

A Study on the Educational Anxiety Experience of Chinese Rural Primary School Students' Mothers from the Perspective of Phenomenology

Yao Chen^{1,2}, Shunbo Zhu³

¹Hunan Academy of Educational Sciences, Changsha 410006, Hunan, China

²College of Elementary Education, Changsha Normal University, Changsha 410100, Hunan, China

³No.7 Middle School of Rucheng County, Rucheng 424100, Hunan, China

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Abstract: Parental educational anxiety has become a social symptom in China, and rural primary school students' mothers exhibit unique educational anxieties due to their special living environment. Based on interviews with 10 rural primary school students' mothers, five typical educational anxiety experiences were selected for analysis, and themes such as rural life burden, children's learning habits, mothers' educational expectations, mothers' educational methods, mothers' emotional state, deviation between reality and expectations, homework guidance ability, mothers' educational level, and attitudes towards children's future development were refined. The root causes of educational anxiety among rural primary school students' mothers include the deviation between children's actual performance and mothers' educational expectations, the sense of disparity under social comparison, physical and mental exhaustion caused by role overload, anxiety triggered by excessive economic burden, and a sense of powerlessness towards children's educational outcomes. To alleviate the educational anxiety of rural primary school students' mothers, mothers should actively adjust themselves, fathers should actively participate in their children's education, society should create a healthy atmosphere, and schools should strengthen family education guidance.

Keywords: Rural primary school; Mother; Primary school student; Educational anxiety; Phenomenological perspective

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1. Introduction

On May 31, 2021, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee proposed the “policy allowing couples to have up to three children and related supportive measures.” This policy was introduced against the backdrop of declining birth rates in China following the implementation of the universal two-child policy. Public willingness to have children is reflected in two main attitudes: “not wanting to have children” and “wanting to have children but feeling unable to do so.” The top three reasons cited are heavy financial burdens, concerns about children's education, and difficulties for women in balancing family and work responsibilities. Educational anxiety is widespread among parents, particularly mothers, with mothers of rural primary school students exhibiting

unique manifestations of such anxiety due to their specific living conditions.

Through research on mothers of students at a central primary school in Q County, H Province, it becomes evident that rural mothers often feel helpless and frustrated when confronting their children's educational challenges. The second author of this paper, a former teacher at a rural school, observed that in many rural families, fathers typically work away from home, leaving mothers as the primary caregivers and communicators with the school. During repeated interactions, rural mothers displayed direct concern and love for their children. Their emotions were frequently tied to their children's academic performance and attitudes toward learning. Many mothers expressed feeling overwhelmed by their children's academic struggles, desiring change but feeling powerless. Over time, these feelings evolved into educational anxiety, which, under the influence of such maternal stress, could exacerbate children's rebellious or unruly behavior. Against this backdrop, critical questions arise: What forms does educational anxiety take among rural primary school mothers? What are its root causes? And how can such anxiety be alleviated? These issues warrant in-depth exploration.

2. Manifestations and analysis of educational anxiety among rural primary school mothers

Through interviews with 10 rural primary school mothers, their stories and feelings about their children's education were documented. Following phenomenological writing principles, five typical experiential narratives are presented below.

2.1. Manifestations of experiences

Experience 1: Dread of after-school hours

"My youngest child needs to be picked up from school every day. After finishing farm work, I rush to fetch him. When we get home, I start cooking, hoping he'll quietly do his homework. But the moment we arrive, he runs straight to the TV. No amount of coaxing works—only when I lose my temper does he reluctantly open his backpack. This happens almost daily. After scolding him, I still have to cook, wash dishes, and clean up. By the end of the day, I'm exhausted. He's only in fourth grade, but his homework is already overwhelming. Teaching him drains me completely. If it's this hard now, what about the future? The after-school hours are my most stressful time."

Experience 2: "Am I really a bad mom?"

"I'm raising my child alone while his father works away, returning only a few times a year. I handle all disciplines, big or small. To keep him in line, I often resort to yelling, which works—he obeys afterward. Boys are playful; he makes mistakes daily. If the teacher says he's unfocused in class, I scold him. If he drags his feet on homework, I scold him again. But once, I overheard him telling a friend: 'Mom is the meanest in the world! Dad's the best—he brings me snacks! Grandpa and Grandma give me pocket money too.' My heart sank. Am I really a bad mom?"

Experience 3: "Why are other kids so much better?"

"To earn more for my child's future, I work at an industrial zone an hour from home, clocking overtime daily. I'm only home on Sundays. My child stays with his grandparents, and I rely on the school's parents' chat online for updates. The teacher often shares exemplary homework or perfect test scores—but my child's name is never there. On weekends, neighbors chat about their kids excelling in town schools. Mine struggles even in a rural school. Why are others' children so outstanding? If he can't even study properly now, what will happen later?"

Experience 4: “Why is the pressure so crushing?”

“With society’s cutthroat competition, I pulled strings to transfer my child to a town school for better education. I rented a place nearby and took a low-paying supermarket job (1,200 yuan a month—just enough for rent). My husband’s income barely covers our expenses. I see online how vital ‘special talents’ are for kids, but supporting both elders and children is financially suffocating. Education can’t wait, but this grind is exhausting.”

Experience 5: Pandemic-era frustrations

“During the COVID lockdown, we had online classes at home. With three kids, we bought an extra phone and juggled devices. But instead of studying, they played games or watched TV. Homework was half-hearted—teachers couldn’t monitor everyone. Every day ended in fights. Is this even learning? Teachers can’t help, and I’m mentally exhausted. If they don’t study now, what future do they have?”

2.2. Analysis of experiences

To uncover the root causes of educational anxiety among rural mothers, a deep analysis of their lived experiences is essential. This study employs the reflective questioning method from phenomenological research to explore the underlying themes in each narrative (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Reflective questions, experiential analysis, and thematic summaries (example)

| Reflective questions on experiences | Experiential analysis | Thematic summary |
|--|--|--|
| <i>“My child is young and needs to be picked up from school every day. After laboring in the fields, I rush to fetch them, return home to cook, and manage chores.”</i> | This reflects the harsh reality of rural mothers’ lives: juggling childcare, physically demanding farm work, and household responsibilities. Heavy daily burdens are a constant for rural mothers. | Rural life burden |
| <i>“I hoped my child would quietly do homework while I cooked, but they immediately turn on the TV. Only after I lose my temper do they reluctantly open their backpack. This happens daily.”</i> | The child’s behavior deviates from the mother’s expectations. It also highlights ineffective parenting methods: gentle persuasion (“coaxing”) fails, while anger (“losing temper”) becomes a last-resort tactic. The latter appears more effective short term. | Child’s study habits Maternal educational expectations Parenting methods Maternal emotional state Gap between reality and expectations |
| <i>“After scolding them, I still cook, clean, and wash dishes. By the end of the day, I just want peace, but the worst part is my child’s homework struggles. How will they manage in the future?”</i> | This reiterates the weight of rural life and the mother’s emotional exhaustion. | Rural life burden Maternal emotional state |
| <i>“My fourth-grader’s homework overwhelms me. Teaching them drains me. If it’s this hard now, what about later? After-school hours are my most stressful time.”</i> | The mother’s limited ability to assist with homework fuels anxiety. Complex assignments exceed her educational capacity, amplifying fears about her child’s future. | Mother’s educational level Homework assistance capacity Attitudes toward the child’s future |

From the above analysis, key themes emerge: rural life burden, child’s study habits, maternal educational expectations, parenting methods, maternal emotional state, gap between reality and expectations, homework assistance capacity, mother’s educational level, and attitudes toward the child’s future.

Applying this method to all five experiences reveals that rural mothers’ educational anxiety stems primarily from: Heavy life burdens (farm work, childcare, household chores); Mismatch between children’s behavior and maternal expectations; Limited education hindering homework guidance; Role overload (acting

as both parents in father-absent households); Ineffective parenting strategies; Work-caregiving conflicts; Social comparisons (“other children’s success”); Deep-seated fears about their children’s prospects. Each of these dimensions will be analyzed in detail below.

3. Analysis of the root causes of educational anxiety among rural primary school mothers

Through thematic summarization, the underlying causes of educational anxiety among rural mothers have been clearly identified. This section explores the significance of such anxiety.

3.1. Anxiety stemming from unmet expectations

Interview data reveal that rural mothers generally face heavy life burdens, balancing physically demanding labor with childcare and educational responsibilities. To improve their circumstances, they expect their children to cherish opportunities and study diligently. However, children often fall short of these expectations. For instance, after school, children rarely start homework voluntarily but only complete tasks under repeated maternal pressure. During the pandemic, despite parents sacrificing resources to purchase devices for online learning, children often used phones for games rather than studying. This discrepancy between children’s actual behavior and maternal educational expectations fuels anxiety.

Rural mothers tend to hold excessively high educational expectations for their children. Like all parents, they hope their children will achieve success and escape rural hardships. Many mothers emphasized their own suffering due to limited education, which they attribute to their current struggles. They believe academic excellence is the most effective path for their children to become individuals with status and social standing. Consequently, rural parents place immense pressure on their children to excel academically. Yet, when children underperform or even rebel against these expectations, mothers experience profound disillusionment and anxiety.

3.2. Anxiety triggered by social comparisons

Rural primary school mothers frequently compare their children to “others’ kids.” In rural communities, where news spreads quickly, discussions about children’s academic performance dominate daily conversations. Through these exchanges, mothers gain precise insights into the academic progress of their children’s peers in their village. Armed with this information, they inevitably measure their own children against others. When their child underperforms academically or acts rebelliously, maternal anxiety intensifies. As the saying goes, “Comparing people kills joy”—rooted in social comparison theory, individuals often define themselves through comparisons with others. Rural mothers evaluate their children by contrasting them with classmates or neighbors’ kids.

For instance, mothers who entrust childcare to grandparents while working away from home grow deeply anxious when their child is never praised in class group chats. Similarly, conversations with neighbors about their children excelling in town schools—compared to their own child’s mediocre rural school performance—spark profound fears about their child’s future. These examples underscore how maternal anxiety is magnified by relentless social comparisons.

3.3. Anxiety from role overload

Analysis of lived experiences reveals that rural mothers commonly grapple with the dual pressures of “supporting the elderly while raising the young” and heavy financial burdens. Influenced by traditional norms, childcare and

education are largely viewed as maternal responsibilities. The adage “men work outside, women manage the household” entrenches this division of labor: fathers often migrate for work to sustain the family economically, while mothers remain home to care for children, elders, and household duties. A survey of 50 students at Q Town Central Primary School found that fathers in most families rarely engage in their children’s education.

Rural mothers juggle laundry, cooking, farm labor, and educational tasks like homework supervision, facing immense daily pressures. By the time children return home, mothers are already exhausted from the day’s labor. Confronting children’s academic struggles in this state amplifies their anxiety. The compounded roles of “caregiver for both old and young” and “acting as both parents” create overwhelming role overload, leaving mothers emotionally strained.

3.4. Anxiety stemming from economic burdens

At present, China’s compulsory education resources remain unevenly distributed, with urban areas offering significantly higher-quality resources compared to rural regions. To secure better education for their children, rural families strive to enroll them in superior schools ^[1]. A minority of financially capable rural parents opt for urban private schools, but most cannot afford the tuition and fees, instead choosing county-level schools. Sending children to county schools exacerbates the financial burden on rural households. Parents must either commute to urban areas for school drop-offs/pickups or rent housing to accompany their children during schooling. If accompanying children during schooling is chosen, this responsibility typically falls on mothers. For rural families, accompanying children during schooling not only increases transportation and housing costs but also reduces household income by removing one laborer. The combination of rising educational expenses and declining earnings heightens maternal anxiety.

3.5. Anxiety stemming from educational ineffectiveness

Interviews reveal that rural primary school mothers generally have low educational attainment, with most having only completed middle school. Due to their limited education, their parenting philosophies tend to be outdated, their methods traditional, and their capacity to guide their children’s studies constrained.

3.5.1. Anxiety from outdated educational beliefs

Many rural mothers believe that strict discipline alone ensures academic success. When children misbehave, they resort to scolding or physical punishment, creating adversarial dynamics. Unaware of the broader influences on learning—such as family atmosphere, parent-child relationships, societal norms, and parental behavior—they oversimplify education. One mother stated, “*If teachers are strict at school and I’m strict at home, my child will study.*” This narrow perspective overlooks holistic factors. For instance, when children resist studying, mothers intensify lectures, triggering emotional clashes that backfire. While didactic approaches dominate, the lack of nuanced techniques stifles children’s enthusiasm for learning. Mothers grow anxious as their rigid methods fail to yield desired outcomes.

3.5.2. Anxiety from limited capacity to assist with homework

Most rural mothers struggle academically, making homework guidance arduous. While they manage lower-grade subjects, higher-grade coursework overwhelms them. As children advance, maternal stress escalates, compounded by exhaustion and helplessness. The inability to support their children’s academic growth deepens their anxiety.

3.5.3. Anxiety from ineffective parenting strategies

Rural mothers frequently rely on anger, harsh reprimands, or scolding to enforce compliance. Though such methods may produce short-term obedience, they fail to address root causes and harm long-term parent-child relationships. Constant confrontations leave mothers in prolonged emotional agitation, detrimental to their well-being. Furthermore, doubts about the sustainability of these stopgap measures—coupled with guilt over their harshness—fuel cycles of anxiety.

4. Strategies to alleviate educational anxiety among rural primary school mothers

Based on the analysis of root causes, this study proposes multi-stakeholder interventions—involving mothers themselves, fathers, society, and schools—to mitigate educational anxiety among rural mothers.

4.1. Mothers should actively adjust their perspectives

First, set reasonable educational expectations. Rural mothers often view education as the sole path to upward mobility, leading to excessively high expectations. The greater the expectations, the higher the investment and fear of failure, intensifying anxiety. Overly ambitious goals can overwhelm children, producing counterproductive outcomes. Thus, mothers should adopt a developmental perspective, recognizing that academic performance is not the sole measure of a child's worth. They must learn to identify and nurture their children's strengths beyond grades.

Second, shift educational philosophies. Rural mothers prioritize academic achievement and study habits, often neglecting other aspects of their children's growth. Many act as controllers, demanding compliance with rigid developmental scripts. Excessive focus on grades and comparisons to “others' children” fuels anxiety. Mothers should broaden their outlook, acknowledging that holistic development—not just test scores—defines a child's potential.

Third, manage emotions constructively. Many rural mothers fixate on educational responsibilities, becoming trapped in cycles of anxiety. Beyond childcare, they should cultivate personal interests to counterbalance stress. Engaging in recreational activities—such as community gatherings or hobbies—can provide emotional outlets and reduce anxiety.

4.2. Fathers should engage in educational responsibilities

Under traditional norms, rural mothers often view childcare and education as solely their duty—a misconception. A child's education is a shared parental responsibility. Surveys reveal that many rural fathers disengage from their children's education, leaving mothers overburdened with household chores, farm labor, and academic oversight. Active paternal involvement can alleviate maternal stress. A father's authoritative role itself is a vital educational resource; moderate participation yields better outcomes. Fathers' engagement acts not only as a support mechanism but also as an antidote to maternal anxiety ^[2].

4.3. Society should foster a healthy educational climate

Education extends beyond families and schools—it shapes societal talent pools. Rural education is a critical frontier, and maternal anxiety impacts both mothers and children's development. Society must acknowledge its educational role and cultivate constructive norms.

First, governments must intervene. Public institutions should guide and support rural education through policy and funding. Increased fiscal allocations for rural schools, improved public educational infrastructure, and enriched learning environments are essential ^[3].

Second, the media must disseminate positive messaging. Rural mothers heavily rely on mobile phones for entertainment, making them susceptible to online narratives. Media should promote progressive educational values—emphasizing child-centered, holistic development—to counter outdated ideologies^[4].

Third, reform societal discourse. Prevailing narratives prioritize exam-oriented education, with advertisements and platforms often exacerbating parental competition. Shifting public discourse toward celebrating diverse talents can reduce mothers’ fixation on grades and alleviate anxiety.

4.4. Schools should strengthen parental guidance

As the primary educational hub, schools significantly influence parental attitudes. Current school-home communication often reinforces stress (e.g., “Study hard or return to farming”). To counter this:

First, reaffirm educational essence by implementing the “Double Reduction” policy. Excessive academic competition has distorted schooling. The policy’s focus on reducing homework and tutoring burdens helps families rediscover education’s true purpose—nurturing well-rounded individuals—and eases maternal anxiety.

Second, adopt holistic student evaluations. Schools traditionally prioritize grades, but modern society demands moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor development. Multidimensional assessments (e.g., creativity, collaboration) should replace narrow metrics, conveying balanced feedback to families^[5].

Third, provide scientific parenting guidance. Most rural mothers lack modern educational knowledge. As experts, teachers must bridge this gap through parent workshops, sharing evidence-based strategies for communication, discipline, and emotional support. Empowering mothers with skills to engage their children constructively—rather than through coercion—can transform anxiety into confidence.

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