment. While some studies (Luo et al., 2021; Yeung & King, 2016) held that exposure to the home literacy learning resources is important in enhancing students' language learning outcomes, others (Dong & Chow, 2022; Singh et al., 2022) highlighted that socioeconomic advantages in language acquisition for high SES families arise from specific parental behaviors that maximize language learning outcomes. In other words, effective English learning outcomes depend more on parental involvement with literacy resources than on the mere possession of those resources.

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To explore these dynamics of social origin more thoroughly from both perspectives, this study integrated three aspects of social origin: *family cultural atmosphere*, *parents' educational philosophy and aspirations*, and *home English learning resources*. In line with the argument of Dickson et al. (2016) that many causal effects originate from and are transmitted through unobservable familial factors, such as "parenting style, ethos, and values" (p. 187), the findings of this study reveal a complex and dynamic interplay of unobservable factors in collectively contributing to the diverse educational decision-making process of students from different social classes.

These class-related influences encompass not only observable factors, such as parental income and educational degree, but also unobservable elements, including individuals' early family cultural experience, home literacy environments, parenting style, previous learning experiences, learning habits and interest, psychological factors, and so forth. Collectively, these influences can have a profound and lasting impact on children's educational decisions throughout their lives. In the subsequent sections, I discuss how these factors dynamically shape the out-of-school English learning choices of students from different social strata.

9.2.3.1 Upper-class students

Regarding upper-class students, this study confirms that growing up in a positive home environment with a culturally rich atmosphere, parents' open-minded and progressive educational philosophy, as well as ample English learning resources, can facilitate students' proactive attitudes in educational pursuits and English language learning decision-making.

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As illustrated in Chapter 6, through the process of “creating”, “transmitting”, as well as “absorbing and applying” family cultural capital, upper-class students in their formative years acquired literate cultural capital and effective learning habits not only through the indirect and unintentional observation and imitation of their parents’ literacy-related behaviors, but also through direct participation in diverse cultural interactions and home literacy activities with their parents, such as shared reading, parental literacy teaching, exposure to English learning activities, and engagement in cultural activities, etc. Many scholars (e.g., Burgess et al., 2002; van Tonder et al., 2019; Yeung & King, 2016) conceptualized the former “indirect” learning as “passive” or “informal” home literacy learning while the latter “direct” learning as “active” or “formal” home literacy learning. In this study, these two forms of learning both existed in upper-class families, whereas they were rarely observed together in middle- and lower-class families.

Moreover, the parenting approach adopted by upper-class families tended to be more future-oriented, characterized by a greater emphasis on long-term competency development rather than solely prioritizing immediate objectives such as enhancing examination performance. This inclination is reflected in the decision-making processes of upper-class students, who tended to prioritize future language acquisition and career advancement over merely improving their examination results in English language learning.

Growing up in such a home environment, upper-class students’ educational decision-making

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tends to be more *future-oriented*, more *intrinsically motivated*, and *less risk-averse*. For one thing, influenced by parents' open-minded and progressive educational philosophy, upper-class students' subjective cost-benefit considerations regarding English language learning choices, whether EPT or other forms of out-of-school English learning activities, extended beyond mere preparation for the *Gaokao* but, instead, focused on enriching language learning abilities, facilitating future career readiness, and addressing personal interests, with test preparation serving only as a secondary goal.

Traditionally, the definition of private tutoring has always been characterized by "privateness, supplementation (either for remedial purposes or enhancement), and academic subjects" (Yung & Bray, 2017, p. 96). Therefore, the predominant rationale for engaging in tutoring has been perceived as "improving students' ability to take high-stakes examinations" (Liu, 2012, p. 47) or "supplementing students' learning of academic subjects at school (Yung, 2019, p. 120). However, this study reveals that this traditional definition is increasingly inadequate for upper-class students, who are now pursuing a broader array of objectives in their engagement with academic private tutoring.

Furthermore, the content of upper-class students' EPT lessons is no longer exclusively aligned with high-stakes examinations or standard school academic subjects, as in the case of Yummelia, who began studying for CET and IELTS courses in advance; or Bobby, whose one-on-one English tutoring was focusing on reading classic literature, appreciating poetry, and reading the Bible.

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Previous research has often portrayed the academic lives of senior high school students in China as "focusing their energy exclusively on the *Gaokao*" (Guo, 2022, p. 1976), so as to meet the "daunting prospect of the *Gaokao*" (Liu & Helwig, 2022, p. 667). This has led to the prevailing preconceived notion that Chinese senior high school students uniformly prioritized *Gaokao* preparation within both mainstream and shadow education. However, the implementation of the DRP has reshaped this perception. This study indicates that, at least among certain upper-class students, the exclusive emphasis on *Gaokao* preparation is no longer the norm. Instead, their motivations for participating in EPT and their tutoring content extend beyond the *Gaokao* and the conventional school curriculum. A quote from Liu (2012) precisely describes the current situation of tutoring for upper-class students:

> In the past, cram schooling helped students gain entry to a better school by improving their abilities for taking tests on academic subjects, but now it plays a much more diversified role in students' daily lives. Perhaps the prime goal of attending cram schools is to increase knowledge, but it is irrefutable that students from different educational levels who attend cram schools have different objectives. Furthermore, the breadth of material taught is increasingly being diversified. (p. 46)

For another, although students from all three social classes were equally concerned with downward social mobility, upper-class students exhibited a comparatively lower degree of risk aversion in relation to the external uncertainties such as the DRP. Specifically, despite

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their dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed on EPT, they did not experience heightened educational anxiety. This is not only because their EPT choices were largely unrelated to the *Gaokao*, which rendered the DRP's impacts minimal, but also because they tended to possess ample family social capital to pursue alternative educational pathways (e.g., studying abroad) to maintain academic advantages. As such, they were more financially and socially insulated from uncertain environmental influences. Many previous studies (e.g., Ji, 2022; Xue & Li, 2023) argued that wealthy families have hidden ways under the DRP to secure their children's educational edges, and this study has provided empirical evidence for such argument, testifying that the DRP has not yet addressed educational inequality outside school.

Upper-class students exhibit a distinctive form of rationality characterized by expansive epistemic horizons and strategic instrumental choices. Their epistemic rationality is shaped by early and sustained exposure to diverse cultural capital, fostering a broad, future-oriented mindset that transcends examination-oriented learning, enabling them to perceive education as a means for long-term competency development, career readiness, and personal enrichment rather than mere test preparation. Their instrumental rationality reflects this privileged epistemic foundation. Unlike middle- and lower-class students, whose educational decisions are often constrained by immediate academic pressures, upper-class students strategically leverage their advantages to pursue a wider array of goals without significant risk aversion. Policy disruptions like the DRP minimally affect them, as their abundant social and financial capital allows alternative pathways (e.g., international education) to sustain their advantages. Thus, their rationality operates within a self-reinforcing cycle of privilege:

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expansive cultural capital enables long-term, intrinsic motivation, which in turn facilitates instrumental choices that further consolidate their elite status.

Ultimately, upper-class rationality exemplifies how structural advantages translate into cognitive and strategic freedoms, allowing them to navigate education not as a high-stakes competition, but as an opportunity for curated self-actualization. This underscores the persistent inequality in rational adaptation: where lower-class rationality is defensive and middle-class rationality is anxious, upper-class rationality remains aspirational and assured, insulated by the very structures that constrain others.

9.2.3.2 Middle-class students

Regarding middle-class students, the distinct characteristic observed in this study is their *utilitarian*, *goal-oriented*, and *anxiety-driven* nature of educational decision-making. These traits are inextricably related to their family social origins where parents typically hold high academic expectations, provide examination-oriented English learning resources, and highly value academic excellence. Such achievement-oriented parenting styles where middle-class parents make "deliberate and sustained effort" to stimulate children's development have been termed by (Lareau, 2002) as "concerted cultivation" (p. 773). Growing up in such a home environment, middle-class students often engage in a variety of organized and commercially driven academic activities from a young age, resulting in limited leisure time at home during the day (Ball, 2010). However, this educational approach often features a high level of stress, competition, and anxiety (Zhang, 2020) and, thus, may consciously or unconsciously impose

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great academic pressure on middle-class students as they navigate their educational decisions. This dynamic not only cultivates a heightened sense of competition among these middle-class children compared to their peers but also leads them to "inherit" their parents' anxieties regarding social mobility at an earlier stage in their development.

As shown in this study, for one thing, middle-class students' subjective cost-benefit considerations were highly examination-oriented, with strong utilitarian motivations to achieve academic success in the *Gaokao* and to realize upward social mobility. One notable example is that the majority of middle-class students from both schools not only prioritized the instrumental benefits of English learning but also highly valued examination-oriented English education at school. Such distinct differences in motivations between middle-class and upper-class students suggest that while many upper-class counterparts are able to engage with the language learning activities in a more proactive, meaningful, and enjoyable way, middle-class students, however, are trapped in a cycle of anxiety and pressure driven by the learning demands of the *Gaokao*. For another, middle-class students were more susceptible to attitudinal factors to the DRP compared to the other two social strata, largely expressing policy disapproval and heightened educational anxiety. This drives them to seek additional academic support through the utilization of family social capital, thereby maintaining their superior competitiveness in English learning.

According to Ball (2010), in the context of increased regional and global competition for jobs, middle-class families' pursuits for success and competitive advantage have led to their

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anxieties about social reproduction, which makes them increasingly rely on “qualifications and other forms of symbolic capital to address and assuage these fears” (p. 160). Such anxiety regarding social reproduction is also referred to by Newman (1993, cited in Lareau, 2002, p. 771) as “uncertainty toward economic futures”. This uncertainty compels middle-class families to invest heavily in educational resources and extracurricular learning activities, often resulting in a frantic race to secure educational competitiveness for their children and to reproduce social advantages (Gupta, 2020; Koo, 2016). As a consequence, the emphasis on obtaining prestigious qualifications may overshadow other essential aspects of long-term personal development, such as social skills and emotional well-being, potentially leading to a narrow definition of success that prioritizes academic achievement above all else.

As noted by Yu et al. (2022, p. 8), middle-class families tend to have both a psychological need for “upper class envy” to motivate themselves to achieve upward social mobility and a psychological avoidance of “lower class fears” to distance themselves from low-quality educational resources. This duality creates a complex dynamic where aspirations for upward mobility are fueled by a desire to emulate the lifestyles of the upper class while simultaneously fostering a disdain for the perceived deficiencies of lower socioeconomic groups. As such, they embody what Zhang (2020) characterized as “the most anxious and ambitious” (p. 396) social stratum: a demographic that perpetually navigates the pressures of competition and the fear of downward mobility. This relentless pursuit not only exacerbates their anxiety but also contributes to a culture of comparison and insecurity within the middle class, wherein self-worth is increasingly measured against the achievements of others rather

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than intrinsic values or personal fulfillment. This phenomenon is precisely manifested through middle-class families' unanimous belief that "the *Gaokao* is the only way out", as observed in Chapter 6.

In this context, it is reasonable to assert that the educational anxiety experienced by middle-class students is a product of social and cultural influences, especially prevalent in Confucian-heritage societies where meritocratic ideals are dominant (Bray & Lykins, 2012; Feng, 2021). This type of anxiety within the middle class has been a longstanding issue that is unlikely to be alleviated simply by implementing burden-reduction initiatives like the DRP; rather, such policies may paradoxically exacerbate anxieties through the aforementioned psychological phenomenon (see Section 8.5) known as the "white bear problem" (Wegner et al., 1987). In essence, although the DRP is intended to reduce academic stress, its implementation serves as a critical "driving force" or "mediating factor", inadvertently amplifying the entrenched educational anxieties and credentialism among middle-class families.

From the perspective of epistemic and instrumental rationality, middle-class students' educational behaviors reveal a complex and arguably constrained form of rationality, shaped profoundly by their social positioning. Their actions exhibit a heightened instrumental rationality, characterized by meticulously calculated cost-benefit analyses focused overwhelmingly on examination success (notably the *Gaokao*) and the acquisition of credentials as means for upward social mobility. This manifests in their prioritization of

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examination-oriented learning, strategic utilization of family social capital for academic advantage, and intense engagement with commercially driven educational activities.

However, this instrumental focus, while seemingly logical within their perceived competitive landscape, is inextricably intertwined with significant epistemic distortions. Their understanding of educational possibilities, risks, and pathways is driven by pervasive anxiety – a direct inheritance of parental fears regarding social reproduction ("uncertainty toward economic futures") and the aforementioned dual psychology of "upper class envy" and "lower class fears" . This anxiety-driven epistemic lens narrows their conception of success to academic credentials alone, fosters intense policy disapproval when initiatives like the DRP threaten their competitive strategies. Consequently, while their actions demonstrate a clear instrumental logic aimed at specific goals, the epistemic foundation upon which these goals and strategies are built – saturated with competition anxiety and a fear of downward mobility – potentially undermines their overall rationality. Their relentless pursuit, driven by deep-seated anxieties, restricts their ability to engage meaningfully or proactively with learning, overlooks holistic development, and locks them into a stressful cycle where the very strategies adopted to secure advantage perpetuate their anxieties and constrain their broader understanding of educational value and life success.

Thus, while their actions may be instrumentally rational, the pervasive anxiety influencing their understanding undermines the idea of fully realized rationality, suggesting they may have diminished overall rationality compared to peers less affected by social mobility

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pressures. Their rationality is ultimately constrained and distorted by the very social forces they navigate.

9.2.3.3 Lower-class students

In line with previous studies (Samuell, 2024; Wu & Tarc, 2024), this study highlights lower-class students' inferior educational situations. Such inferiority, in this study, is manifested through lower-class students' *constrained*, *laid-back*, and *more risk-averse* educational decision-making.

The findings indicate that, compared to students from higher social strata, lower-class parents were more likely to adopt a free-range parenting style, characterized by lower academic expectations and diminished levels of parental involvement in their children's education. As noted by Liu and Bray (2022), rural lower-class families tend to have much more limited resources for concerted cultivation and intensive mothering. Lareau (2002) described this free-range parenting style adopted by lower-class families as the "accomplishment of natural growth" (p. 749), emphasizing a focus on the healthy development of children rather than on talent cultivation. While this parenting approach allows for greater independence and self-sufficiency in children, it simultaneously fosters a sense of constraint.

On the one hand, due to limited parental literacy and a lack of strategic planning for talent development from an early age, this study shows that lower-class students often developed low needs for self-actualization in their English learning pursuits. As argued by Wu and Tarc

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(2024), lower-class students, constrained by their class orientation, may be unaware of the globalized nature of the living and working environment in China, which increasingly demands cross-cultural communication skills facilitated by proficiency in English. Consequently, their cost-benefit considerations regarding out-of-school English learning were narrowly focused on preparing for the *Gaokao*; they rarely contemplated the future utility or intrinsic value of learning English, with some perceiving it as devoid of practical benefits.

On the other hand, lower-class students frequently encounter a variety of challenges due to their parents' inability to offer sufficient support and resources, which adversely affects their educational decision-making. These challenges encompass: 1) a deficiency in economic capital, characterized by financial constraints and limited access to English language learning materials, 2) a lack of cultural capital, evidenced by insufficient cultural goods, such as literary books, and limited exposure to culturally enriching experiences, and 3) a shortfall in social capital, reflected in inadequate familial social networks..

While economic capital can still be attainable for lower-class families, albeit often through the arduous process of borrowing money from relatives or friends (Wu, 2012), social capital frequently exhibits significant class bias, as social networks tend to be "homogeneous with respect to class" (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 344). Consequently, lower-class families are less likely to have friends or acquaintances in positions of power or influence that can provide them with necessary educational information or expertise, which limits their capacity to navigate educational systems effectively, especially under the DRP. Moreover, compared to

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economic capital which acts as a direct and visible mechanism in shaping educational inequality (Wu & Wang, 2025), cultural capital operates through a more subtle mechanism of intergenerational transmission and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986). In this context, lower-class students face significant challenges in acquiring substantial cultural capital, not only because of their parents' relatively low educational qualifications and families' limited cultural resources but also due to a significant deficiency in parental involvement in fostering daily literacy and supporting school-related learning. As highlighted in Section 7.4.4, the inflexible and demanding work schedules of low-income parents deprive them of the time and energy necessary to engage in their children's cultural learning activities and educational endeavors. Barg (2019) argues that "economic resources are closely linked to time resources, as they allow parents to, for instance, hire childcare services, cover transportation expenses for school-related activities, and purchase materials required to support school events" (p. 15). Consequently, unlike their upper- and middle-class counterparts, cultural capital in the form of parental active engagement in children's educational and cultural activities remains largely inaccessible to lower-class students.

These obstacles, stemming from their family socioeconomic backgrounds, often result in lower-class students subconsciously internalizing feelings of "powerlessness and frustration" (Lareau, 2002, p. 753), which, in turn, affects their self-perception and aspirations and ultimately promotes them to seek educational pathways that are characterized by lower ambition, reduced costs, and diminished risk. Arguably, the interplay of limited support and resources inherently creates a cycle of disadvantage that constrains the educational choices of

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lower-class students.

In this context, two distinct reactions emerged among lower-class students in response to the DRP. The first kind of reaction, exemplified by students like Reggie, was characterized by a misguided belief that educational inequality had been effectively eradicated. Consequently, these students expressed strong support for the DRP, perceiving it as an equalizer to facilitate equal educational opportunities and alleviating their anxiety regarding academic performance. This optimistic outlook may stem from a lack of awareness about the complexities of educational inequality, leading them to overlook the structural barriers that persist despite policy changes.

The second type of reaction, illustrated by students such as Zoe, involved a recognition that the DRP had entirely eliminated their sole means of accessing affordable tutoring. This realization engendered feelings of inferiority, negativity, and frustration, particularly upon discovering that their wealthier peers were engaging in costly underground one-on-one tutoring sessions. Yung (2020a) has previously found that underprivileged students can eventually move socially upward by achieving good academic performance through investment in private tutoring. However, the DRP has effectively restricted this pathway. The circumstances facing lower-class students under the DRP highlight the persistent divide between socioeconomic classes, fostering a sense of inequity that undermines lower-class students' educational aspirations and reinforces their feelings of inadequacy. As argued by Zhang and Chen (2022), the DRP not only fails to reduce the psychological and academic

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pressure on underprivileged children to attend extracurricular training but also exacerbates their feelings of inferiority as a result of existing class disparities.

Examined through the dual lenses of epistemic and instrumental rationality, lower-class students' educational decision-making manifests as a highly contextualized rationality shaped by structural constraints. Their instrumental rationality is practical and survival-oriented: they focus on the *Gaokao* as their most viable path to upward mobility, avoid risky educational investments, and adjust their expectations based on what is realistically available to them. Such cost-benefit calculations grounded in material realities constitute a rational alignment with survival logic, affirming that despite resource limitations, these students exhibit cognitive adaptability to their circumstances. Unlike middle-class students, who are driven by competition and anxiety or upper-class students who have more freedom to explore learning for personal growth, lower-class students make calculated decisions based on necessity rather than aspiration.

Nevertheless, this instrumental rationality operates within profound epistemic constraints: fractures in family sociocultural capital and the "accomplishment of natural growth" parenting model (Lareau, 2002) objectively narrow their educational horizons. Their comprehension of English's global utility remains underdeveloped, their awareness of hidden educational barriers is limited, and their interpretations of the DRP falls into misjudgments, either viewing it naively as an equalizing solution or despairing over the elimination of affordable tutoring avenues. This epistemic framework stems from class-homogeneous

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information networks and the internalization of chronic "powerlessness", culminating in risk-averse, conservative decision-making patterns.

9.2.4 Summary of findings to the research questions

Table 9.1 summarizes the findings pertaining to the three questions. In conclusion, the above findings reveal two primary mechanisms driving educational inequality through decision-making processes. First, disparities in rational mindsets underpinning cost-benefit calculations contribute significantly to educational inequality. Compared to those future-oriented upper-class counterparts who actively pursue out-of-school English learning opportunities for self-competency enrichment and to those anxious yet ambitious middle-class peers who are strongly motivated to remediate academic English performances in the *Gaokao* through out-of-school English learning opportunities, lower-class students seem to be more laid-back, demotivated, and risk-averse.

Second, disparities in families' strategic responses to objective environments also play a crucial role. While affluent families actively maintain access to high-quality tutoring and other forms of learning resources and may even try to "jump" out of the *Gaokao* system (e.g., studying abroad) to deal with the uncertainty and anxiety brought about by the DRP, disadvantaged families not only face both financial barriers and information gaps to accessing these learning resources under the DRP, but also demonstrate a practical and survival-oriented rationality toward educational decision-making. Thus, although the DRP has partially equalized educational opportunities by restricting private tutoring in the

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Table 9.1

Reconceptualization of RCT according to findings of research questions

Research questions	Key findings	Theoretical conceptualization
1. What types of out-of-school English learning activities do high school students choose and why?	● A focus on large-group EPT but with a neglect of English speaking exercises. ● Engagement in EPT primarily for remedial assistance while participation in other forms of out-of-school English learning activities mainly for enrichment.	
2. In general, how does social origin shape high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects?	● Social origin as a core variable exhibiting a positive association with out-of-school English learning choices. ● Significantly negative primary effects on EPT, contrasted with significantly positive primary effects on other forms of out-of-school English learning. ● Heterogeneous secondary effects: 1) Significantly positive effects of anticipated English learning benefits and family social capital on both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning. 2) Significantly negative effects of anticipated probability of English learning success on EPT, contrasted with significantly positive effects on other forms of out-of-school English learning. 3) Insignificant effects of status maintenance motives on	● Primary effects in the form of academic performance play a non-negligible role in out-of-school English learning choices, even at a higher educational transition point.

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	both EPT and other forms of out-of-school English learning. 4) Only EPT choices were significantly affected by English learning policy stance and perceived policy-induced anxiety in English learning.	
3. By differentiating students into upper, middle, and lower social classes: (1) How does social origin differentially shape high school students' out-of-school English learning choices through its primary and secondary effects? (2) What factors related to social origin help to explain the inequality in educational decision-making among the three social classes?	● Similar primary effects across social classes: negative impacts on EPT but positive impacts on other forms of English learning within each social class. ● Heterogeneous, complex, and dynamic secondary effects across social classes, mediated by: 1) ***Tangible disparities*** arising from observable factors of social origins (e.g., parental income, educational degree, employment). 2) ***Intangible disparities*** arising from unobservable factors of social origins (e.g., home literacy environments, parenting style, individuals' early family cultural experience, previous learning experiences, learning habits and interest, family social/interpersonal connections, psychological factors, etc.)	● The dynamics of both observable and unobservable factors stemming from social origins differentially influence students' cost-benefit calculations and policy reactions across different social classes, thereby further determining varying out-of-school English learning choices.

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marketplace, education opportunities remain deeply stratified.

These two disparities are not only determined by observable factors, such as parental income, but are also inextricably shaped by unobservable factors linked to family socioeconomic characteristics, such as family literacy and cultural environment. This raises a significant question for consideration: if the lower-class families' economic conditions and resources were transformed overnight so that they equaled those of the upper- and middle-class families, would they make similar educational choices as well? This study provides a preliminary answer to this question: even with equivalent economic resources, students may still make divergent educational choices due to differences in their mindsets, intrinsic motivations, and educational aspirations.

9.3 Reconceptualization of the theoretical framework

Based on the findings outlined above, this section discusses the shortcomings of RCT and attempts to reconceptualize the theoretical framework.

First, in line with previous studies (Goldthorpe, 2007; Thomson, 2016), this study challenges the assumption of "rationality" inherent in RCT. In the context of the DRP where private tutoring has been strictly restricted, the educational choices made by lower-class students highlight that what is deemed as the "rational" optimal choice by RCT may, in reality, be the only feasible option available to underprivileged students due to resource constraints and inadequate information. As noted by Stocké (2007), the process of educational decision-

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making is in fact influenced by different information search and processing strategies, whereas RCT only considers "optimal strategy" (p. 516). This study shows that the optimal rational approach might be more applicable to upper- and middle-class students, who typically engage in long-term educational planning to make well-informed choices based on rational calculations and possess ample resources and information to navigate the impacts of educational policies effectively. In contrast, lower-class students face substantial barriers that impede their capacity to engage in out-of-school tutoring or other enrichment activities under the DRP. Consequently, rather than making well-informed rational choices, these students frequently find themselves with no viable educational alternatives at all.

Second, this study emphasizes the necessity of examining intrinsic motivations in cost-benefit evaluations, particularly among upper-class students. Traditional applications of RCT have predominantly framed individuals' subjective cost-benefit assessments as extrinsically motivated, aimed at advancing educational attainment and securing future occupational and economic opportunities (Thomson, 2016). As a result, many prior studies (e.g., Bachsleitner et al., 2018; Becker & Hecken, 2009; Gabay-Egozi et al., 2010) have only focused on instrumental or extrinsic motivations related to educational choices while overlooking intrinsic motivations such as personal interests and self-competency improvement. This study contends that intrinsic motivations, particularly those rooted in social value orientations, must be considered when analyzing students' educational decision-making processes within the framework of RCT. By incorporating these intrinsic motivational factors, a more comprehensive understanding of educational choices can be achieved.

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Finally, this study argues that RCT simply quantifies the determinants of educational choices as primary effects (i.e., academic performance) and secondary effects (i.e., cost-benefit considerations and objective conditions), while overlooking the intricate interplay of unobservable elements inherent in social origins (e.g., parents' educational values and individual previous learning experiences, etc.) in influencing educational choices. In essence, although primary and secondary effects, indeed, contribute to explaining disparities in educational choices, the unobservable sociocultural factors that sustain intangible inequities must not be disregarded, as they collectively fall outside the simplified analytical framework of RCT. The inherent complexity of educational choices cannot be adequately captured within the current RCT paradigm.

This theoretical limitation is corroborated by Lörz et al. (2016), who asserted that the existing framework of RCT remains inadequate for explaining social differences in educational choices, because the subjective cost-benefit considerations and performance-related factors are "unlikely to be isolated from students' previous experiences and social background characteristics" (p. 156). Correspondingly, Entrich (2025) also concluded that rather than simply reducing the decision-making process to a quantification of student academic achievement and associated rational cost-benefit calculations, dynamic factors behind this family decision related to intergenerational transmission, psychological factors, and individual characteristics should also be taken into account. Together, these critiques underscore the necessity of transcending RCT's rigid paradigm to account for the

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multidimensional, socially embedded nature of educational choices.

The aforementioned three limitations underscore the necessity for an extension and refinement of the RCT. Therefore, expanding from Figure 2.2, I have added unobservable factors resulting from social differentials to show how out-of-school English learning choices are determined by students from different social strata. As Figure 9.2 shows, the three identified aspects of family social origin in Chapter 6 – *family cultural atmosphere and home literacy environment*, *parents' educational philosophy and aspirations*, and *home English learning resources* – collectively shape a multitude of unobservable individual factors underpinning intergenerational transmission that may indirectly influence students' educational decision-making. The dotted lines illustrate exactly how these unobservable factors contribute to intangible inequalities through subjective cost-benefit calculations and reactions to objective conditions.

On the one hand, unobservable factors associated with intergenerational transmission shape diverse rational mindsets, which, in turn, determine students' subjective calculations of costs and benefits associated with educational choices. Arguably, the notion of "rationality", in fact, is inherently context-dependent in the process of intergenerational transmission. Students from privileged social backgrounds are likely to benefit more from these unobservable intergenerational factors, leading to more rational and optimal educational choices. In contrast, due to the lack of intangible resources, such as culturally enriching learning experiences during their formative years, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be less developed and more restricted in their rational thinking, adversely

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impacting their

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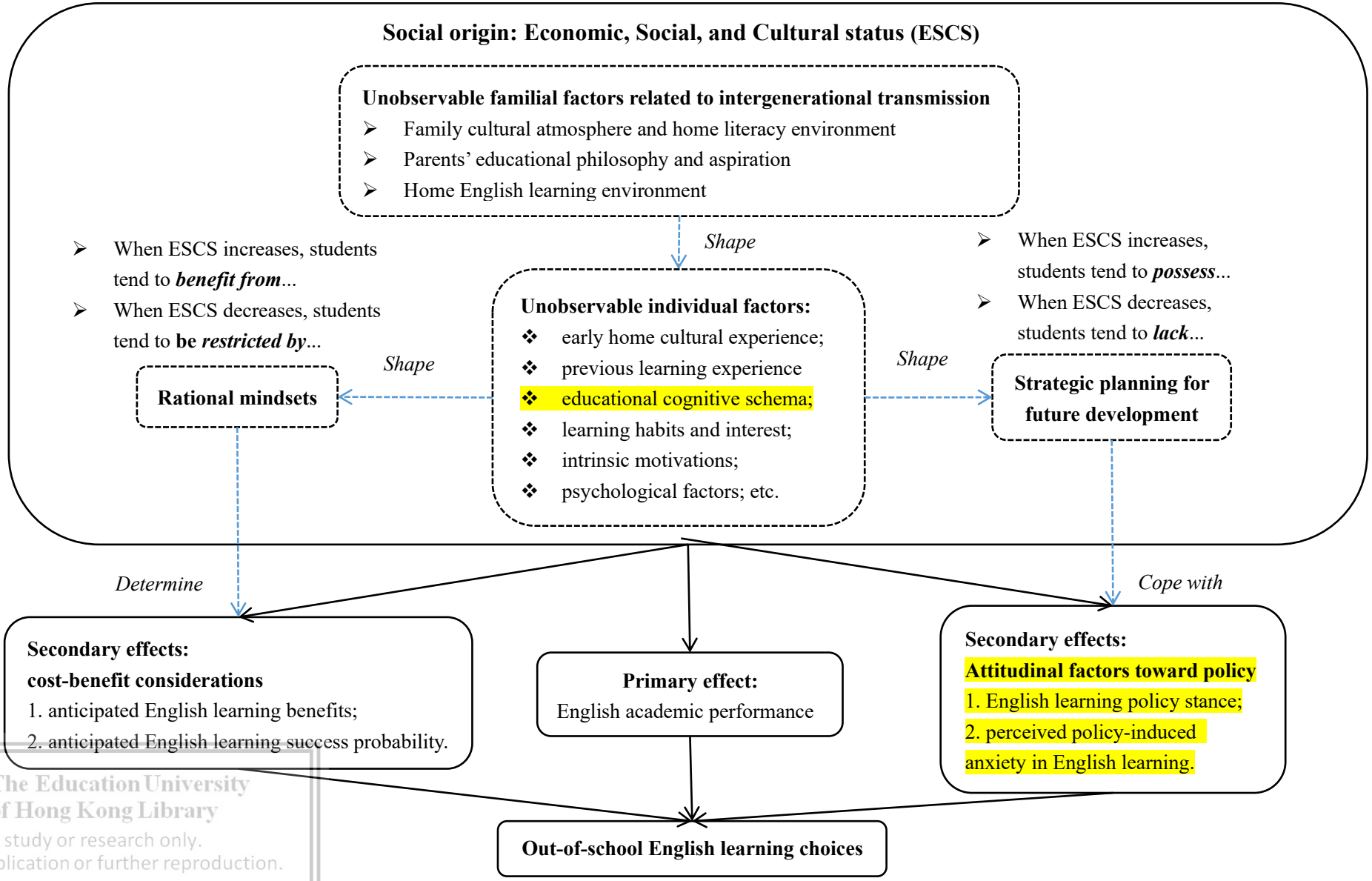
Figure 9.2

Applying RCT to out-of-school English choices of high school students of different social origins



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ability to evaluate educational opportunities rationally.

On the other hand, these unobservable factors also play a crucial role in shaping students' strategic educational planning, which can help mitigate the negative effects of objective conditions, such as policy changes. While privileged families are able to devise strategic alternatives to counteract adverse policy impacts, underprivileged families often lack the necessary capacity and resources to sustain their educational advantages in the face of such external influences.

All in all, by incorporating a broader range of factors, this refined approach highlights the disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes among students from different social strata. It suggests that while RCT traditionally assumes rationality in decision-making, this rationality is often conditioned by social contexts and home environments that privilege upper-class groups over others. Moreover, by integrating policy influence, this approach argues that lower-class students, in fact, face compounded challenges that limit their ability to navigate educational choices effectively, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities.

9.4 Implications

The findings of this study reveal significant disparities in educational decision-making processes among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting the complex interplay of tangible and intangible inequalities in educational decision-making. All of these factors emerge as critical in shaping students' educational trajectories. As a result,

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these insights not only illuminate the inherent inequalities within the educational system but also necessitate a reassessment of existing practices and policies. In the subsequent sections, I discuss the implications for advancing mainstream education and enhancing the DRP framework.

9.4.1 Implications for mainstream education

Mainstream and shadow education have historically functioned as two parallel and mutually independent educational systems through which, students acquire knowledge to fulfill their aspirations. However, both educational systems have been shown to exacerbate inequalities that stem from familial socioeconomic backgrounds.

Regarding the mainstream education system, numerous prior studies (e.g., Abrahams, 2024; Schmidt et al., 2015) underscore that schools often act as environments where educational disparities are not only perpetuated but also reinforced. This study reveals pronounced disparities in factors such as teaching quality, availability of learning resources, class sizes, and instructional methodologies between the two schools (i.e., School A and School B), highlighting the deeply entrenched social issue of the highly inequitable distribution of educational resources within Chinese society. Due to primary effects, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have fewer academic abilities and are compelled to enroll in lower-ranking schools. The substantial differences between elite and lower-ranking schools further exacerbate academic inequalities by providing students with markedly distinct educational opportunities, thereby contributing to the entrenchment of social class

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stratification.

Moreover, research has indicated that curricular differentiation – particularly through school tracking systems that categorize students into various ability groups – also significantly contributes to the intensification of educational inequalities (Oakes, 2005; Schmidt & McKnight, 2012). Since high-achieving students predominantly hail from affluent families, such tracking systems invariably amplify SES disparities. As Ball (2010) aptly notes: "schools are distinctly class-biased, marked by an ingrained 'institutional classism' working systematically through various organizational procedures and teacher expectations for the interests of some and against those of other categories of children" (p. 157).

In terms of the shadow education system, scholars (e.g., Dawson, 2010; Marshall & Fukao, 2019) contended that shadow education is a primary contributor to educational inequality, because wealthier families or those from more privileged backgrounds possess adequate financial resources and are more adept at utilizing supplemental educational resources to access such fee-paying services, thereby widening the gap between different socioeconomic groups. As Bray and Lykins (2012) assert, "shadow education is much less about remedial help for students to keep up with their peers, and much more about competition and creation of differentials" (p. 67). This dynamic can lead to discrimination against students who cannot afford such out-of-school education (Islam et al., 2021; Mahmud & Bray, 2017), further entrenching existing SES disparities.

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In the Chinese context, educational inequalities arising from these two educational systems are particularly pronounced. In the past, the Chinese government has imposed stringent regulations primarily targeting mainstream education, implementing policies aimed at equalizing access to schooling (Tan, 2013; Zhang & Bray, 2018) while exerting significantly less control over shadow education (Liu & Bray, 2022). These policies sought to dismantle tracking within the schooling system and provide equitable learning experiences for students across varying socioeconomic backgrounds. However, despite these initiatives, Zhang and Bray (2018) found that shadow education has effectively undermined the intended impact of school equalization policies through mechanisms of differential access and sorting. In response, China enacted a two-pronged DRP in 2021, aimed at ensuring equitable schooling while simultaneously imposing strict regulations on shadow education, seeking to mitigate the counterproductive effects of shadow education on school equalization initiatives and thereby promoting more equitable educational opportunities.

Regrettably, this study reveals that educational inequality persists despite ongoing governmental oversight of both mainstream and shadow education systems, at least during the high school stage. This persistence is largely attributed to disparities in educational decision-making processes that tend to favor affluent families. According to Liu et al. (2024), while the direct inheritance of social status as a means of transmitting socioeconomic advantages has become less common in modern societies, the indirect transmission of socioeconomic advantages, primarily through educational attainment, remains prevalent. Serving as critical channels for this indirect transmission, mainstream and shadow education

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systems have been consistently utilized by privileged families to sustain their socioeconomic advantages. As shown in Section 8.4, wealthy families were always able to find ways to circumvent equalization policies by accessing alternative educational pathways (e.g., study abroad) and covertly engaging in expensive one-on-one tutoring. Consequently, achieving complete equalization of schooling access or eradicating underground tutoring practices proves to be an exceedingly challenging endeavor.

Since it is challenging to completely regulate the behaviors of privileged families, policymakers should prioritize compensating for the educational disadvantages faced by lower-class students within both mainstream and shadow education systems. First of all, schools, as critical institutions for mitigating disparities (Lörz et al., 2016), must proactively address systemic inequities by expanding access to high-quality resources and tailored academic support for disadvantaged students. This could include integrating free school-based tutoring services to satisfy lower-class needs for shadow education, allocating additional funding to schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions to enhance teacher-student ratios, and providing technological learning tools that assist lower-class students' academic learning.

Moreover, it is essential for schools to provide adequate mental support to underprivileged students. As demonstrated in Section 8.3.2, certain lower-class students experienced confusion and helplessness upon discovering that their upper-class peers were participating in costly one-on-one EPT. This observation aligns with Foley's (2023) research, which indicates

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that lower-class students often experience feelings of inferiority when learning alongside their upper-class counterparts, leading them to subconsciously internalize negative status beliefs and stereotypes about lower-class individuals, thereby ultimately diminishing their learning confidence. Therefore, schools should collaborate with communities to offer psychological support and mentorship, trying to enhance resilience and academic self-efficacy among marginalized learners.

9.4.2 Implications for policymakers

In China, the current policies to address educational inequality have primarily centered around enhancing mainstream education and restricting shadow education. However, these two approaches may not be sufficient to radically address educational inequality.

First of all, while enhancing mainstream schooling can contribute to reducing educational disparities, it is imperative for policymakers to recognize that schools are not the only arenas where reforms are needed to tackle persistent educational inequality. For one thing, disparities in economic resources fundamentally shape unequal access to educational opportunities beyond school, such as access to private tutoring. As discussed in Section 9.2.2, the "economic geography" (Bray, 2023, p. 349) elucidates how structural economic inequities – manifest in urban-rural resource disparities (Sun et al., 2023; Wu & Tarc, 2024) and highly stratified real estate markets (Chiang, 2019; Gong & Sun, 2023) – perpetuate educational opportunity gaps for socioeconomically marginalized rural learners. Therefore, this study aligns with Nath's (2005) argument that sustainable educational equity demands not only

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school reforms but a wider set of policies to eliminate systemic poverty and deprivation.

For another, this research underscores the role of social and cultural capital in perpetuating educational inequality beyond the school context. As Ball (2010) noted, policies focus on schools as the primary venue for addressing achievement inequalities is "naïve and damaging" (p. 163), because students' academic competencies are not merely products of their school environments but are also "socially, culturally, and economically "made up"" (p. 162). This necessitates the importance of addressing the educational inequalities stemming from social relational advantages, income inequalities, and disparities in the home cultural atmosphere.

Second, while this study acknowledges that shadow education is, indeed, another critical area that exacerbates and perpetuates educational inequality, it also argues that the competitive dynamics of shadow education reveal deeper systemic issues underlying educational inequality in Chinese society. Through this study, it can be seen that, despite the DRP restricting the shadow education sector, severe competition in Chinese society remains unmitigated, continuing to manifest itself in "underground and illegal pathways" (e.g., home one-on-one tutoring) or through the pursuit of "other forms of out-of-school learning resources" (e.g., English workshops). Li (2023) has aptly illustrated this point by stating that "the rampant growth of the private tutoring market and the education 'rat race' just mirror inequality from education to income, even to social status. However, even if you break the mirror, the root problems still exist" (p. 11). In other words, the presence of shadow education

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reflects broader societal inequities rather than merely serving as a symptom of educational shortcomings.

Therefore, addressing the entrenched educational inequalities in Chinese society requires a more comprehensive approach that goes beyond equalizing mainstream schooling and regulating shadow education. As shown in Figure 9.3, mainstream education, shadow education, and other forms of out-of-school learning resources collectively constitute integral components of the "education supply" in the market. When students reach critical educational transition periods, such as Grade 12, they need to make corresponding educational choices that align with "talent demand" in the labor market. These choices are shaped not only by a series of complex dynamics related to family origins (as identified in Chapters 6 to 8), but are also determined by the current level of market-supplied education (as exemplified by Schools A and B) as well as the demand for talent in the labor market (as discussed in Chapter 8).

Nonetheless, many of China's existing policies aimed at equalizing education, including the DRP, have only partially addressed inequalities stemming from the market supply of education, primarily mainstream and shadow education, while neglecting to adequately tackle the inequalities arising from educational decision-making and the differentiated demand for talent in the broader labor market. As argued by Liu and Bray (2022), the DRP has only reduced inequalities in educational supply while leaving "many of the underlying forces of social competition" (p. 891) untouched.

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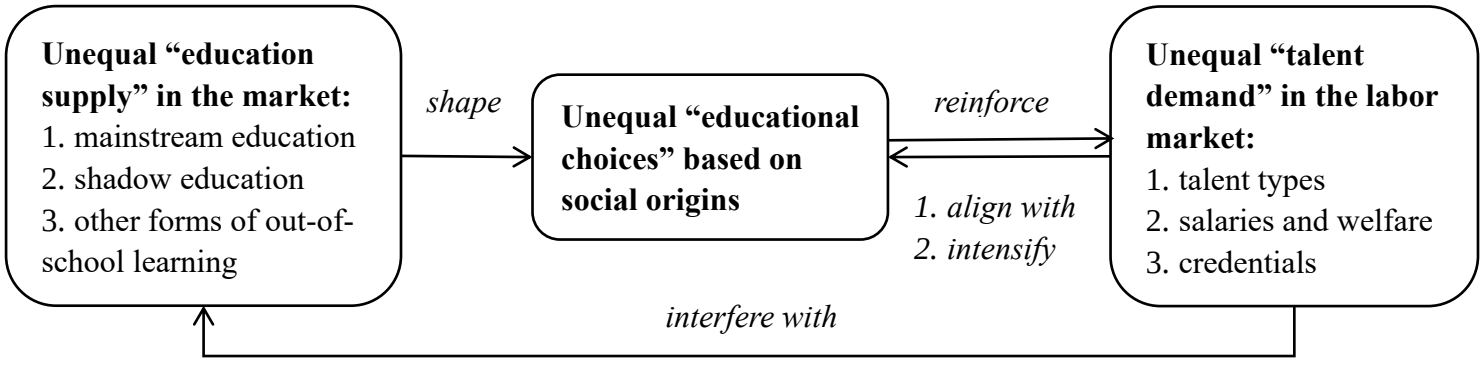
As shown in Figure 9.3, in labor markets characterized by hierarchical talent demand systems – where compensation, benefits, and credential requirements disproportionately favor elite positions – this structural imbalance perpetuates educational inequities through two mutually reinforcing mechanisms. First, this differentiated labor system inevitably contributes to the unequal educational choices of families. Families with elite social status and high educational aspirations will undoubtedly leverage their socioeconomic capital and interpersonal facilities to maintain their superior educational status, effectively aligning their educational choices with the labor market demands for high-skilled professionals. Conversely, socioeconomically disadvantaged families face systemic barriers in accessing such opportunity-hoarding pathways, resulting in stratified educational trajectories that mirror labor market hierarchies.

Figure 9.3

The cycle of educational inequalities in society



Second, such unequal educational choices, in turn, intensify labor market polarization. As Zhang (2020) pointed out, hierarchies and elitism in contemporary China translate to a large extent into "credentials, income inequalities, and status differentiation in the labor market,

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which in turn translates into access to scarce resources" (p. 401). The unequal educational choices not only reflect but actively reconstitute labor market stratification, as the credentials accumulated by elite households through stratified educational choices legitimize their disproportionate access to resources while marginalizing non-elite groups. Meanwhile, this highly stratified talent demand in the labor market will also interfere with the supply of education in society, as evidenced by the proliferation of shadow education, which emerges as a response to these inequalities. In such cases, the unequal education supply, as exemplified by the education quality of School A and School B, undoubtedly shapes unequal educational choices.

It can be argued that inequality is not reproduced by shadow education *per se*; rather, it arises from three interconnected dimensions: unequal supply of educational resources, disparate educational decision-making processes (Entrich, 2015), and the inherent talent demands in the highly stratified labor markets (Entrich & Lauterbach, 2021). Consequently, the vicious cycle of educational inequality is perpetuated through these dynamics. As such, three policy implications are proposed as follows.

First, to better mitigate educational inequality from a market "supply" perspective, the government should not only focus on enhancing mainstream schooling or restricting shadow education but also prioritize equitable access to various other forms of out-of-school learning resources. As shown in this study, other forms of out-of-school English learning opportunities are also significantly stratified among social classes, with wealthier families possessing

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greater access to information and resources that facilitate these learning experiences. Consequently, one potential solution for the government is to establish publicly funded programs that provide underprivileged students with access to high-quality out-of-school learning resources. Additionally, the government can enhance information dissemination regarding available learning opportunities by creating centralized platforms where families can easily access information about free or low-cost educational resources in their communities. By fostering partnerships with non-profit organizations and community groups, the government can further extend the reach of these resources, ensuring that all students have the necessary support to succeed academically.

Second, it is imperative for the state to implement measures aimed at equalizing the social status and remuneration of mental and manual laborers, trying to address the underlying issues of educational inequality from a market "demand" perspective. In China, the substantial treatment gap between mental and manual workers might be the core factor contributing to the excessive academic competition and therefore educational inequality (Ji, 2022; Zhang & Chen, 2022). Specifically, the Chinese government once promulgated a policy stipulating that students who rank in the bottom 50% of the *Zhongkao* can only attend vocational high schools to acquire technical skills (Li, 2023; Zhang & Chen, 2022). However, this policy has received much resistance. This is because students in vocational high schools have minimal chances to attend universities; instead, most graduates typically transition directly into the labor market upon graduation, assuming roles as manual workers with significantly low salaries and limited welfare benefits. Such inferior treatment levels of

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manual workers have led to a profound prejudice against vocational education within Chinese society (Li, 2023; L. Zhang, 2022).

Arguably, only by enhancing the social status and income of manual workers and ensuring their fair compensation can the societal phenomena of academicism and credentialism be gradually dismantled, thereby alleviating educational inequality. If this is not addressed, students may persist in their reluctance to enroll in vocational schools, perpetuating feelings of academic pressure and competitive anxiety without respite. Privileged families, as illustrated in Section 8.4, will continue to leverage their socioeconomic advantages to secure less competitive but more expensive educational pathways for their children, such as attending Sino-foreign universities or pursuing studies abroad, thereby further entrenching existing social and educational disparities.

Finally, since underprivileged students tend to lack adequate social capital to obtain necessary educational support, information, and expertise (Horvat et al., 2003), it is crucial to provide adequate guidance and support for educational decision-making among underprivileged students during critical transition periods. Policymakers should develop targeted programs that offer additional resources and support to underprivileged families, thereby enabling them to make informed educational choices that correspond with market demands. This approach should extend beyond mere financial aid for these families; is must also acknowledge the importance of intangible factors that influence educational decision-making.

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To effectively address the intangible dimensions of educational decision-making, policymakers should prioritize the integration of culturally relevant content in discussions with underprivileged students. This approach aims to equip these students with the essential knowledge and understanding necessary to cultivate critical educational cognitive skills, thereby reducing disparities rooted in socioeconomic backgrounds when they are making educational choices.

Moreover, parental involvement has been proven to have a greater impact on students' educational outcomes than the mere possession of learning resources (Dong & Chow, 2022; Singh et al., 2022). As shown in this study, the involvement of upper-class parents in their children's literacy development and cultural learning activities has significantly contributed to children's formation of early learning aspirations and positive learning habits, even only through the simple act of reading books together. This underscores the importance of prioritizing initiatives aimed at enhancing parental engagement in educational decision-making. To this end, one effective strategy is to establish community outreach programs designed to foster communication between schools and families. Regular meetings, informational sessions, and resources that educate parents about available educational pathways and support services can significantly boost family involvement, thereby effectively helping underprivileged families navigate the educational decision-making process.

9.5 Contributions to knowledge

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This study investigated students' out-of-school English learning choices under the DRP in Mainland China, employing a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews. The findings yield three main contributions: first, they provide empirical insights into the dynamics and relevant issues of out-of-school learning; second, they make empirical contributions to the research of the DRP by uniquely considering high school students' learning experiences; finally, they advance both theoretical and methodological discourse on the application of RCT in educational research. The subsequent discussion delineates these contributions in greater detail.

9.5.1 Out-of-school learning

This study first contributes to the existing literature on educational inequalities by empirically reconsidering the broader spectrum of out-of-school learning resources and their implications for equity in education. Previous studies (e.g., Dawson, 2010; Marshall & Fukao, 2019; Samuell, 2024) have mainly focused on researching the inequalities stemming from shadow education while largely neglecting the role of other forms of out-of-school learning resources in reproducing educational inequalities. Even in the face of restrictions on shadow education, privileged families continue to make decisions to access other forms of out-of-school learning resources as alternatives to uphold their advantageous social positions. This study contributes to our knowledge that the perpetuation of educational inequalities does not originate from shadow education *per se* but rather from the educational decisions that families make concerning their engagement both in shadow education and in other forms of out-of-school learning resources. By highlighting the strategic and rational educational choices made by

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families, this study underscores the need to examine how these decisions influence the educational trajectories of students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Additionally, this study's specific emphasis on English language learning has broadened the empirical research landscape concerning motivations toward out-of-school language education from students' perspective. As outlined in Chapter 2, the motivations for engaging in out-of-school language learning are multifaceted, not only encompassing instrumental purposes, such as acquiring expertise and enhancing future employment prospects (Littlejohn et al., 2016; Pursel et al., 2016), but also including intrinsic motivations, such as personal interest and self-competency enhancement (Chang et al., 2015). Findings in this study highlight that these motivations are also significantly stratified according to students' social origins. Specifically, upper-class students demonstrate a stronger propensity for intrinsic motivation, while their middle-class counterparts exhibit a greater tendency toward instrumentally driven learning orientations. For rural lower-class students, however, they barely have access to information and out-of-school language learning resources. This contribution calls for a deeper examination of the disparities in motivations underlying students' engagement in out-of-school language learning in future studies.

9.5.2 The Double Reduction policy

This study also notably enriches existing literature by uniquely illuminating high school students' out-of-school English learning experiences under the DRP. While research on the DRP has been expanding rapidly in recent years, most empirical research (e.g., Teng et al.,

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2024; Wang et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022) has only focused on compulsory educational stage (i.e., primary and middle schools), while largely overlooking the challenges that have arisen at the high school stage under the DRP.

As shown in this study, the intense competition at the high school level has persisted and, in fact, has been exacerbated by the DRP. The policy has even inadvertently created new forms of inequality within this context. Although high school education is not as stringently regulated by the DRP as primary and middle education, such lack of sufficient regulation has precisely allowed shadow education capital and other forms of educational competitions to flourish at the high school stage. In other words, the DRP, in essence, addresses only the symptoms of the underlying issues rather than their root causes, merely postponing families' competitive pressures from primary and middle schools to high schools.

This can be analogous to the case of South Korea during the 1970s when a large-scale prohibition on private tutoring was accompanied by the implementation of the "high school equalization policy", which tried to equalize compulsory education by abolishing high school entrance examinations and adopting the random lottery enrollment system (Ji, 2022; Kim, 2016). While these initiatives greatly relieved the pressure on teachers and students in primary and middle schools (Lee, 2023), they ultimately did nothing more than defer competition inherent in the educational system to the high school levels, thus making "the examination hell phenomenon which disappeared at the school entry level is now revived at the high school level" (Lee, 2023, p. 641). This is also the case in China now. As elucidated

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by Liu and Bray (2022):

> Although primary and lower secondary education were more equalized under these policies, upper secondary education remained stratified. [...] Observing government efforts in equalizing compulsory education but being aware of increasingly stratified post-compulsory education, parents did not dare to rely only on schools for their children's careers. (pp. 884–886)

As a consequence, familial anxieties have inevitably intensified under the DRP, particularly among middle-class families who feel a pressing need to pursue out-of-school educational resources to ensure their children excel in an increasingly competitive high school environment. This insight uniquely contributes to the academic discourse surrounding the DRP from the perspective of post-compulsory education, illuminating that despite high school education not being the primary focus of the DRP, which primarily targets compulsory education, it nonetheless experiences significant washback effects. These effects exacerbate existing inequalities and amplify educational anxieties at high school stages, underscoring the broader societal and systemic impacts of the policy beyond its intended scope.

Therefore, while it is true that the DRP represents a comprehensive solution to addressing excessive academic pressure, promoting children's healthy development, and curbing increased educational spending at the compulsory educational stage (Shi & Yung, 2025; Xue & Li, 2023), this study also calls for increased attention to the persistent inequalities and

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competitive pressures that manifest at the high school level. Addressing these issues will be essential for achieving the intended outcomes of the DRP and ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all students.

9.5.3 The Rational Choice Theory

This study significantly advances the application of RCT through theoretical refinement and methodological innovation. Theoretically, it addresses a critical gap in existing empirical RCT research by incorporating the role of unobservable dimensions of social origin – a facet largely overlooked in prior studies that predominantly operationalize social origin through observable proxies like parental education, occupation, and income (e.g., Bachsleitner et al., 2018; Lörz et al., 2016; Müller & Klein, 2023; Zimmermann, 2020). Reducing social origin to merely measurable indicators introduces statistical bias and obscures its theoretical complexity. As illustrated in our framework (Figure 9.2), primary and secondary effects of social origin – shaping academic performance, cost-benefit analyses, and policy responses – are fundamentally mediated by intangible factors inherent to students' backgrounds. To reconcile this limitation, we reconceptualize RCT through the lens of "bounded rationality" (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 5), which acknowledges how cognitive constraints, information asymmetries, and time pressures – rooted in social origin – structure decision-making.

This bounded rationality manifests in two interconnected dimensions in my findings. First, bounded epistemic rationality emerges as unobservable social factors (e.g., internalized class-based beliefs or tacit knowledge) constrain students' cognitive maps, distorting perceptions of opportunities, risks, and self-efficacy. For instance, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often exhibit risk-averse, short-term educational choices not due to irrationality but because their epistemic boundaries limit access to objective realities.

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Second, however, such boundaries do not negate instrumental rationality. Within their subjectively constructed realities, students systematically leverage available resources to pursue goals they perceive as maximizing their interests, even when those goals emerge from constrained epistemes. As Quackenbush (2004) emphasizes, instrumental rationality evaluates means-ends coherence, not goal origins. Thus, choices like prioritizing vocational training over university, though shaped by intangible social forces, remain instrumentally rational within actors' contextual horizons. This dual framework resolves a core tension in RCT: it explains stratification patterns while affirming agency within structural constraints, ultimately enhancing RCT's power to model how inequality permeates educational decision-making.

Methodologically, this study challenges the quantitative dominance in RCT research by advocating for mixed-methods approaches as essential for capturing bounded rationality's complexity. Prior empirical work (e.g., Entrich, 2025; Matsuoka, 2018; Thompson, 2016) relies heavily on statistical analyses of observable proxies, while qualitative investigations (e.g., Liu, 2019; Tavares & Cardoso, 2013) remain scarce. This imbalance is untenable given that quantitative metrics alone cannot access the unobservable social processes that bound epistemic rationality, such as how familial narratives shape risk perception, or illuminate the lived logic of instrumentally rational choices under constraints. Our mixed-methods design bridges this gap: quantitative data identify broad patterns (e.g., class-based divergences in responses to policies like the DRP), while qualitative depth exposes how bounded rationality operates. Interview data reveal, for example, how generational stigma distorts cost-benefit calculations, while interviews validate that students' "feasible" choices reflect coherent adaptation to subjectively understood realities. As Edling (2000) argues, quantitative analyses of large-scale data cannot provide substantive explanations because the rational behavior of individuals is not taken adequately, not to mention that individuals do not behave exactly as

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the RCT prescribes. In other words, purely quantitative RCT studies cannot explain deviations from "ideal' rationality, especially when decisions emerge from intangible social boundaries. By centering lived experience, our approach not only mitigates methodological reductionism but also offers a blueprint for studying agency within structural constraints.

Together, these contributions redefine RCT's application in education research. Theoretically, we expand RCT beyond observable metrics by modeling how social origin's intangible dimensions create structurally bounded yet instrumentally functional rationality. Methodologically, we establish mixed methods as indispensable for tracing the epistemic-instrumental interplay in real-world decisions. This integrated framework advances a more dynamic, equitable understanding of how students navigate educational inequity, recentering RCT on human actors rather than abstract axioms.

9.6 Limitations and future research directions

Drawing on RCT, this study aimed to explore high school students' out-of-school English learning choices in Mainland China. Although efforts were made to minimize potential biases and limitations, it is important to acknowledge that certain external factors may still influence the findings, though these limitations do not undermine the empirical validity of the findings.

First, when recruiting participants, a modest but memorable notebook (37 RMB) with my signature was offered as an incentive. While, as discussed in Section 3.8.2, this small gift was not financially burdensome and unlikely to motivate students solely for the reward, it is important to recognize that perceptions of the incentive may vary among students.

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Particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the notebook could have served as a compelling reason to participate, potentially skewing their responses. This is evident in instances where some lower-class students provided vague answers such as “I do not know” or “I have never thought about it”. While these responses might be largely ascribed to horizon-restricted cognitive schema wherein English is rationalized as a transactional credential for immediate academic progression (e.g., *Gaokao*), not as convertible socioeconomic and cultural capital for future development, it is also plausible that some students may have approached the interview with a primary focus on receiving the gift rather than engaging meaningfully in the discussion. While this scenario cannot be entirely controlled, it nonetheless enriches the study by illuminating the diverse responses of students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds when participating in the research. This limitation underscores the necessity for further investigation into how incentives impact participation in educational research.

Second, the geographical focus of the study restricts the applicability of its findings, necessitating caution when generalizing results to other contexts within China. The data were drawn from a single city – Chengdu. It is important to acknowledge that variations in local policies and educational resources across different cities may affect the generalizability of the findings. For example, cities in more developed coastal areas may benefit from greater educational resources and stricter DRP regulations, potentially leading to different educational choices and outcomes not captured in this study. As such, future studies may consider including more cities in research on the DRP.

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Nevertheless, despite the study being limited to a single location, the focus on Chengdu offers significant value. With a total of 1,287 valid samples providing ample data for analysis, Chengdu also serves as a key representative of peripheral regions and cities with similar characteristics, as it is one of the nine pilot cities for the DRP and the capital of Sichuan Province. This context allows for insights that may be applicable to similar urban settings.

Finally, while the study aimed to recruit students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds by selecting two different public high schools (School A and School B) as research sites, this approach presented its own limitations. Notably, both schools were public institutions, which may not comprehensively represent the full spectrum of student experiences from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Extremely wealthy students are likely enrolled in international or private schools, where they are exempt from the *Gaokao* and less impacted by the DRP. Consequently, their out-of-school English learning options could diverge significantly from those of public high school students. Unfortunately, due to constraints in scope and time, this study could not investigate the out-of-school English learning choices of these students, leaving a gap in understanding the broader educational landscape.

Despite the limitation of focusing solely on two public high schools, this study remains valuable because it provides insights into the experiences of students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds within that context. While both schools may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences in international or private institutions, the findings still

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highlight important aspects of public high school education. Future research should consider including students from a broader range of educational settings, such as private and international schools, to better understand the out-of-school English learning options available to all socioeconomic groups. This would help fill the critical gaps in knowledge regarding the broader educational landscape and DRP's impact on language learning choices.

Overall, these limitations underscore the complexities inherent in exploring educational choices among different social classes. By addressing these limitations, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced discourse on educational equity and access in the context of evolving policies like the DRP.

9.7 Epilogue

At the outset of my research, I was frequently approached by individuals who questioned my decision to focus on high school students. This interest likely stems from my own experiences during my senior year, when I got up each morning at 6:30 a.m., attended evening classes until 11:30 p.m., and engaged in private tutoring on weekends without respite. These formative experiences prompted me to ponder from an early age whether private tutoring and an examination-oriented educational system genuinely have the power to alter one's life trajectory or merely reproduce inequities? Serendipitously, the DRP implementation coincided with the start of my PhD journey, offering a timely lens to investigate these questions.

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The interviews conducted with 36 students were particularly enlightening, offering a nuanced understanding of how social stratification shapes their varying educational decision-making through the lens of RCT. While recognizing the future-oriented educational planning exhibited by upper-class students and the utilitarian educational goals pursued by middle-class students, the interviews of the 12 lower-class students often elicited frustration during my dissertation writing process. Contrary to expectations that the DRP might mitigate disparities, I observed that lower-class students faced formidable challenges in their educational choices, which were shaped by the paradox between the pressures of the *Gaokao* and the harsh realities of their lives. It became evident that their purportedly rational educational decisions were significantly shaped by their existing cognitive schema, economic circumstances, and levels of sociocultural capital.

As a member of the middle class, I acknowledge that it may not be appropriate to empathize with lower-class families from my perspective. I recognize this as a personal sentiment and strive to portray the experiences of lower-class students in an objective and unbiased manner throughout my writing. Interestingly, some lower-class students like Reggie, nurtured through the "accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau, 2002, p. 749), did not seem to perceive educational inequality or its associated hardships but, instead, displayed pure joy and relaxation absent from middle-class counterparts' stress-laden achievement pursuits – a finding complicating deficit narratives of disadvantaged groups.

Returning to the topic of educational inequality, this research reveals a fundamental tension:

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while the DRP disrupts surface-level inequities in shadow education access, it fails to adequately address inherent problems of educational stratification and social hierarchies. In other words, policies targeting surface-level inequities cannot dismantle systems structurally dependent on differentiation. I am, thus, reminded of an argument written by Entrich and Lauterbach (2021):

> Inequality is not produced through shadow education *per se*; it exists because highly stratified societies, labor markets and, of course, education systems demand inequality. Shadow education is inevitable, not just because of the changed value of education in all realms of human society, but because education has always served to differentiate people of different origin, status, and talent. Inequality is an integral part and desired result of the meritocratic selection and allocation processes of educational systems. (p. 250)

In such systems, credential hierarchies and unequal educational choices – predicated on origin, status, and perceived talent – are not accidental byproducts but intentional outcomes of institutionalized selection processes in this meritocratic society. Privileged families, as demonstrated in this research, consistently adapt to circumvent egalitarian policies, leveraging their capital to preserve superiority. It is a formidable challenge to regulate upper-class families' behavior. In this context, this study highlights the need for continued reform, because true educational equity demands not merely enforcing equalization policies such as the DRP but fundamentally restructuring meritocratic systems that perpetuate these disparities.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire

As a matter of policy, we are concerned with protecting the privacy of individuals who participate in voluntary surveys. We want to let you know that

1. The only reason we ask you to complete the questionnaire is to gather information related to studying the Double Reduction policy and out-of-school English learning.

2. Your responses and all personal information will be kept confidential.

3. We need to know your name and student ID number to connect with your answers for statistic analysis and later-stage interviews.

I. Basic Information

1. What is your name? _____

2. What is your student ID number? _____

3. What is your school name and class number? _____

4. What is your gender? (1) Male (2) Female

5. What is your ethnicity? (1) Han (2) Minority

6. What is your registered residence? (1) Urban (2) Rural

7. What is the highest education level of your father / other male guardian?

   (1) Middle school diploma or below (2) High school or vocational school diploma (3) Technical college (4) University degree (5) Postgraduate or above

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8. What is the highest education level of your mother / other female guardian?

(1) Middle school diploma or below (2) High school or vocational school diploma (3) Technical college (4) University degree (5) Postgraduate or above

9. What is the occupation of your father / other male guardian? (Note: if retired, please enter the occupation prior to retirement)

(1) Government (including the state-owned company) officials

(2) Managers in private company

(3) Private entrepreneurs

(4) Professional and technical personnel (including faculty in higher education institutions, other researchers, school teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, designers, etc.)

(5) Clerk and related workers

(6) Individual business (including run a restaurant, open a store, individual transportation, individual handicrafts, etc.)

(7) Military personnel and police

(8) Business service personnel (including caterers, transporters, couriers, tour guides, etc.)

(9) Industrial workers

(10) Agricultural laborers

(11) Unemployed

(12) Others, please indicate _____.

(13) Not applicable

10. What is the occupation of your mother / other female guardian? (Note: if retired, please enter the occupation prior to retirement)

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(1) Government (including the state-owned company) officials

(2) Managers in private company

(3) Private entrepreneurs

(4) Professional and technical personnel (including faculty in higher education institutions, other researchers, school teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, designers, etc.)

(5) Clerk and related workers

(6) Individual business (including run a restaurant, open a store, individual transportation, individual handicrafts, etc.)

(7) Military personnel and police

(8) Business service personnel (including caterers, transporters, couriers, tour guides, etc.)

(9) Industrial workers

(10) Agricultural laborers

(11) Unemployed

(12) Others, please indicate _____.

(13) Not applicable

11. Do you have the following items in your house/apartment?

Item	**Yes**	**No**
(1) A room of your own		
(2) A room with a bath or shower		
(3) Own mobile phone		
(4) Own iPad		
(5) Own Computer/Laptop		
(6) Television		
(7) Digital camera		
(8) Vacuum cleaner		

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(9) Home cinema system		
(10) Car		
(11) Own passport		
(12) Juice Extractor		

12. Do you have the following art collection and educational resources in your family?

Item	Yes	No
(1) Classical literature		
(2) Books of poetry		
(3) Works of art		
(4) A desk to study at		
(5) A quiet place to study		
(6) A computer you can use for schoolwork		
(7) Educational software		
(8) Books to help you with your schoolwork		
(9) Technical reference cooks		
(10) A dictionary		

II. About English learning

13. What was your English score of the last municipal unified exam? _____

14. Do you now attend any English private tutoring to improve your English academic performance?

(1) Yes (go to question 16)

(2) No (go to question 18)

15. Please tick the type of English private tutoring you attend:

☐ Parental tutoring

☐ One-on-one English private tutoring (both at home or in institutions)

☐ Small group English private tutoring

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☐ Large group English private tutoring

☐ Online English courses

☐ Others, please indicate _____

16. Please tick the reasons for taking English private tutoring (multiple choice, and then go to question 19)

☐ For enrichment

☐ For remediation

☐ For interest

☐ In order to get high scores in the *Gaokao*

☐ My school English education does not provide enough help for my study

☐ My teachers/parents want me to participate in English private tutoring

☐Peer effect: many of my classmates have participated in English private tutoring

☐ Others, please indicate _____

17. Please tick the reasons for not taking English private tutoring (multiple choice):

☐ Private tutoring is too expensive

☐ I have no time because there is too much school homework

☐ I have no time because I am having private tutoring of other subjects

☐ I want to take English private tutoring, but I cannot find the channels to access

☐ My school English education has provided sufficient training, and I do not need more

☐ I do not think private tutoring can improve my academic achievement

☐ I prefer to learn English by myself

☐ It is not necessary as I have good English grades

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☐ I do not care about English learning as it is not important to me

☐ Others, please indicate _____

18. Do you now take any out-of-school English learning activities (e.g., do English auxiliary books, watch English videos, listen to VOA/BBC) to improve your English academic performance?

(1) Yes (please go to question 20)

(2) No (please go to question 22)

19. Please tick the type of out-of-school English learning activities you take:

☐ Purchase English auxiliary materials and do exercises

☐ Watch English videos/television channels

☐ Do extensive reading through English books/newspapers

☐ Do intensive listening through English listening materials (e.g., VOA, BBC, authentic English radio programs)

☐ Take English self-study lessons and tests (e.g., MOOCs, Duolingo)

☐ Take English learning projects (e.g., workshop, learning consultation)

☐ Communicate with English native speakers

☐ Others, please indicate _____

20. Please tick the reasons for taking out-of-school English learning activities (multiple choice):

☐ For enrichment

☐ For remediation

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☐ For interest

☐ My school English education does not provide enough help for my study

☐ In order to get high scores in the *Gaokao*

☐Out-of-school English learning activities are more interesting than school learning and private tutoring

☐ Out-of-school English learning activities allow me to learn more authentic and idiomatic English than in the classroom

☐ Learning English through social media improves both my English abilities and social skills

☐ Others, please indicate _____

21. Please tick the reasons for not taking out-of-school English learning activities (multiple choice):

☐ I have no time because there is too much school homework

☐ I do not know where or how to find appropriate English learning resources

☐ I prefer English private tutoring, as it is more systematic and instructional

☐ English learning activities are not effective enough to improve my academic achievement

☐ English learning activities take up too much of my spare time

☐ It is not necessary as I have good English grades

☐ I do not care about English learning as it is not important to me

☐ Others, please indicate _____

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III. Subjective motivations for English language learning

22. Views on the English learning benefits for your future studies and career:

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

To what extent you agree with the following statements.	1	2	3	4	5
(1) Learning English enables me to read advanced literature in future studies.					
(2) English improves my future employment opportunities.					
(3) English brings me a competitive edge in future work and promotion.					
(4) I might use English as the working language in my future career.					

23. Views on the anticipated likelihood of the school English education in helping you succeed in English language learning:

Very unlikely	Unlikely	Average	Likely	Very Likely
1	2	3	4	5

How likely you think the following statements are true for you. ***Through school English education...***	1	2	3	4	5
(1) I believe I am able to fully master all the English knowledge at the high school stage.					
(2) I believe I am able to successfully achieve my target scores on the English exam in the *Gaokao*.					
(3) I believe I am able to help me to score over 120 even if it is a very difficult English exam.					

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(4) I believe I am able to score above the class average, no matter how difficult the English exam is.					

24. Views on your expectations for your future life:

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

To what extent you agree with the following statements.	1	2	3	4	5
(1) I would like to attain a higher level of education than the level of education of my parents'.					
(2) It is important for me to work in an occupation that is better than the occupations of my parents.					
(3) It is important for me that my salary be at least equal to the level of my parents'.					
(4) I would like to attain a social class on a level at least equal to my parents'.					
(5) My parents would not be satisfied if I found a worse job than they have.					

IV. English learning under the Double Reduction policy

25. Views on the Double Reduction policy:

Strongly disapprove	Disapprove	Neutral	Approve	Strongly Approve
1	2	3	4	5

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
(1) Do you approve of reducing English homework in high schools?					
(2) Do you approve of restricting English private tutoring in high schools?					

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26. Views on the educational anxiety brought about by the Double Reduction policy in English learning:

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

To what extent you agree with the following statements.	1	2	3	4	5
(1) I am worried that English learning will be more involuted under the Double Reduction policy.					
(2) I am worried that my English grades will drop in the absence of English homework and practices after class.					
(3) The restriction on English private tutoring makes me feel more anxious than before.					

27. Views on family social capital under the Double Reduction policy:

Questions ***When English private tutoring is restricted under the DRP...***
(1) How much do your parent(s) value English education? (1) Not at all (2) Below average (3) Average (4) Above average (5) Very much
(2) How often do your parent(s) check or provide instructions on your English homework? (1) Never (2) Rarely (Once or twice a year during school time, or rare days during vacations) (3) Sometimes (Once or twice a semester during school time, or some days during vacations) (4) Often (Once or twice a month during school time, or most days during vacations) (5) Very Often (Once or twice a week during school times, or almost daily during vacations)
(3) How many social relationships (e.g., acquaintances, colleagues, friends, etc.) do your parent(s) have that are able to provide English private tutoring or other English learning opportunities for you under the Double Reduction policy?

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(1) None (0 relationships) (2) Few (1-2 relationships) (3) Some (3-5 relationships) (4) Many (6-10 relationships) (5) Extensive (More than 10 relationships)
(4) How often do you discuss future alternative educational choices with your parent(s) to cope with the Double Reduction Policy and *Gaokao* failure? (1) Never (2) Once (3) Twice (4) Three to five times (5) More than five times

Please leave your contact information (We Chat/Mobile phone number) if you want to participate in the later-stage interviews: _____

Thanks for participating in the questionnaire!

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Appendix II: Interview questions

Student Interview

I. Family background (*Social origin, ESCS*)

1. Can you talk about your parents' living habits at home?

- ❖ What are the usual forms of entertainment of your parents after work?
- ❖ Do your parents have reading habits at home?
- ❖ How do you think your parents' living habits have affected your studies?

2. What do you think of the cultural atmosphere at your home?

- ❖ Do your parents usually take you to museums, art galleries, or tell you stories about literature and history? Can you please give specific examples?

3. What do you think of the English learning environment at your home? Are there any other English learning opportunities (e.g., traveling abroad, parents taking you to some English events, or helping parents to attend/handle English-related matters at work, etc.)?

4. What are your parents' attitudes toward your study?

- ❖ Do they hold high expectations for you? How?
- ❖ Do they put great emphasis on your examination scores? Why?

II. English learning situation (*Subjective cost-benefit considerations*)

5. Why is studying English important to you? Could you please give specific examples?

- ❖ Will you continue to study English after graduation from high school?
- ❖ How do you think you will use English in the future?
- ❖ Since you perceive English as beneficial, could you please explain the reasons why you

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do not take out-of-school English learning activities? (*Only for students who perceive English as beneficial but do not take out-of-school English learning activities*)

6. How do you feel about your school English education?

- ❖ Do you think your current school English teaching style/method can effectively help with your study? Why?
- ❖ From what aspects do you think your school English education enhances your English learning success?

7. What is your main purpose/reason for (not) attending EPT?

- ❖ Comparing the EPT you have attended so far with school English education, which teaching style do you prefer?
- ❖ Which is more effective for you? Why?

8. What is your main purpose/reason for (not) taking other forms of out-of-school English learning?

9. Apart from school work, how much time do you voluntarily spend on English learning after school? What makes you spend so much/so little time on English learning?

III. Attitudes and views toward the DRP (*Attitudinal factors toward policy*)

10. Can you briefly talk about your views toward the DRP?

- ❖ What do you know about the DRP? What do you think of the policy?
- ❖ As a high school student, do you think tutoring should be eliminated and homework reduced? Why?

11. How do you feel about "reducing academic pressure" in the high-school stage?

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- ❖ Do you think your learning pressure and competitive anxiety have been reduced under the policy? Why?
- ❖ Is this the reason why you (not) take out-of-school English learning activities? Why?

12. As private tutoring is restricted, how do you think your parents' network of social resources can help you with your English learning? Do you think your parents could provide you with any alternatives if you fail *Gaokao*? How?

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Appendix III: Consent form for schools

Consent Form and Information Sheet for Schools

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

<High school students' choices for out-of-school English learning under the Double Reduction policy in Mainland China>

The following information is intended to help your school decide whether or not to participate in this study conducted by SHI, Yaqing, a PhD student at the Education University of Hong Kong. Please note that your school are free to decide not to participate or withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. You are welcome to ask any questions before and during the study.

Purpose of the study: The study aims to explore high school students' out-of-school English learning in Mainland China.

Procedures: Data will be collected using questionnaires at the beginning. Based on the results of the questionnaires, suitable students will be invited for the one-on-one interviews through WeChat video call. All interviews will be conducted in Mandarin Chinese and will be audio-recorded.

Confidentiality: To protect each participant's privacy, all personally identified information, including name, gender, ethnicity, registered residence, school name, will be strictly kept confidential in the study. Your questionnaires will be locked in the researcher's drawer and audio-recorded interviews will be kept in password-protected files in the researcher's computer. All the information will be only kept for three years till the researcher complete

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and publish the study. Afterwards, all information will be deleted.

Potential risks: There are no known risks associated with this study.

Potential benefits: Students participate in the study can gain the experience of reflecting English learning. If this study get published, your school will make a great contribution to the education domain.

Compensation and appreciation: To show my great appreciation for your school's participation in the study, I will offer the following ways to show my gratitude. When this study is completed, I will make appropriate recommendations and suggestions for your school teaching and learning based on the relevant conclusions drawn from the study, and then I will print off all the results and send them to the school's education department. I hope this can make some contribution to the future development of your school.

Questions and concerns: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me on Wechat or at

Consent to participate in the research:

My school hereby consent to participate in the captioned research with full knowledge of the study purposes and procedures described above.

Signature: _____

Post: _____(Prof/Dr/Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss)

Name of School: _____

Date: _____

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Appendix IV: Consent form for students

Consent Form and Information Sheet for Students

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

<High school students' choices for out-of-school English learning under the Double Reduction policy in Mainland China>

The following information is intended to help you decide whether or not to participate in this study conducted by SHI, Yaqing, a PhD student at the Education University of Hong Kong. Please note that you are free to decide not to participate or withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. You are welcome to ask any questions before and during the study.

Purpose of the study: The study aims to explore high school students' out-of-school English learning in Mainland China.

Procedures: Data will be collected using questionnaires at the beginning. Based on the results of the questionnaires, suitable students will be invited for the one-on-one interviews through WeChat video call. All interviews will be conducted in Mandarin Chinese and will be audio-recorded.

Confidentiality: To protect each participant's privacy, all personally identified information, including name, gender, ethnicity, registered residence, school name, will be strictly kept confidential in the study. Your questionnaires will be locked in the researcher's drawer and audio-recorded interviews will be kept in password-protected files in the researcher's computer. All the information will be only kept for three years till the researcher complete

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and publish the study. Afterwards, all information will be deleted.

Potential risks: There are no known risks associated with this study.

Potential benefits: Students participate in the study can gain the experience of reflecting English learning. If this study get published, you will make a great contribution to the education domain.

Compensation and appreciation: To show my great appreciation for students who participate in the study, I will offer the following reward: 1) students who participate in the questionnaire can add me on WeChat to ask for any information related to the overseas university application after the *Gaokao*, English learning, IELTS preparation, and studying abroad at any time, 2) students who participate in the interviews will additionally receive an exquisitely customized notebook with an EdUHK stamp and my signature as a souvenir of their involvement in this study.

Questions and concerns: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me on Wechat or at

Consent to participate in the research:

I _____ (Name of participant) hereby consent to participate in the captioned research with full knowledge of the study purposes and procedures described above.

_____ (Signature of participant)

_____ (Date)

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