

# Factors, Challenges and Suggestions of Technical and Vocational School Dropout Issue in Xinjiang, China

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000333>

Received: 10 July 2025; Accepted: 18 July 2025; Published: 16 August 2025

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Chinese government has implemented a series of strategic policies aimed at promoting technical and vocational education and training (TVET), with the objective of enhancing skill development and educational access among secondary school graduates. However, despite these national efforts, technical and vocational schools (TVS) in underdeveloped regions such as Xinjiang continue to experience disproportionately high dropout rates. This study investigates the contributing factors behind student dropout in Xinjiang's TVS and examines the challenges faced by those who leave school prematurely. Adopting a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with dropout students, teachers, and parents. Thematic analysis using NViVO revealed a multifaceted interplay of financial hardship, institutional limitations, cultural stigma, and reduced learner motivation. Furthermore, students who dropped out often encountered ongoing cultural, educational, and employment-related difficulties. The findings highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms to improve the status of vocational education, enhance institutional responsiveness, and strengthen family and community support mechanisms. A conceptual framework is proposed, integrating the core factors, challenges, and suggested interventions, offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders working to reduce dropout in Xinjiang's vocational education system.

**Keywords:** school dropout, technical and vocational education, Xinjiang, qualitative research, education policy, conceptual framework

## INTRODUCTION

School dropout remains a serious global concern, especially in developing regions where education is crucial for economic and social mobility. In China, dropout rates in Technical and Vocational Schools (TVS) are particularly high in underdeveloped areas such as Xinjiang. Despite national policies aimed at strengthening vocational education, many students leave TVS before completing their programs (Guo et al., 2019).

Dropout refers to a student's premature withdrawal from school before earning a recognized qualification (Iwuagwu, 2019; Hassan & Said, 2022). In Xinjiang, dropout reflects deeper structural issues—including poverty, weak educational infrastructure, and cultural attitudes toward vocational learning. This study investigated the factors and challenges contributing to dropout in Xinjiang's TVS and explored strategies to reduce it.

Vocational education is considered a practical solution to unemployment and poverty in many countries (Fretwell, 2003; UNESCO, 2010). China has invested heavily in TVS, contributing to national skills development and employment. However, dropout remains a widespread issue, especially in western provinces where schools lack resources and students face multiple disadvantages.

In countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, TVS dropout rates range between 17% and 19% (MOEC, 2017; Office of the Education Council, 2019). In Xinjiang, the situation is more severe. Studies reported dropout rates exceeding 30% in some programs (Li Qing, 2014). Many students left within the first year due to academic failure, financial pressure, or lack of interest (Yang Hongping, 2017).

Xinjiang's economic conditions significantly contribute to this issue. The region's per capita income remains far below the national average (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Many families struggle to support their children's education, prioritizing immediate income over long-term schooling. Although the government has invested billions in improving vocational education in the region, school conditions remain substandard, and job placement support is weak.

Another challenge is the mismatch between vocational programs and local labor market needs. While Xinjiang's economy is rich in agriculture and natural resources, TVS often fail to offer training relevant to these sectors (Xue, 2021). This disconnect leads to poor job prospects, discouraging students from continuing their education.

Social stigma further reduces the appeal of TVS. In China, vocational education is often viewed as a last resort for low-performing students (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). The High School Entrance Examination system tends to place students with lower scores into vocational tracks, reinforcing perceptions of inferiority and reducing motivation.

Dropout in Xinjiang's TVS results from a complex mix of school, family, and societal factors. School-based issues include irrelevant curricula, insufficient academic support, and unqualified teachers (Tan, 2020). Students often report disengagement due to rigid teaching styles and a lack of connection between what is taught and their future careers.

Outside the school, financial pressure is a dominant factor. Many students come from low-income families who cannot afford additional school expenses. Without adequate scholarships, students are pushed to work rather than study. Moreover, weak parental involvement and peer influence contribute to disengagement. Parents with limited education may not see the value in completing vocational training (Otero et al., 2021).

Cultural bias against TVS also plays a key role. Students often internalize negative views about vocational education, leading to low self-esteem and lack of motivation. The belief that TVS offers limited upward mobility causes many families to encourage their children to seek work or marry early, especially in rural and ethnic minority communities (Woronov, 2020; Al-Sa'd, 2007).

In addition, there is a systemic failure to align education with local job markets. Many vocational programs do not equip students with the skills required by local industries, further weakening the incentive to stay in school. Students who see little value in their education are more likely to drop out.

Despite policy-level efforts, few studies focus on the lived experiences of dropout students in Xinjiang. Existing research is often quantitative and overlooks critical qualitative insights. A better understanding of the individual, institutional, and cultural dimensions of dropout is needed to design targeted interventions. This study used a qualitative approach to explore these factors in depth and developed more effective strategies to reduce dropout in Xinjiang's TVS.

## **Research Objectives**

- a) To explore the factors contributing to dropout rates at Technical and Vocational Schools (TVS) in Xinjiang, China.
- b) To investigate the challenges faced by students who have dropped out of TVS in Xinjiang, China.
- c) To explore suggestions to reduce dropout rates among TVS students in Xinjiang, China.

## **Research Questions**

- a) What are the factors which contribute to the dropout rates at TVS in Xinjiang, China?
- b) What are the challenges faced by TVS students who dropout in Xinjiang, China?

c) What are the suggestions to reduce dropout rates among TVS students in Xinjiang, China?

## Theoretical Framework

This study adapted the integrated Push-Pull-Fall Out framework (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994) to systematically investigate TVS dropout dynamics in Xinjiang. The framework's three core mechanisms function in tandem: (1) Push factors signify institutional pressures that actively displace students, including insufficient academic support, misalignment of the curriculum with labor markets (Xue & Li, 2021), and punitive school policies; (2) Pull factors encompass external socioeconomic attractions such as immediate employment needs (Cardoso & Verner, 2006), family financial pressures (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), and peer influences (Pusztai et al., 2022); (3) Fall-out factors capture passive disengagement processes where students gradually withdraw due to diminishing motivation, cultural stigmatization of vocational education (Woronov, 2020), and perceived irrelevance of training to local industries. This three-part model effectively bridges macro-level structural constraints with micro-level decision-making, particularly in Xinjiang's unique context where ethnic minority students face additional language challenges (Ennin & Manariyo, 2023) and geographic isolation exacerbates educational inequities.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was grounded in the Push–Pull–Fall Out theory (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994) and integrated three core elements: the factors contributing to dropout, the challenges faced by dropouts, and the strategies for prevention. It drew upon established research indicating that dropout was rarely the result of a single factor but emerges from the interaction of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural influences (Garcia et al., 2019; Nekongo-Nielsen et al., 2018). In this framework, push factors are internal to the school system, such as poor academic performance and insufficient teacher support; pull factors arise from outside the school, including financial pressure, peer influence, and family background (Doll et al., 2013); and fall-out factors reflect a gradual loss of motivation due to a lack of engagement or perceived value in education. These are further linked to post-dropout challenges, such as limited employment prospects and social marginalization (Effiong & Edet, 2020). To address these issues, the framework incorporated proposed solutions at three levels: national policy, institutional reform, and family education support (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yu, 2018). This integrated model guided the data collection and analysis in this study, offering a comprehensive approach to understand and address the dropout issue in Xinjiang's vocational education system.

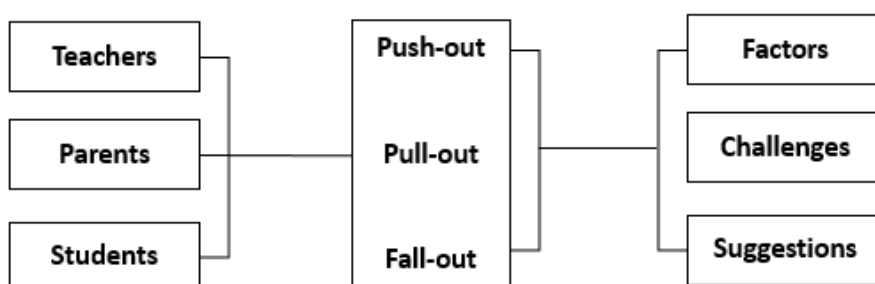


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework Of Dropout Issue Among TVS In Xinjiang, China

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The dropout issue in technical and vocational schools (TVS) is a significant challenge globally, particularly in developing countries. Dropout rates in TVS are influenced by a combination of factors, including financial constraints, poor academic performance, and lack of motivation. In emerging markets such as Thailand and Indonesia, dropout rates in TVS have been reported at around 10% and 17.19%, respectively (Tungkunanan, 2020; MOEC, 2017). These high dropout rates highlight the need for effective strategies to retain students. Effective interventions include improving teacher-student relationships and enhancing curriculum relevance

(Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2017). In China, dropout in TVS is influenced by weak foundational learning, negative societal perceptions, and a mismatch between vocational education and industry needs (Gao, 2009; Xu et al., 2022). Dropout rates in Xinjiang, China, are significantly higher than in other regions due to geographical location, economic conditions, and cultural biases against vocational education (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Poor academic performance, insufficient teacher support, and a curriculum that fails to align with regional economic needs further contribute to disengagement and dropout (Yu et al., 2017; Xue & Li, 2021). Effective solutions include improving educational infrastructure, aligning curricula with local industries, and enhancing teacher quality (Voronina-Pryhodii & Kravets, 2022). The Push-Pull-Fall Out framework provides a comprehensive lens to understand dropout phenomena. Push factors include poor academic performance and insufficient teacher support (Doll et al., 2013). Pull factors involve external pressures like financial difficulties and family obligations (Cardoso & Verner, 2006). Fall-out factors include lack of motivation and social norms that devalue vocational education (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). This framework helps identify specific interventions to address dropout.

Cultural challenges in Xinjiang include a societal bias against vocational education, which is often perceived as inferior to academic education, leading to low student morale (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Yu et al., 2017). Educational challenges stem from the dual-track education system in China, which places vocational education in a secondary position, resulting in limited opportunities for vocational students to pursue higher education or secure good jobs (Stewart, 2015; Liu et al., 2024). Job-demand challenges are significant due to a mismatch between the skills taught in vocational schools and the needs of the job market, leading to difficulties in finding employment and further diminishing the appeal of vocational education (Esmail & Khan, 2024). To reduce dropout rates, suggestions include reforming the education system to provide more opportunities for vocational students, such as pathways to higher education (Mustapha, 2017). Strengthening internship management to protect student rights is also crucial (Lao, 2024). Improving teacher quality through training and rotation systems can enhance student engagement (Rosa, 1997). Strengthening school-enterprise cooperation to provide practical opportunities and employment guidance can also reduce dropout rates (McKinney, 1984). Changing parental attitudes towards vocational education and improving parent-child communication can provide better support for students (Otero et al., 2021). Financial support for low-income families can alleviate economic pressures contributing to dropout (Perdana et al., 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the underlying factors contributing to dropout in Technical and Vocational Schools (TVS) in Xinjiang, China. A qualitative approach was selected as it enabled an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and contextual influences surrounding student dropout (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, this study employed semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and parents to gather rich, descriptive data on personal, institutional, and societal factors related to dropout. The research was exploratory in nature, aiming not to test hypotheses but to interpret meaning and provide insight into a complex social issue.

### Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in a public vocational school located in a prefecture-level city in Xinjiang. The school offered programs in areas such as automobile maintenance, hotel management, computer applications, and preschool education. According to school data, dropout had become increasingly frequent in recent years, particularly among students in their first year. This location was chosen due to its representativeness of typical TVS in underdeveloped western regions of China.

A total of 23 participants were purposefully selected, including 13 students who had dropped out, 5 current or former teachers, and 45 parents. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015). Criteria for student participants included having officially dropped out within the last two years. Teachers were selected based on their experience in dealing with at-risk students, and parents were chosen based on their child's dropout history.



## Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted over a two-month period. Interview guides were developed for each group of participants, with questions designed to probe reasons for dropout, personal or institutional challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The questions were open-ended and flexible, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely and in depth (Patton, 2015).

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. For participants who were uncomfortable with being recorded, detailed notes were taken instead. The interviews were conducted in locations selected by the participants to ensure privacy and comfort, including homes, cafés, and school meeting rooms. Ethical procedures were strictly followed throughout the data collection process.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcription, the data were read multiple times to achieve familiarity. Initial coding was conducted manually, followed by the identification of patterns and themes. Codes were then grouped into overarching categories corresponding to push, pull, and fall-out factors, as well as post-dropout challenges and suggested solutions. This coding process was iterative and reflective, allowing for the refinement of categories as new insights emerged.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, triangulation was applied by comparing findings across student, teacher, and parent accounts. Member checking was also used with selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. In addition, reflective memos were maintained throughout the research process to record analytic decisions and researcher assumptions.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the dropout issue among students in Technical and Vocational Schools (TVS) in Xinjiang, China, is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, which can be categorized into push-out factors (school-related), pull-out factors (external pressures), and fall-out factors (personal and cultural influences). Push-out factors include poor academic performance, often exacerbated by language barriers for minority students who struggle with Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction. This not only hampers their academic success but also limits their communication with teachers. Additionally, students receive insufficient teacher support due to high teacher turnover rates and varying teaching styles, which alienates them from the school environment. Institutional policies further contribute to dropout rates by prioritizing academic performance over skill-based training and linking admissions processes to financial incentives, thereby undermining educational quality. Pull-out factors stem from peer influence, where disengaged peers normalize dropout behavior. Financial difficulties also compel students, particularly in economically underdeveloped regions like Xinjiang, to leave school and work to support their families. Low parental education further restricts comprehension of the long-term value of education. Fall-out factors are shaped by social norms that devalue vocational education, positioning it as an inferior option compared to mainstream academics. This is compounded by a monotonous curriculum and weak teacher-student relationships, which erode students' motivation and create a growing sense of disconnection between their education and future opportunities, ultimately leading to their dropout.

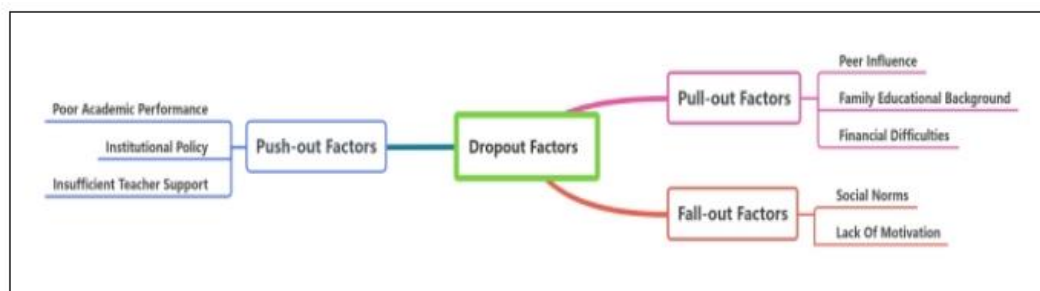


Figure 2 Mind Map Of Dropout Factors

Through an analysis of interviews conducted with dropouts from vocational technical schools in Xinjiang, as well as their parents and teachers, significant challenges contributing to the high dropout rate have been revealed. First in terms of cultural challenges, conventional Chinese society has always underappreciated vocational education, considering it as less than academic education. This cultural bias has resulted in a loss of dignity related with vocational education, which leaves pupils humiliated and alienated. Considered as a second-best option, dropouts view vocational education as a result of psychological conviction that attending such schools leads in lack of future possibilities. Second, with regard to educational challenges, China's dual-track system emphasizes by placing vocational education as a secondary type of instruction the obvious differences between vocational and general education. Many times failing academically, students attending vocational schools support the view of vocational education as "inferior education." Moreover, there is a clear difference in cultural competency between vocational teachers and their students, which lowers teachers' sense of identification towards their students and could lead them to desert them. Lastly, about challenge of job-demand, there is a mismatch between the skills taught in vocational schools and the needs of the job market. Many times, the skills acquired do not meet employment requirements, hence additional training is required to find a job. Furthermore among the labour rights that vocational students lack protection of during internships are low salaries, poor working conditions, absence of benefits, and exploitation, which further diminishes their incentive to carry on their studies. These challenges like cultural bias, teacher-student gap and mismatches in the work market undermine the appeal of vocational education in Xinjiang, hence generating high dropout rates and limited future progress of the students.

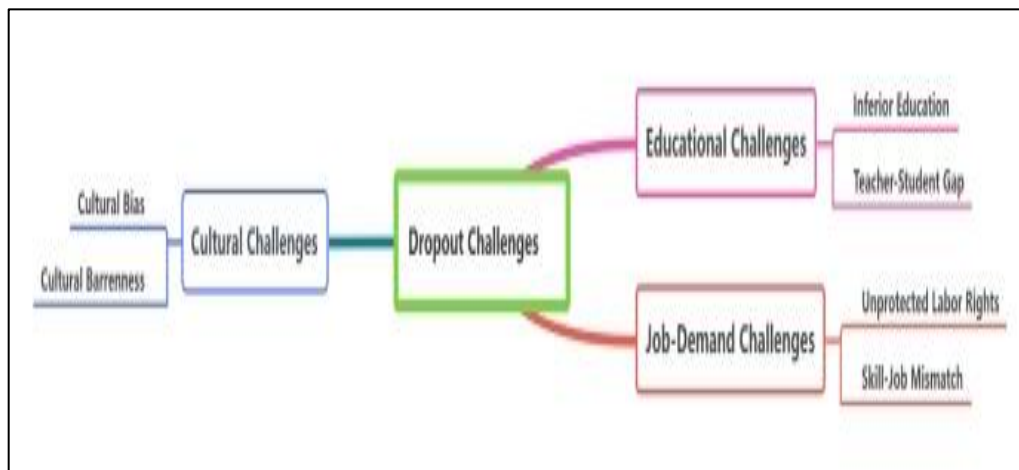


Figure 3 Mind Map Of Dropout Challenges

To address these challenges, the study proposed targeted suggestions from three dimensions: national policy, institutional management, and family education. At the national policy level, it is crucial to reform the education system to provide more opportunities for vocational school students, such as establishing undergraduate and graduate pathways, to reduce social bias against academic qualifications. Supervision of employment, including clarifying internship compensation standards and enhancing the monitoring of internship businesses, is essential to protect student labor rights. Additionally, local curriculum should be developed in alignment with regional economic characteristics to improve students' employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. In terms of institutional management, schools should inspire a positive environment through creative activities, academic contests, and encouragement of campus life to enhance students' passion for learning. Job placement services should be strengthened to improve students' employability and job adaptability, with strong cooperation with businesses, career counseling courses, and practical training opportunities. Training programs for teachers, such as rotation systems and training from specialists, can help improve teaching capacity to better meet the diverse needs of vocational education. From the perspective of family education, parents should change their perceptions of vocational education, actively support their children in choosing vocational paths, and guide them in planning their careers. Simultaneously, parents should focus on improving parent-child communication to create a harmonious family atmosphere and prioritize their children's mental health and academic progress.

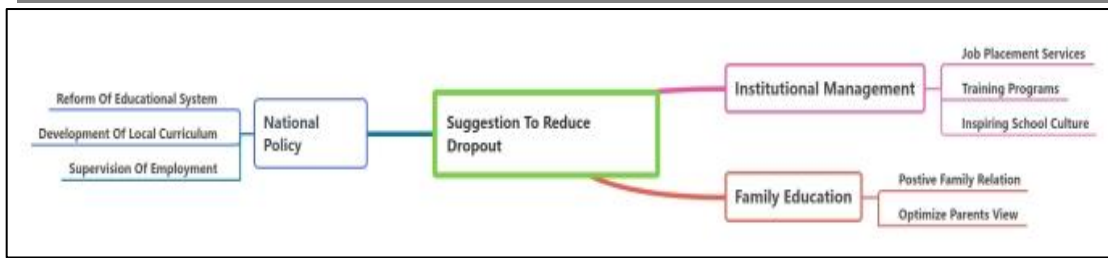


Figure 4 Suggestions To Reduce Dropout

The study's findings align with existing literature on the multifaceted nature of dropout phenomena in vocational education. The push-out factors identified, such as poor academic performance and insufficient teacher support, are consistent with studies by Bradley and Renzulli (2011) and Lessard et al. (2010), which highlight the importance of academic success and teacher-student relationships in retaining students. The pull-out factors, particularly peer influence and financial difficulties, echoed the findings of Amdouni et al. (2017) and Perdana et al. (2024), emphasizing the role of external pressures in student dropout decisions.

The cultural challenges faced by vocational students in Xinjiang, such as the devaluation of vocational education compared to academic education, are supported by the work of Hansen and Woronov (2013) and Wang (2020). These cultural biases not only affect student self-perception but also influence parental attitudes towards vocational education, as noted by Adewale et al. (2017). The educational challenges, including the gap between vocational and general education and the teacher-student cultural competency gap, are consistent with studies by Liu et al. (2024) and Loo (2018).

The employment challenges, particularly the mismatch between taught skills and job market needs, and the lack of labor rights protection during internships, are highlighted by Esmail and Khan (2024) and Lao (2024). These findings underscore the need for vocational education to be more closely aligned with industry demands and for stronger protections for student interns.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was grounded in the "push-pull-fallout" model, which highlights the interplay between family background, school environment, and individual attributes. The framework identified the root causes of dropout, including educational and cultural biases, language barriers, and curricula that are out of step with the needs of the job market. It provided a systematic understanding of the dropout problem and offers pathways for intervention, with practical and theoretical value for addressing dropout challenges in Xinjiang and similar contexts.

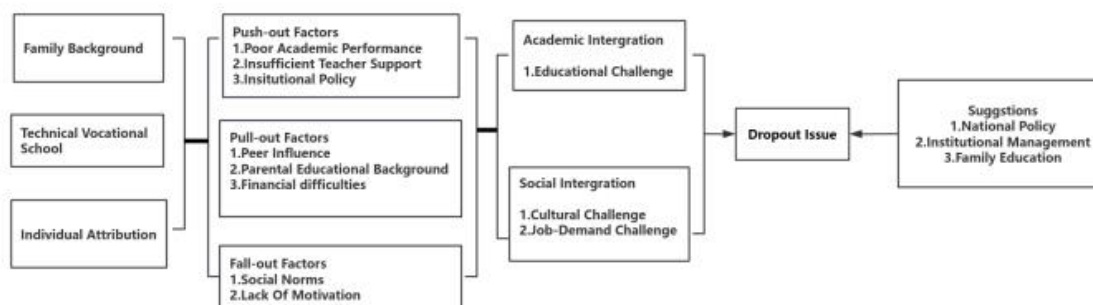


Figure 3 Framework Of Dropout Issue Among TVS In Xinjiang , China

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth analysis of the dropout issue among students in Technical and Vocational Schools (TVS) in Xinjiang, China, using the "push-pull-fallout" theoretical framework. The findings highlighted that dropout rates was influenced by a combination of push-out factors (such as poor academic

performance and insufficient teacher support), pull-out factors (including peer influence and financial difficulties), and fall-out factors (like cultural biases and lack of motivation). These factors interacted with cultural, educational, and employment challenges, exacerbating the dropout problem.

The research underscored the need for a multifaceted approach to address these issues. Recommendations include national policy reforms to enhance the status of vocational education, improve institutional management through better teacher training and job placement services, and strengthen family education by changing parental perceptions and improving parent-child communication. These measures aim to reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes for students in Xinjiang.

Future research should focus on expanding the sample size to include a more diverse range of students, incorporating quantitative methods to validate the findings, and conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of dropout behavior. Additionally, exploring the corporate perspective on the alignment between vocational training and labor market demands will provide further insights into improving the relevance and effectiveness of vocational education.

By addressing the identified factors and challenges, and implementing the proposed recommendations, this study aims to contribute to the development of effective strategies to mitigate the dropout crisis in TVS in Xinjiang and similar contexts.

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